# Foreword

CRAIG CALHOUN

Since the 1970s, the United States has seen oddly contradictory trends. On the one hand we have been "bowling alone," as Robert Putnam put it when he described the decline of a variety of long-standing forms of shared, collectively organized social activity. On the other hand we have seen an explosion of new forms of participation, from the online mobilizations for elections to small-scale venture philanthropy to a host of peer evaluations of consumer products and professional services. We are arguably more "linked in" on larger scales than ever before and yet we still lack more effective institutions for democracy.

This stimulating book is among the first to put squarely on the social science agenda the questions of how public participation can fail to amount to democratization—and how extremes of inequality play into this. The authors are not fatalist or determinist; they think a different outcome might be possible. Nor are they pessimists who refuse to acknowledge gains where they have occurred. They point to the reality and the benefits of participation in several spheres from workers' rights to community development. But they are realists who see—and analyze—some of the limits built into the new kinds of participation that have become prominent since the 1970s.

More than thirty years ago, Harry Boyte described the small-scale, often local activism that followed the big movements of the 1960s and early '70s as a "backyard revolution." The implication was that many small mobilizations would change attitudes and eventually, somehow, scale up to major social change. This did happen on some fronts. The human rights movement grew into a global force. Consumer rights activists secured a variety of victories from disclosure of the contents of processed foods to banning several unsafe products. Environmentalists got environmental impact assessments written into law. But these movements have largely been ethical and legal projects at the margin of democratic politics, not organizing efforts at the center.

Likewise, an ideology of participation and consultation has spread through capitalist corporations and government agencies. There are more hearings than ever before. There are not just suggestion boxes but frequent surveys seeking the opinions of employees, customers, suppliers, and the public. Indeed, workplaces have changed in significant ways. More companies offer employees stock options and a chance to participate in profits. More have informal office spaces, even campuses, complete with gyms and organized with a minimum of manifest hierarchy. But then sometimes those

perks are for only elite workers, engineers, scientists, and top management—while production workers toil for contractors in China or Malaysia. As the authors of this book rightly recognize, inequality lies at the heart of the paradox of growing participation and declining democracy.

Throughout the long postwar boom, inequality fell in the United States and most industrial countries. Since the 1970s, however, inequality has intensified. It has grown not just a little, but dramatically, and the United States is extreme, even in this global picture of escalating gini coefficients. The U.N. Development Program ranked the gap between the richest and poorest in the United States, and this gap is the third highest level of inequality around the world. The census shows the top one-tenth of 1 percent of the population taking 10 percent of all income, the top 1 percent owning more than 20 percent of all wealth; the top 10 percent owning more than two-thirds of all wealth; the share of the bottom 80 percent in the country's wealth dwindling to just above a tenth. Both income and wealth inequality are up, and so is poverty.

This growing inequality came with surprisingly little protest or organized resistance. Indeed, egalitarian arguments have faced a cool reception since the 1970s, tainted by association with a seemingly discredited socialism and opposed to the widespread identification of freedom with the removal of fetters from private property. This was an era when finance capital was ascendant, transforming wealth and workplaces. In the forty years after the 1974–1975 recession, the total proportion of wealth held in the form of financial assets grew from one-fourth to three-fourths. There was a long bubble in asset prices (marked by three distinct waves of especially dramatic increases). Rising home prices helped to shield those who at least owned their homes from the erosion of earnings and purchasing power experienced by most of those in the bottom 80 percent of the population. A significant increase in the proportion of women working raised the family income of two-earner households, though this was partly offset by an increase in single parents, mostly women. But, crucially, the inequality came packaged together with financialization, globalization, and neoliberalism.

This combination was already evident in the deindustrialization that gathered speed from the later 1970s. Even profitable businesses were starved for capital when markets determined that higher returns could be found elsewhere. Efforts were made to describe deindustrialization in attractive terms: the end of smelly, polluting factories; the coming of a knowledge society in which everyone would be a middle-class, white-collar worker. Of course this picture left out the extent to which industrial work would be replaced by service employment—in which a small minority made fortunes and most made closer to the minimum wage.

In this context, participation was a mixed blessing. On the one hand, it had the potential to reduce workplace alienation, strengthen community, and involve citizens in large-scale electoral politics that otherwise struggled to interest most voters. On the other hand, it also had the potential to disguise the reproduction of inequality and to reinforce rather than challenge structures of authority. Sorting out the relationship between these two sets of potentials is a central task of this book. The news is not entirely encouraging: To a very large extent, the new forms of participation

have obscured inequality or made it more palatable, not limited it or even challenged its sources.

The chapters of this book present perhaps the most sustained analysis available of the complicated relationship among the growth of inequality, the rise of a more participatory social *style*, and the challenges faced by contemporary democracy. They address dimensions of this from elections to corporate social responsibility, philanthropy, and social movements. Some key themes stand out.

Nonprofit organizations have been widely touted as a key component of civil society. Some have seen them as crucial alternatives to the government provision of public goods. This was a key theme in George Bush's famous description of them as a "thousand points of light." More generally, enthusiasm for civil society has been rendered problematic and sometimes ideological by a tendency to celebrate what it offers and not think critically about the limits on the offering and the extent to which they depend on inequality. Philanthropy is a good use of wealth, for example, but is not in itself a justification of high levels of social inequality conducive to the acquisition of massive fortunes. Similarly, responsible corporate use of profits to support local community institutions like symphony orchestras is not in itself an adequate justification of corporate capitalism—let alone the rapacious financial capitalism of recent decades.

Behind some of the failure to see the complexity of this issue is liberal ideology with its insistence on political equality and tendency to ignore economic inequality or even celebrate private property as a primary instance of freedom, not differentiating between the very small-scale property of most individuals and the large-scale property of the very wealthy and of corporations. Calls to make economic equality a more primary aspiration have been denigrated as socialist—and an important feature of the era considered here is the extent to which the collapse of the Soviet Union all but eliminated socialism from respectable political discourse.

The issues at stake are not just the extent of inequality but the relationship between elites and others in society. Philanthropy and charity are modalities for such relationships but not the only ones. When organized on a large scale and through formal organizations, they reflect not only generosity and need but also the extent to which the rich and poor no longer live in the same communities, linked by reciprocal personal relationships. There are new forms of participation, often formally organized, but old informal models of participation by diverse citizens in shared communities have not commonly thrived.

* * *

The first section does an excellent job bringing out some of the issues. There is philanthropic support for some issues, including even some issues on rapacious capitalism. As Vallas, Judge, and Cummins point out, there are significant gains from treating workers' rights as human rights, as well as some tendencies for such campaigns to reinforce the market position of corporations in advanced societies. Markets generally have been shaped by calls for more participation—and there are even markets in

public-interest participatory organizations and their capacity to mobilize deliberative publics as Lee, McNulty, and Shaffer show. Perhaps most important, for-profit business corporations have entered the arena of civic participation directly and through a host of surrogate organizations. Edward Walker's valuable account of the proliferation of branded corporate efforts to secure legitimacy through participation in public affairs also makes clear that this is not only self-interested but also obfuscating for real attention to those public issues.

All of this is shaped not just by corporate interests, or the interests of the wealthy, but also by the professionals who find employment in the nonprofit and philanthropic sectors. These try to turn available funding into resources for good causes, but they also wittingly or unwittingly sustain ideological compromises and the legitimacy of extreme social inequality. All the chapters in this section (and that by Kreiss) reveal the complexities and ambiguities of the professionalization of philanthropy and, more generally, expertise. The tension between expertise and democracy is old, and the best resolution uncertain. But it is clear that tilting the balance very far in favor of expertise is sharply depoliticizing.

This issue is joined well in the next section where the production of authority becomes an explicit theme. One of the most striking features of the rise of new elite-dominated participatory institutions has been a domestication of social movements. Participation has become a good in itself, often substituting for egalitarian economic reform. But, of course, participation also compensates for perceived weaknesses and exclusions of previous egalitarian projects. Too many of these resulted in frustrating, impersonal, and often inefficient bureaucracies delivering useful services in costly and unpleasant ways.

There are different modalities for the relationships among elites, institutions, and ordinary citizens in modern, ostensibly democratic societies. Consultation is one (see Lee, McNulty, and Shaffer). Negotiation is another, sometimes marked by concessions (Martin). And deliberation is a third—addressed here by Francesca Polletta with nuance and an appropriate sense of ambivalence. But mobilization is particularly challenging. Should the poor actually take to the streets? Should workers actually challenge capitalist production? Or should there be only participation?

Michael McQuarrie's account of different ideologies and strategies of popular participation in urban renewal is challenging and important. He shows the co-optation of once-radical activists struggling to deliver some tangible results, not just an ideological dream, to their followers but in the process finding it necessary to make common cause with real estate developers and political elites. Isaac Martin shows how public consultation is shaped by fiscal, not just substantive concerns. David Schleifer and Aaron Panofsky examine the ways in which these processes play out not just with regard to the old institutions of local government and development, or the national state, but in the new arena of health activism. There, entrepreneurs and exciting new technology interface with the effort to produce informed citizens through new media and blurred boundaries between advocacy and investment.

Even though so much action shifted into participatory domains distant from conventional political parties, electoral politics did not remain untouched and was not

irrelevant. As Daniel Kreiss shows, the mobilization of new media for electoral campaigns produced a version of citizen participation but one importantly limited and implicitly but not explicitly structured. This is an example of the top-down character of many institutions and practices in the new participatory society. Yes, ordinary people can participate, perhaps more than in most of history, but only in elite managed institutions.

This naturally recalls the recurrently forgotten and distorted history of populism. Partly because elites write history and generally are not central to populist mobilizations, these are often portrayed as simply eruptions of irrationality, backward-oriented mobilizations of people who can't find their place in the progress. But, of course, as the chapters here help us to understand, progress is not always as obvious or one-dimensional as elites suggest. Ostensible progress involves losses as well as gains, losers as well as winners, and we need always to ask for whom is this particular path of change progress—as opposed to a disastrous loss of employment, home, or community? Populism is often described as right-wing but in fact is inherently hard to fit into a left-right continuum. In the United States there is a proud and important history of genuinely democratic populist activism. Contemporary movements like the Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street (OWS) may offer only distorted mirrors for this. David Meyer and Amanda Pullum bring out why, despite the seeming paradox, it is possible to have a social movement society and still a democratic deficit. And certainly populism is subject to channeling, sponsorship, steering, and demagogues, but it is also a challenge to the depoliticizing character of many conventional forms of allegedly political participation.

Nina Eliasoph nicely characterizes one aspect of the depoliticization of new forms of participation. They involve an infinitely receding horizon for genuinely serious political change. As she shows, promoting participation may not be an effective way of serving the interests of the needy and may be a goal pursued for other reasons. There is a larger history here that is not brought out in chapters mainly focused on current events. And of course there are global comparisons to be made. But this is precisely because the issues brought to the fore in this collection are not idiosyncratic and are not mere accidents but are deeply implicated in the forms capitalism and democracy are taking—and not just in the United States.

* * *

The chapters here are overwhelmingly about cities, and that is also no accident. More than half the world lives in cities, and the dynamics of urbanization and its complex production of new forms of wealth creation, politics, and community are key to our whole era. But attending to this also reveals that cities are not just one scale of governance; in a sense the word "city" is a stand-in for a complex set of challenges to the scale and cohesion of governance and governmentality. The period from the 1960s and 1970s to the present is distinctive in this as in so much else. With the postwar expansion of the welfare state as background, it has brought neoliberalism, "new social movements," legitimation crises, globalization, financialization, and indeed the

financial crisis (a package evoked here most substantially by Baiocchi and Ganuza). Until very recently in the United States, radically growing inequality was surprisingly little remarked on. But it is basic, not a minor side effect. It is connected to deep insecurity, that also has other sources, and to anxiety over the future.

The new populism is a struggle over belonging as well as over privilege. It is shaped, especially on the right, by anxieties about demographic diversity. A sense of the erosion of attractive features of community, a living wage, and a meaningful patriotism merge with xenophobia, masculine anxiety about new roles for women, and a politics of resentment. The previous peak in large-scale political mobilization, 1968, was in fact part of an era of white people's movements. It came at a low point in the foreign-born population and it evoked the frustrations and aspirations mainly of home-grown youth wishing America would better live up to its own ideals and best possibilities.

The politics of the 1960s had an impact on all ensuing mobilization. Even the Tea Party, which sometimes declares its contempt for most of what '60s activists stood for, also shows its shaping influence. It is insistent on multiculturalism or at least deference to diversity. It exuberantly claims a unity of sincerity, emotion, and political conviction. Both the Tea Party and, even more, OWS echo the devotion to deliberation that was important to both the civil rights movement and 1960s activism (described well by Francesca Polletta in her book *Freedom Is an Endless Meeting*). This is taken over as well into parts of the culture of the new media and even the renewal of public religion—often denigrated by the left but in fact an arena of both participation and serious deliberation.

* * *

Where does this leave us? We struggle with inequality, we seek solidarity, and we hope to participate in shaping the social institutions that order our lives. Top-down structures of participation offer some paths to engagement but little change to really transform basic social conditions. Above all, they inhibit confronting the deep and deepening inequalities of contemporary social life. We do need to address questions of public interest and public goods through discourse. But we confront this not in an ideal speech situation where equals communicate openly, but in an institutional structure where even participation is shaped and distorted by inequality. We confront an updated version of Habermas's fear of an administered society, the collapsed boundaries between politics, economy, and society, in a period when state politics is discredited and both wealth and "the private" are celebrated. We also face a long-running problem about expanding "the public" beyond a notion of "people like us" to include others often seen as threats or less deserving. And we have trouble producing—at once—new forms of participatory knowledge and practice and also new processes to reverse the forces bringing ever more social inequality.

* * *

This book does not have all the answers, but it forces us to ask better questions.