

PRAGMATIST CONCEPTION OF PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY¹

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“... the task of democracy is forever that of creation of a freer and more humane experience in which all share and to which all contribute.”

John Dewey, “Creative Democracy—The Task before Us”

Abstract: The paper considers the issue of participatory democracy which has recently got high in the European integration agenda. In the history of ideas, however, it has been a controversial as well as neglected idea associated mostly with Rousseauian and Leftist models of democracy. The author points to the key features of participatory democracy such as the idea of self-mastery. The philosophical idea of participation lies at the heart of the pragmatist conception of democracy as developed by J. Dewey. Its functioning may be illustrated by the concept of “democratic normative community”. This conception of participatory democracy as a broad social rather than a narrow political phenomenon provides the framework that makes it both a vital ideal and a creative task for current global as well as local efforts to bring about the sociopolitical change.

Keywords: pragmatism; participatory democracy; participation; Dewey; democratic normative community.

Introduction

In considering the issue of democracy we are confronted with the route between Scylla of elitism which treats politics as a matter of professional politicians who alone are competent to rule democratically, and Charybdis of tyranny of the public which takes as natural its right to be involved in political decision making. Both extremes are dangerous. That of professional politics eliminates participation of those who are also the subject rather than the object of politics. That of the public creates involvement without competency. The former leads to distortion of democracy, the latter to unwise democracy. It is reasonable to think that only an active, engaged citizen who critically examines politics and social life

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can impose the hurdles to bureaucracy, dogmatism, empty conformism, corruption, etc. Participatory democracy is understood as the process of the broadest possible involvement and meaningful contribution by citizens, not only in political but all other spheres of life as well. To achieve this shall mean the realization of fully participatory culture and society, not only participatory politics. I do not take the idea of participatory democracy as a single or particular alternative to other conceptions of democracy such as representative or liberal democracy. Rather, I take it as the rich idea which is—or at least can and should be made—compatible with other conceptions.

The idea of participatory democracy has recently got high in the European integration agenda. Apart from individual European countries with their different level of participationism, the all-European consultative body has been established, *The European Economic and Social Committee* (EESC), whose mission, according to its current President, Mr Dimitris Dimitriadis, is explicitly stated as follows:

We seek to build a Europe with a Human face. A Europe made up by our citizens, fostering personal progress and wealth, innovation, care for the environment and participative democracy. We want a Europe, tailored by our citizen's needs, beliefs, expectations and entrepreneurial style of thinking. Think and Act, show us the path which meets and satisfies your more profound needs and expectations (<http://eesc.europa.eu/organisation/president/index-en.asp>).

This institution has held a series of conferences on the role and contribution of civil society and participatory democracy since 1999. This real movement can be taken as the evidence that the idea of participatory democracy can be given more concrete practical expression on a large scale such as new forms of social and civil dialogues and new partnership opportunities between all those concerned with European governance (see <http://www.eesc.europa.eu>).² The new vistas of democracy find new ways of governance and citizenship, new forms and tools of participation via communication, sharing information, creation of networks throughout the European community. Flexibility and intelligence are taking place here not only on micro (local) but also on macro-level (global) in problem solving and integration of community.

On the History of the Idea

Historically, even though the idea of participation in social and political life is ancient, the roots of the idea of participatory democracy³ as a specific concept is notoriously allied with Jean-Jacques Rousseau who insisted on direct citizen participation despite his acceptance

² In addition to the initiatives of this body, there are some others, such as a think tank *Notre Europe*, founded in 1996 by Jacques Delors, which has held the conference “What kind of participatory democracy for the European Union?” (see <http://www.notre-europe.eu>). The *European Trade Union Confederation* held the conference “Towards Participatory Democracy in the European Union” in 2005 (see <http://www.etuc.org>). Besides these, there is *The European Citizens' Initiative* as the alliance of many civil society organisations, supporters and volunteers which also fosters and coordinates activities supporting participatory democracy all over Europe (see <http://www.citizens-initiative.eu>).

³ The term itself has been allegedly coined by Arnold S. Kaufman in the 1960s in connection with the student movement in the USA.

of the idea of social contract. Philosophically, his motivation was both to find an effective association of people as well as to preserve their freedom as much as possible. Thus the solution of the problem is the *idea of self-government and self-control* to the effect that 1) governed and governors are identical, 2) state and civil society are also identical, 3) sovereignty cannot be represented, and 4) government is but an administrative tool. However, such a vision of democracy has been from the beginning seen as hardly attainable even in a technical way, as opposed to classical liberal model. Thus participatory democracy as a species of a direct democracy has always carried with it a tone of being *unrealistic*. Even worse, Rousseau in his efforts to solve the problem of social order and avoid anarchy inaugurated his concept of “general will” which, though ideally created freely in a participative way by all citizens as the expression of their common interest, has become the representation of the body politic as the expression of the right interest of a people as a whole, with the authority to “force to freedom” all dissenting individuals. In virtue of this construction, participatory democracy has also gained the flavor of totalitarian intentions, particularly since Marx and his followers have also been playing with the idea.

Nonetheless, no totalitarian ills necessarily follow from the healthy philosophical idea of *participation as self-government*. The witness is that classical liberal theory of democracy of 19th century had also adopted this idea via John Stuart Mill, who had no problem to support the combination of representative government with a limited direct citizen participation. On the other hand Mill also contributed another traditional “stigma” to participationism arguing that it is suitable just on a small scale and *impossible in society at large*. But Mill was the exception among liberal-democratic theorists, and his legacy was later to be eclipsed by what has become the dominant “realist” (or “elitist”) conception of Josef Schumpeter. According to him, democracy is simply “that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people’s vote” (Schumpeter 1962, 269).

Since publication of his major work *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy* in 1942 this school of democratic thought has prevailed in the Western world. For Schumpeter, democracy has become the matter of political and institutional procedure, a method of voting public officials and making political decisions. To his followers such as Giovanni Sartori and many others, participationism in democracy is dangerously allied with socialism and Leftism, and thus suffers from deadly sins consisting, among others, in refusal to respect modern elitism at the expense of supporting mass movements, utopianism, etc.

Even though participationism has found more fertile soil among Leftist thinkers of various colors, not only among Marxists, this is by no means exclusively a Leftist idea (cf. works of Robert Dahl since the 1970s). The critique of “realist” conception of democracy as purely “formal”, “legalist” and “procedural”, and the search for its alternative has got on its way due to such people like George Douglas Howard Cole (1889-1959) who, with his ideas of industrial democracy and workers’ self-management, is regarded one of the progenitors of participatory democracy in the 20th century. Further, the “sensational” 1960s have expanded and extended the democratization “from below” to further walks of life and parts of the world, from student movements (as epitomized by Port Huron Statement in the USA) to civil rights and peace movements to soft anarchism of the “hippies” movement to “socialism with a human face” in Dubcek’s Czechoslovakia—all of these epitomized by the slogan “power to the people”. Consequently, the “New Left” has been constituted which instigated the full revival—or rather a new beginning—of a theory of participatory democracy. This was inaugurated by the

works of economist and prominent New Left activist Dimitrios Roussopoulos written with C. George Benello (1970) and the feminist political theorist Carole Pateman (1970), followed by by no means a Leftist Canadian political scientist Crawford Brough Macpherson (1911-1987) in the 70s, and others in the 80s, such as Jane Mansbridge (1980), Benjamin Barber (1984), etc. These developments have in the end initiated a successive convergence of the Left and the Right, socialist and liberal traditions in democratic thinking. The main achievements in terms of participationist conception may be summarized as follows:

- The basic idea is self-mastery (as an upgrade of Rousseau's conception of self-governing order);
- The dualism of the rulers and the ruled is to be abandoned;
- People have the right, and must also be given a real opportunity, to decide of matters that concern and affect their lives;
- People are free and equal in their access to institutions and decision making in all spheres of life;
- There is more to democracy than voting which is neither the sole nor paradigmatic or the most significant democratic activity;
- Participation breaks down political apathy and civic passivity;
- Participation leads to consensus, social responsibility and strong democracy;
- Participatory democracy is real, and it commands with its own tools, such as referendum, recall, citizen-initiated legislation, etc.;
- Participatory democracy is not bound to local and small communities since the new technology shall allow new ways of global participation (the vision of e-democracy);
- Participatory society and culture are possible, and are the keys to better democratic future.

Philosophers and political theorists have gradually come to realize that even if participation is a necessary, but far from a sufficient, mark of democratic order, without citizens' participation there is no democracy. The point only is—who participates in what and how? In one way or another, participation is a part of any type of democracy. Thus new variations have started to appear since the 1990s, such as “associative” or “associational” democracy (Cohen and Rogers, 1983), “anticipatory democracy” inspired by the Tofflers, “bioregional democracy” and “green democracy” reflecting ecological situation, “semi-direct” and “consensus” democracy, “grassroots democracy”, “workplace democracy”, “inclusive democracy”, even “panocracy” (a rule by all) which goes beyond, but also shares, many principles and ideas of participatory democracy, and above all “deliberative democracy” (sometimes called “discursive democracy”). All these may be seen as the substantiation, refinement and current elaboration of the idea of participation, or as current versions of participatory democracy. Of these the most important is “deliberative democracy” which differs from the “classical” participative democracy in that it demands participation via communication and decision-making, while the latter is based on the direct participation in social action.

Deweyan Conception of Participatory Democracy

Dewey's place in the tradition has been somehow overlooked and only recently is being fully acknowledged (see e.g. Cunningham (2002, 142-162). But Dewey was for a long time waiting on the path that the participationist democrats have been searching for. According to Robert Westbrook (1991, xiv-xv),

among liberal intellectuals of the twentieth century, Dewey was the most important advocate of participatory democracy, that is, of the belief that democracy as an ethical ideal calls upon men and women to build communities in which the necessary opportunities and resources are available for every individual to realize fully his or her particular capacities and powers through participation in political, social and cultural life.

The spirit of Deweyan democracy is participatory through and through. His the was idea of “free and active participation in modern social life” (Dewey, MW 1, 16),⁴ “free and deliberate participation” (Dewey, MW 7, 311) as the only meaningful way how to reach the growth as well as the meaning in human life. Participation of the individual in the world is also crucial and vital for mental and moral development. Thus the purpose of participation in Dewey is twofold: not only the development of community but at the same time the development of the self. Participation is self-government and self-development, self-realization of human potentialities.

Anthropologically speaking, democratic participation is an essential part of life itself, of a “truly human way of living” (Dewey, LW 11, 218), not merely its instrument. It is a voluntary commitment to life within community, to engagement in social action and interaction for the sake of creation of common good. But the *fruits* of participation are manifold: social, practical, moral, educational, transformational, political. And even when it comes to the common good, Dewey’s conception is not identical with that of Rousseau. According to Alan Ryan (1995, 311), Dewey gave some negative answers to the question of “what does participatory democracy look like?” Surely, “it is not to be one-party rule”, neither the dictatorship of the proletariat, nor “the imposition of an elite vision” and “manipulation of the humble many by the sophisticated few”.

It is clear that Dewey’s conception of democracy is not a political one, or at least not only political in the first order. It is a social, ethical and philosophical conception of democracy. He is not interested in democracy as a form of government and a method of political power. He drew on Jefferson’s idea of democracy as a way of life, not only as a form of government. Here is the definition of democracy he provided later in his life:

The key-note of democracy as a way of life may be expressed, it seems to me, as the necessity for the participation of every mature human being in formation of the values that regulate the living of men together:—which is necessary from the standpoint of both the general social welfare and the full development of human beings as individuals (Dewey, LW 11, 217-218).

Democracy for Dewey is a part of genuine human way of being, which is the social being. It is a “human condition”. Simply, it is not possible to live as a genuine human being and not to live in a democratic way since it is not possible to live in isolation as an abstract individual. The social being of individual may be performed in principle in two ways: democratic, which is the right way, and undemocratic, which is the wrong and distorted way. Thus Dewey’s term for “participation” is simply “*sharing*” (Dewey, MW 9, 167) and “(mutual) *contribution*”. This can be understood as the expression of Dewey’s life-long craving for common happiness and unity in the social realm. “Sharing our experience with others” he wrote in his *Psychology* (Dewey, EW 2, 307), or sharing our life with others is his principle of democracy.

⁴ References to Dewey’s works here follow the international standard usage of his *Collected Works* (see references below).

Thus, for Dewey, participatory democracy is identical with the idea of community itself:

The defining or characteristic condition of a group as social is communication, participation, sharing, interpenetration of meanings (Dewey, MW 15, 239).

Human social life can be defined as democratic participation. *Not to participate* or *not to share*, is for Dewey something absolutely strange, even absurd. The problem is rather *how to participate* so that to create good.

Sharing or participation is a two-way road. One way from society to individual is necessary as adoption or “consumption” of what already there is in experience/culture. This is learning. The other way back from individual to society is necessary as creation or contribution to common experience/culture. This all must be learned, and despite democracy seems very natural way of life for community, it demands education all the way down since “learning to give and take, is the best possible method of training for membership in the larger society” (Dewey, MW 5, 521).

This brings us to the following Deweyan claim: before there can be democracy in politics/government/power, there must be democracy in society/culture/experience. Not in any case *vice versa*. If there is no democracy in the way of life, there cannot be democracy in the way of power. What there is in such a case is just a mask or a masquerade, a camouflage of democracy. Dewey’s conception of democracy, that inherently involves the idea of participation as sharing, serves better thick philosophical than thin political purposes. Those who think political can be taken in abstraction from philosophical, just mistake bad politics for a good one.

In a political context, freedom without real opportunities to participate is empty and purely formal. Dewey was the resolute supporter of citizen participation. According to him, universal and direct “participation in choice of rulers, is an essential part of political democracy” (Dewey, MW 10, 138). Self-government through participation is a true democratic vista. Such a participation is intelligent, creative, deliberative. Thus, the Deweyan idea of participatory democracy comprises at least three important ideas: *communication*, *cooperation*, and *creativity*.

Democratic Normative Community

Pragmatist conception of democracy with respect to social norms has recently been elaborated by Beth J. Singer (1999). In her analysis of social and human rights, she develops the concept of “normative community”, which is “constituted by all who share a common set of norms” (*ibid.*, 29). The existence of normative community is the prerequisite of human life as we know it. Norms govern institution of rights and obligations, but there are no apriori rights and obligations; all are established by normative community. Social norms are the product of communicative interaction, and they evolve and change. Thus

for norms to arise... and for them to carry the authority of a community, requires the participation of that community’s members in their institution: it requires that they exercise their own personal autonomy in this process (*ibid.*, 30).

All persons

who are called on or are in a position to apply them must be allowed to do so in accordance with their own judgement and in the light of their own experience. That is, they must be allowed to judge the norms autonomously (*ibid.*).

The nature of norms is interactive and communicative. Norms “evolve in a dialogic process and are the product of that dialogue” (*ibid.*, 67). They enable mutual identification, understanding responses of others and a social cohesion but as rights and obligations they cannot be absolute and unquestionable. Norms may conflict and the operation of social norms does not preclude criticism. People have a right and even an obligation to criticise the norms. Critical deliberation is a part of the process in which norms are instituted, perpetuated and modified. Uncritical and unreflective creation as well as application of norms mean degeneration into mechanical habits and misuse of power.

B. Singer considers a *condition sine qua non* of such a normative community that the efficacy of social norms substantially depends on their internalization, i. e. voluntary acceptance by its members. For this to be the case, the members of normative community must have their own free right and autonomy not only to interpret all norms which are at stake, but most importantly

all those who are expected to live by them must participate in their institution, perpetuation, and revision. This means that each must be granted the authority to do so: authority to play a part in shaping community’s perspective (*ibid.*, 70-71).

In case this precondition is not fulfilled, the consequences are disastrous:

Enforced conformity is only a counterfeit of norm-governed behavior. What is accepted in such a case is the authority, not of the norms, but of the enforcing power. To the extent that a government or a dominant subcommunity tries to impose its laws or customs on other subcommunities and their members, the stability of the inclusive community is undermined. A common history and geographic proximity alone are not sufficient conditions of normative community, and the alternative to normative community is anomie, alienation, the antithesis of community (*ibid.*, 70).

Thus, a true normative community is “a community of self-directing, yet mutually responsive members”, who “must be free to articulate their own perspectives” and via interpreting the norms to participate in the self-governance of the community as a whole. This is not a blueprint for anarchy but rather the conception of “a community of dialogic reciprocity” (*ibid.*, 71-72) which is the equivalent of true democratic community. In such a community its members, “in addition to sharing a set of norms ... accept one another as legitimate and authoritative participants in collective decision making” (*ibid.*, 138).

The pragmatist conception of participatory democracy and normative community conceives of any kind of norms as of deliberative constructions, that are “always open to critical assessment and subject to change.” No one norm “should ever be taken to be incorrigible.” Norms traditionally developed as the instrument of power and social control “from the above” should be transformed into the instruments of self-government, and the only legitimate perspective from which they should be critically assessed is the perspective of those who must abide and live by them (*ibid.*, 156-161).

Conclusion

Dewey once wrote that “it is true that no other people at any other age has been so permeated with the spirit of sharing as our own” (Dewey, LW 3, 144). But is this really the case? Do we really feel sharing that much?

There is ample evidence that those who have thought that the issue of democracy has been solved once and for all after 1899, have simply been fooling themselves. What has happened is rather the distortion of democracy by power elites just to make it a mechanism of acquiring power than to make it functioning all the way down in social life and human affairs. Participatory democracy as an ideal is “a vital ideal” rather than a “dead dog”, and it deserves our attention in order to “be reframed in the light of the twenty-first century’s new obstacles and new opportunities” (Green 2004, 62). Therefore it is our Deweyan task that is ahead of us—to look for more creative ways in our democratic projects.⁵

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