



Participatory Practices in Organizations

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Abstract

The literature on participatory practices in organizations has been less coherent and more limited to subspecialties than the literature on bureaucracy in organizations—despite a number of celebrated studies of participation in 20th century American sociology. Due to the practical nature of participatory reforms and the ambiguity of participation as a concept, attempts to review participatory knowledge have a tendency to focus on refining definitions and clarifying frameworks within subfields. This article instead provides a broad thematic overview of three different types of research on participation in organizations, all critical to an understanding of today's dramatic expansion of participatory practices across a variety of organizations. Classic research studied participation as dynamic and central to organizational legitimacy. Institutional design research has focused on participation as a stand-alone governance reform with promising empowerment potential, but mixed results in domains such as health care, environmental politics, and urban planning. Finally, recent research seeks to place participatory practices in the context of shifting relationships between authority, voice, and inequality in the contemporary era. The article concludes with suggestions for building on all three categories of research by exploring what is old and new in the 21st century's changing participatory landscape.

Contemporary observers find the 21st century to be in the midst of a high-tech participatory renaissance across the institutions of US society, variously described as “The Great Consultation” and the “Age of Engagement” (Edelman 2010; Martin 2015). This veritable explosion of crowdsourced fundraisers, participatory art festivals, citizen journalism, and web-enhanced dialogues has allowed Americans new opportunities to have their say in their workplaces and communities. From the DMV to the IRS, even the fustiest bureaucracies have let the sun shine in, opening up their decision-making processes to public and stakeholder input. At the national level, Barack Obama's Open Government Directive committed his administration to the principles of transparency, collaboration, and participation on his very first day in office (Obama 2009).

But does all of this engagement really add up to collective empowerment? Organizational sociologists would seem well-placed to answer such a question, given their interest in the dynamic interplay of agency and structure (Schneiberg and Lounsbury 2008). And indeed, there is a rich and voluminous literature on participation in organizations—so voluminous, in fact, that it is extremely difficult to parse. Scholars of participation in organizations have called participation an “enigmatic” and “nebulous construct” (Glew et al. 1995), a “magic word” (Schregle 1970), and a “buzzword” (Leal 2007). In 1978, Dachler and Wilpert argued that “No clear set of questions, let alone a set of answers, which begin to define the nature of the participation phenomenon are discernible. Participation literature includes a plethora of undefined terms and characteristically lacks explicitly stated theoretical frameworks” (1978: 1). By 2010, the editors of the 600-plus-page Oxford Handbook of Participation in Organizations claimed that among the many difficulties of conceptualizing participation, “not only is there a range of different traditions contributing to the research and literature on the subject, there is also an extremely diverse set of practices that congregate under the

banner of participation” (Wilkinson et al. 2010b: 4). Both sources are primarily concerned with employee participation at work. What about the many other organizations with which we engage in our everyday life? How do we begin to understand participation in organizations of *all* types – especially the “new public participation” of today (Lee, McQuarrie, and Walker 2015) – as a sociological phenomenon?¹

This review approaches this question by grouping the wide variety of social research on participation in organizations into three categories in order to sketch a thematic account of the literature.² First, I describe the influence of classic works that envision participation as central to the development of authority in American institutions. Next, I describe the proliferation of case studies of participatory reforms within particular domains, with an emphasis on trends across these subdisciplines in better defining the different dimensions of participation in order to associate institutional designs with normative outcomes. By contrast, some scholars have focused on the multivalent and dynamic meanings attached to participation as key features of its diffusion and implementation in radically different contexts. I conclude the analysis by describing the latter research on the new public participation and its emphasis on linking participation in organizations to patterns of authority and inequality in contemporary society. Finally, I suggest possible avenues for new research on participation in organizations drawing on these prior efforts.

Classic studies of participation: participation as central to the development of contemporary authority

One does not have to go far to find reports of a decline over the modern era of substantive participation, understood broadly as the engagement of non-elites in organizational decisions and practices that affect their lives. The concept of increasingly bureaucratic administration and its accelerating dominance over everyday life, regardless of countervailing humanistic values, is central to theorists’ conception of social problems, from Weber (1930) to Michels (1962). Certainly, this narrative of lay disempowerment through bureaucratic expertise in organizations that look ever more similar, and of rule by a few over conforming masses increasingly withdrawn from public life, has resonated with Americans over many decades (Mills 1951; Powell and DiMaggio 1991; Putnam 2000; Skocpol 2003; Whyte 2002; Wolin 2010). Not coincidentally, a parallel fascination with the potential and limitations of popular power, beginning with the American and French revolutions onward, has focused the interest of social critics attentive to alternative modes of social organization and radical challenges to authority (Cohen and Rogers 1995; Kweit and Kweit 1981).

A number of seminal studies of US organizations blended these two strains of interest in researching participatory potential. These works traced waves of participation in US political and economic organizations from the 19th century to the 20th, exploring dynamic tensions between state-building, corporate power, and popular authority. While by no means comprehensive, I briefly highlight the influence of a few of these classics on later works of history, sociology, and political science in the broader multidisciplinary field of American political development.

The common thrust of these comparative historical studies of participation has been a tendency to see participation not in terms of insurgent failures, but as a multi-faceted aspect of the coordination of power itself. As against earlier scholarship on Populism as a reactionary backlash, Goodwyn’s work on the Populist “moment” focused on the cultural conditions that allowed for the organizational development of participation (1976). His reconsideration was followed by careful assessments of the development of capacity in producer movements across race, class, and gender (Clemens 1997). These researchers describe the organization and

coordination of claim-making as central to the development of the modern capitalist state, and especially to the enduring involvement of interest groups and markets in its functioning (Hansen 1991; Morone 1998; Sanders 1999; Schneiberg 2013). Postel (2007) goes even further in seeing participation in the organizations that Populism fomented as essential to the technological and organizational achievements of industrial agriculture and global business in the 20th century.

Formal and informal participation may have been critical to the development of modern bureaucracies, but researchers have found that their outcomes are contingent and complex. Within the apparatus of the modern welfare state, Selznick's work on the Tennessee Valley Authority investigated the unintended consequences of bureaucratic reforms focused on grassroots participation, which produced both power-sharing and cooptation (1949). Politics researchers like Mansbridge have found similarly mixed results depending on the contexts in which participatory strategies are deployed (1980). "Democratizing bureaucracy" in the Bureau of Reclamation empowered some constituencies, according to Espeland (2000), but that empowerment was unevenly distributed among groups. Selznick argued that legitimacy concerns are often key to power-sharing, and Martin demonstrates that, in later eras, governments increase public consultation when they seek greater extraction (2015). New groups may be empowered by informal and formal participatory regimes, but both types of participation may alienate some stakeholders (Lee 2007). Balogh even finds that the increasing dominance of experts in promoting a market for commercial nuclear power after World War II triggered a "powerful chain reaction," in which would-be participants marshalled their own experts, challenging the authority of administrators and bureaucrats altogether (1991). Professionalization and bureaucratization are not "overly determined," in this view, but can even precipitate participation in unintended ways (Balogh 1991: 302).

Not surprisingly, the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s and their fraught embrace of participatory strategies prompted a wave of research interest in participation in movement organizations and their links to collective efficacy – particularly as the following decades saw the precipitous decline of union power. How can organizations' principles be reflected in their structures, and what forms of horizontal organization can maximize collective effort? Pateman's work (1970; see also Barber 1984) urged attention to the longstanding theoretical tradition supporting participatory (versus representative) democracy. She suggested that participatory democracy developed citizens' capacity for political engagement, and should be practiced across social institutions, particularly in the workplaces where people spend so much of their lives. Freeman, in contrast, found that informal participation as practiced by social movements could mask power relations, and argued against this "tyranny of structurelessness" (1972). Later scholars like Polletta have responded by reframing democracy within movements as not simply educative, but as adaptive and drawing on participants' existing relational capacities and cultures (2002).

Influential empirical studies of postwar community politics (Dahl 1961; Gaventa 1980) investigated democratic potential in settings where stark power inequalities were perceived as normal and even natural, setting off multiple waves of both empirical and theoretical research investigating the conditions of possibility for representative, deliberative, and other forms of democracy in stratified societies (Benhabib 1996; Gutmann and Thompson 1996; Urbinati and Warren 2008; Young 2000). By contrast, scholars like Rothschild and Whitt (1986) and Kanter (1972) explored lessons from deeply participatory and inclusive organizations, with studies that asked what enabled intensive organizational commitments in cooperatives, utopian communities, and communes. These studies were oriented toward the lessons such unique organizational forms could have for organizations in general, in parallel to the ways that the authors found that collective experiments have often prefigured new methods

of organization in mainstream institutions. Osterman (2006) builds on Rothschild and Whitt by investigating how networks of community organizations have been able to overcome oligarchy through “cultures of contestation.” Like Kanter, Turner (2006) explores how participatory innovations by countercultural actors were extremely influential, in his case in the development of the early Internet’s horizontal structures. In their comparative analysis of the Burning Man and Open Source communities, Chen and O’Mahony (2009) demonstrate that communities emphasizing intensive participation may recombine familiar organizational forms in novel ways in order to distinguish themselves from comparison groups in “conventional” organizations. Even as they define themselves against bureaucracy and oligarchy, members of participatory organizations are centrally concerned with legitimacy and authority.

Classic studies of participation have inspired further scholarship on the social forces driving interest in participation in particular periods, and on the broad, long-term influences of participation on public and private institutions. These works have particularly focused on mixed results and unintended consequences when participatory authority and voice in organizations are expanded. While seminal studies of participation have been cited extensively (Google Scholar lists 3,251 citations for Selznick’s *TVA and the Grassroots*), the concepts they have advanced regarding cooptation, the creation of administrative constituencies for participation, and “ambiguities” and “inherent dilemmas” in organizationally-sponsored participation (Selznick 1949) have been more influential in the multidisciplinary study of American political development than in the fields of sociology or political science more broadly. As described in the Introduction, the canon of research on participation in organizations is far less established than that on the public sphere, for example (Ferree et al. 2002).

Studies of contemporary participation within distinct fields: isolating design principles and assessing outcomes

Nevertheless, classic research noting silver linings even in failed participatory experiments has contributed to contemporary researchers’ interest in the democratizing potential of well-designed participatory reforms. Not surprisingly, given the focus on labor in the prior section, research on participation in industry and corporate settings is the most recognized of the field-specific literature on institutional design, such that workplace settings are often assumed by the use of the term “participation in organizations” (Wilkinson et al. 2010a). This field of study has a very long history (Graham 1995; Webb and Webb 1906), and participation in work organizations applies to strategies as comprehensive as employee ownership or as limited as a suggestion box on the factory floor (Barley and Kunda 1992; Budd, Gollan, and Wilkinson 2010; Cotton et al. 1988; Doellgast 2012; Heckscher 2007; Sirianni 1987). The literature in the field covers a wide variety of aspects of institutional reforms and their impacts, including employee reactions to participation (Vallas 2006) and managers’ feelings about it (Heckscher 1995).

Case studies of participation within other fields and community settings have proliferated as innovations in participation have themselves diffused globally across sectors. The expansive literature on participation in work organizations is accompanied by distinct and lively literatures on the implications of participation in urban politics (Adams 2007; Alford 1969; Baiocchi 2003; Barnes, Newman, and Sullivan 2007; Bingham, Nabatchi, and O’Leary 2005; Silver, Scott, and Kazepov 2010; Sirianni and Friedland 2001), environmental politics (Agrawal and Gibson 1999; Dietz and Stern 2008; Koontz 1999; Pellow 1999; Sabel, Fung, and Karkkainen 2000; Singleton 2000; Thomas 2001), science and health care (Banaszak-Holl, Levitsky, and Zald 2010; Chilvers and Kearnes 2015; Epstein 2007; Kedrowski and Sarow 2007; Levitsky 2008; McCormick et al. 2003; Thorpe and Gregory 2010), and global development

(Bastian, Bastian, and Nivaran 1996; Brunt and McCourt 2012; Cleaver 1999; Elyachar 2002; Hickey and Mohan 2004; Kothari and Minogue 2002; Mansuri and Rao 2004, 2013; Sivaramakrishnan and Agrawal 2003).³

Scholars in art, media, and communications have been particularly intrigued by the ways that new technologies and innovative practices might reshape fields traditionally seen as reliant on solitary geniuses or top-down corporate and state monopolies (Carty 2010; Chadwick 2013; Chen 2009; Delwiche and Henderson 2013; Earl and Kimport 2011; Fish et al. 2011; Gainous and Wagner 2013; Howard and Hussain 2013; Kester 2004, 2011; Allan and Thorsen 2009). In the midst of an accountability crisis, even the ivory tower has gotten participatory religion, with scholars of higher education unpacking how new participation regimes might reshape the social, educational, and research missions of the university (Boyle and Silver 2005; Burawoy 2005; Cress and Donahue 2011; Fitzgerald, Burack, and Seifer 2010; Ostrander 2004; Stoecker et al. 2009; White 2010).

In contrast to the work described in the prior section, which explores tensions within organizations between participation and bureaucracy, and the historical causes and broader consequences of participation in organizations, this research tends to focus on isolating key features in institutional designs for participation, contrasting them with conventional models of governance, and assessing direct outcomes in terms of their potential to engender empowerment and other benefits to participants. This is often accompanied by an understanding of participation as an instrumental and normatively positive stand-alone reform when it works as promised. Hence, many scholars ask whether participation actually does work, or relatedly, how to “make” it work (Wondolleck and Yaffee 2000).

The search for participatory best practices and places where participation has worked does resemble the topical focus of the research on participatory experiments in the classic literature, with the distinction that these research questions are oriented to discovering how institutional design “choices” and formal principles can be assembled into “recipes” for successful performance (Fung 2003)—there is far less focus on questions regarding historical processes of political development. A typically normative example is Fung and Wright’s “real utopias project,” which seeks to document cases in which small-scale models of “empowered participatory governance” have solved complex contemporary problems (Fung and Wright 2003). Such studies have provided substantial empirical evidence from communities around the world detailing the life cycles of participatory projects and the fruitful relationships sustained by stakeholders, activists, community organizations, businesses, and administrators at different levels of governance (Briggs 2008).

The institutional design research has tested and rejected many assumptions in political and rational choice theory regarding the unworkability of participatory reforms, whether because of capacity deficits or impracticality (Dryzek 2010). Fung’s study of community policing and school reforms in Chicago (2006a) compares neighborhood-level initiatives that suggest that participation can make a difference and empower individuals in “decidedly non-ideal conditions” (221) of racial and economic inequality. Elinor Ostrom’s Nobel Prize-winning work on institutions for common pool resource management demonstrates that the “tragedy of the commons” is by no means a foregone conclusion, given a number of enduring self-governing institutions for irrigation, fisheries, and pastureland in communities from Japan to the Philippines (1990). This research has also developed a deep and nuanced body of knowledge exploring diverse features and outcomes of well-known model cases, such as participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre, Brazil (Baiocchi 2005) and the British Columbia Citizens’ Assembly on Electoral Reform (Warren and Pearse 2008).

Such studies influence demand for and implementation of participatory reforms in their own right, and scholars in this area are involved in designing and assessing reforms in the real world.

Political scientist and “pracademic” James Fishkin conducts ambitious experiments using his Deliberative Polling method for communities, countries, and transnational organizations like the EU that are seeking to educate publics and gain a better sense of participant preferences (2009). Scholars not only have attempted to facilitate participatory reforms in the real world but also have engaged in prefigurative politics by democratizing the research process on organizational participation itself. Participedia, a crowdsourced database of cases, methods, and organizations initiated by researchers Archon Fung and Mark Warren, intends “to catalogue and compare the performance of participatory political processes” (Participedia 2013). It is worth noting that such efforts involve not just scholarship but organizational development in their own right, as Participedia requires front-end engagement by scholars, practitioners, and the public, and is supported by back-end collaborations among the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, the Bertelsmann Foundation, and other organizations. Fishkin’s work is conducted through the Center for Deliberative Democracy at Stanford, and other centers throughout US higher education conduct related democracy work (Carcasson 2010).

The institutional design literature also includes comprehensive meta-analyses of the outcomes of participatory reforms in particular subfields. Because of the broad and vague use of the term, these scholars define participation as a way of more accurately assessing its impact on organizational performance and individual attitudes (Budd, Gollan, and Wilkinson 2010; Staw and Epstein 2000). Hirschman’s formulation of exit, voice, and loyalty is well known (1970), and many scholars have defined participatory concepts along multiple dimensions such as level of involvement or effect on decision-making (see Arnstein’s “ladder of citizen participation,” 1969, for example; Dachler and Wilpert 1978). One such endeavor is Cotton et al.’s (1988) meta-analysis of different forms of participation and their outcomes; more recent examples include Fung’s “democracy cube” as a method of mapping the varieties of participation (2006b). Many retain a normative focus in connecting documentation of beneficial outcomes to enhanced administrative and stakeholder legitimacy, claiming, for instance, that “the sphere of employee involvement and participation is likely to remain contested, but ... its strategic viability is enhanced when linked with employee well-being as well as performance” (Markey and Townsend 2013). Similar efforts to define outcomes obtain in different domains like environmental decision-making (see, for example, Halvorsen 2001 and Lauber and Knuth 1999, for efforts to measure fairness, quality of deliberation, and satisfaction). More expansively, Kelty and colleagues “disentangle” seven dimensions of contemporary participation in science and technology that they believe apply across domains (2014).

As might be expected, misgivings about whether participation actually fulfills its promise represent the critical flip side of a normative category of literature that seeks successful reforms. A number of dramatic critiques of participation ask: Is participation “worth the effort” (Irvin and Stansbury 2004)? A “trap” (Purcell 2006)? “Janus-faced” (Swyngedouw 2005)? A “failure” (Heckscher 1995)? “The new tyranny” (Cooke and Kothari 2001)? Researchers of unsuccessful cases describe how democratizing potential may be “derailed” (Walker and Hurley 2004) or diluted (Wampler and Avritzer 2005). “Engaged scholarship” has itself come under considerable scrutiny by academic researchers (Fox 2013; Low and Merry 2010; Malan 2000). In workplace participation research, scholars have found employee participation to be more restricted and less revolutionary than idealists might hope, and urge “a more inclusive agenda” even within the literature (Glew et al. 1995). According to Wilkinson, Townsend, and Burgess, “Despite the interest in the ideas of employee involvement and participation and the idea of multiple channels, it does tend to be confined to a limited range of topics, especially information-passing with a hint of consultation, rather than any notion of industrial democracy. The channels are wide rather than deep” (2013: 583).

Given the historical cases described in the prior section, the common themes in this literature (that participation holds many advantages over command-and-control decision-making, but often mixed or disappointing outcomes) are no surprise. Because they are focused on institutional design and its association with performance, researchers are often preoccupied with how to overcome local “pathologies” (Button and Ryfe 2005, 29) or how to correct design errors that prevented participation from measuring up. According to Cohen and Rogers (2003: 239), “we have a problem in the circumstances, not in the ideal that condemns them.” Participatory innovations are “middle range” “exercises in ‘reformist tinkering’” (Fung 2003: 339), so the devil must be in the details—in more precise definitions, more comprehensive assessments of context, and better alignment of accountability measures. The same researchers often emphasize that performance measures can not capture the larger civic value of modeling participation for publics, even when projects’ immediate results are disappointing (Button and Ryfe 2005).

Certainly, as with the literatures described in the prior section, there is interest in the institutional design literature in the complex relationship between participatory rhetorics and practices. But often, efforts to define participation lament failures to refine concepts sufficiently; much less frequently do scholars focus on the ambiguity of participation and its malleability as a concept as potentially a part of its power in use (Vallas 2006). The fact that participation is slippery, extremely difficult to define, and an object of considerable debate has rarely been unpacked as itself a perennial, historically dynamic aspect of democratic culture. Projects to trace these debates over the changing meanings of participation by American democracy scholars (Morone 1998; Schudson 1998) have had very little impact on research efforts to isolate and assess the key elements of contemporary reforms, due to their practical focus on more effective institutionalization.

As I have argued elsewhere, framing participation projects as “cherished spaces apart” hinders our understanding of exactly how participatory reforms are embedded in existing political cultures (Lee 2014: 127). Just as putatively ideal cases may be hotly contested or rejected by publics (Warren and Pearse 2008), limited or fragile cases may hold empowerment potential and advance other normative values even when they do not accord with abstract ideals (Layzer 2008). Pollock and Sharp argue that “the impacts of participation in community-based urban regeneration projects are complex, usually contested and often contradictory... Rather than seeing it as a problem, or something to be removed as soon as possible from the process, contestation and conflict should be recognised as appropriate reflections of community” (2012: 3063). Viewing participation as a set of concepts and practices that are themselves objects of political contention means abandoning the normative commitments in the institutional design literature to participation as an abstract good in and of itself (Dryzek 1996). But this in no way means abandoning an interest in the potential that managers, reformers, practitioners, activists, researchers, and publics seek in participation. The scholarship in the next section attempts to shift from design-specific inquiry and meta-analyses of performance to explore instead the enduring power of participation’s ambiguous promises, a reframing that requires asking how participation may be perceived as empowering and disempowering at the same time.

New research on the “new” participation: reframing investigations of contemporary authority and inequality

A number of recent efforts in scholarship on participation have broken with conventions in the institutional design literature to place empirical studies of participation in organizations in broader contexts, blending micro-level cultural studies of democracy with macro-level

political-economic inquiry (Polletta 2012). Taking participation seriously in the current era means understanding it as central to the moral precepts of neoliberal governance (Moreton 2007), the lived experience of digital consumption (Zukin et al. 2006), and the cultural circuits of contemporary capitalism and the world of work (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005; Fleming 2009; Thrift 2005). Participation is so normalized in the ideologies of contemporary organizations as to require new perspectives on participation, encompassing cross-cutting and overlapping discourses and practices experienced by participants as they move through the various organizations and communities in their lives. These studies represent a return to the macro-level focus on the historical development of authority in classic studies of participation, but with specific preoccupations with the relationship of contemporary processes of participatory institutionalization and global diffusion to co-occurring trends and events, such as privatization, professionalization, and financial and political crises.

Today's participation defies taken-for-granted boundaries of citizenship and market contexts at a time when those boundaries are often blurred (Clemens and Guthrie 2010; Fligstein 1996; Zukin et al. 2006). Scholars like Eliasoph (2009, 2011) have studied ideologies of participation as merely one element in the rise in "empowerment projects," public-private organizational initiatives with "morally magnetic missions" that nevertheless often undermine each other in actual practice (2011: x). The peculiar initiatives that characterize the ideal of neoliberal governance in Western democracies—public-private governance, short-term funding cycles, collaboration, transparency, diversity, and, of course, individual participation and empowerment—encourage engagement of a very specific type, including short-term volunteerism and the needy needing to demonstrate a role in their own empowerment. Participation is accomplished, but disconnected from longer-term, less camera-ready forms of empowerment or capacity-building.

According to Lee, McQuarrie, and Walker, "Empowerment practices may, counter to one's intentions, contribute to the demobilization of publics, the marginalization of the needy, or the reinforcement of the authority of existing elites" (2015: 248). Such research involves objective analysis of the role of organizations and scholarship itself in promoting the new public participation. Ganuza and Baiocchi, for example, trace the "power of ambiguity" in the way participatory budgeting diffused internationally as a model reform (2012: 1). Contrary to the definition used in this paper, contemporary participation may not even be restricted to non-elites or non-experts. Lichterman describes how the contemporary use of "contracted specialists" and student interns as participants by urban organizations in his research may exacerbate tensions: "the meaning and consequences of activist participation may change... when some of the participants are interns, plug-in volunteers, and plug-in specialists" (2014). To further the discussion of these issues, Baiocchi and colleagues have initiated a "Participation and its Discontents" forum project for "interrogating the promises and pitfalls of political participation" (2013).

Scholars interested in the adoption of participation across diverse contexts have paid particular attention to the experts and elites responsible for actually implementing participatory reforms in an atmosphere of austerity. Lee studies the largely-invisible role of the emerging field of public engagement professionals in the new public participation (2015). Scholars like Krause (2014) and Guillot (2005) study the professional "democracy makers" charged with producing a "good project" in the developing world on limited budgets. While Krause and Guillot are still focused on specific cases within development, as in the institutional design literature, their lens of interest goes beyond the outcomes of participation in particular cases to trace participation's varied meanings and strategic functions in the context of multiple overlapping professional and organizational fields (see, for example, Watkins, Swidler, and Hannan 2012). Whereas ambitious surveys in institutional design research seek to identify hospitable contexts and best

practices for participation, this newer research unpacks the ways in which strategic discourses around “best practices” themselves influence problem identification and site selection for participatory reforms.

A central theme in this new literature involves the disconnection of the political equality participation may afford from the enhanced social and economic equality that were previously assumed to accompany it (Walker, McQuarrie, and Lee 2015). Pacewicz (forthcoming) and McQuarrie (2013) investigate the restructuring of urban participation into new, less empowering forms by partnerships and community development organizations at a time of panic about capital flight and urban decline. Lee, McNulty, and Shaffer (2013) study deliberative democracy initiatives sponsored by governments, corporations, and non-profits and find that, while they deepen the involvement of citizens in decision-making, those decisions are likely to be aimed at individualized methods for ameliorating the pain of retrenchment and downsizing. Karpf (2012), Kreiss (2012), and Nielsen (2012) look at the dramatic innovations in participation in national and state-level politics in the 2000s, and find that some aspects of mobilization have democratized while power backstage has been consolidated, often in the hands of new elites like digital consultancies. Much of this literature focuses on the relationship between participatory expansion and the advancement of neoliberal administrations, no doubt because policies advocating devolution and decentralization are so often associated with calls for stakeholder self-determination and community empowerment in decision-making. But a focus solely on the role of participation in the development of neoliberal governance in the West risks overlooking the other diverse contexts in which participation has diffused globally in the 2000s, including deliberative democracy experiments in China (Leib and He 2006; Zhou 2012).⁴

Recent work on private investments in participation demonstrates just how much participation is changing today. While the workplace participation literature describes many different forms of employee participation, no account of participation in corporations today could be complete without understanding the many ways private firms respond to and mobilize the participation of elite and non-elite stakeholders, from corporate social responsibility campaigns (Soule 2009) to grassroots lobbying (Walker 2009). In an era when Wal-Mart can leverage the protests of anti-corporate activists in more efficient siting decisions (Ingram, Yue, and Rao 2010) and industry associations are places for cementing solidarity (Spillman 2012), participation in market organizations is extremely complex. Whose participation is influencing what for whose ends, when a consultant hired by a corporation subsidizes the participation of a smokers' rights group or a low-income community of color in protesting policy (Walker 2014)? When boycotts do not change consumer behavior but do affect company stock prices (King 2011)? When health activists advocate for favorable reimbursement policies for drugs in which they have a financial stake (Schleifer and Panofsky 2015)? While the research on this changing landscape is still developing, it is clear that stakeholder claims about the proper relationship between participation and the public interest are very much in flux. Indeed, just as research on the new public participation reveals limitations of contemporary participation, it also provides new understandings of creative potential and rapidly-adapting strategies in the reshaping of participation by participants, activists, and organizations.

None of these scholars of the new public participation dismiss its democratizing potential, but new forms of participation, like the old, have complex and contingent outcomes that require attention to authority and inequality in expansive, even global, political landscapes. As distinct from critiques of participation in the literature in the prior section, these scholars are less concerned with normative judgments about failed or bad participation than with the ways in which participation has retained its democratic promise for organizational actors even as it has changed forms and meaning dramatically over the last few decades and even within the course

of particular projects. Participation may be substantive and symbolic at the same time, and that is a matter of sociological investigation.

Directions for future research on participation in organizations

There is a massive amount of scholarship on participation in organizations, of which this review essay has touched just a small fraction in an attempt to organize the field thematically for those seeking a preliminary guide to research in the area. Research on participation in organizations is practically a growth industry in the “Age of Engagement,” with academics facing new competition from non-profit experts, policymakers, and privately-funded initiatives intending to document the power of participation in order to harness it (Scott 2011; Zacharzewski 2010). Nevertheless, some understudied aspects of participation deserve further inquiry within the academy, building on the research in each of the prior categories I have defined.

There is plenty of room to expand on classic scholarship on participation in light of the new research described here, both to revisit assumptions about the limited forms of participation sustained in historic organizations and to enliven our understanding of shifts in practices that preceded, and may have contributed to, the reshaping of participation today. Scholars in this vein have focused on unpacking the surprisingly extensive deployment of participatory rhetorics and practices from the Populist to the Progressive eras—whether in William Jennings Bryan’s sophisticated use of supporter databases and direct mail (Kazin 2006), Dixie Cup Company-sponsored mobilization in the Progressive Era (Lee 2010), or civic organizations strong-arming their members’ participation in WWI bond drives (Ott 2011). Today’s enthusiasm for digital campaigning, corporate grassroots campaigns, and financial democracy has very old roots indeed (Frank 2000). Such research requires confronting the particular methodological difficulties of historical research on participation, whose material aftereffects may be ephemeral.

As described previously, advances in the institutional design research have focused on further refining frameworks and definitions, on critiquing disappointing or mixed outcomes in participation, and critiquing researchers themselves for a failure to be sufficiently participatory, even in engaged research. Both case research and meta-analyses in the institutional design research would benefit from exploring further the use of participation in unusual organizational contexts, with unusual stakeholders, and in less than “ideal” settings for testing performance or identifying best practices (Warren and Pearse 2008). Ostrom (1990) and other comparative studies (Briggs 2008) have the analytical advantage of including “fragile” cases, cases in transition, and cases where participation does not adhere to formal design principles. This case selection strategy is driven by an understanding of institutional change as involving iterative, long-term, and multi-layered processes, rather than stand-alone projects or interventions (Girouard and Sirianni 2014); some institutional design choices may intentionally contradict formal ideals. While pursuing research on such cases may involve loosening formal definitions of participation and successful outcomes, or exploring the terrain for processes and settings that fall outside analytical frameworks, these outliers and boundary cases may help us to unpack taken-for-granted assumptions about when democratization might lead to social change, and when participation and expertise are complementary. In addition, recurrent calls for deeper and more reflexive engagement may be counterproductive. Critiques of engaged scholarship may reach an “impasse” (Lashaw 2013), inasmuch as, despite hopes for research on participation to be participatory, there are limits to publics’ relative interest in engaging with research on participation.

The third category of research on the new public participation is the least developed of those reviewed here. Research that focuses on the professional and organizational contexts by which participation is accomplished today, and the pathways through which participation travels as a

reform, an abstract tool, an organizational strategy, and a rhetoric have only just scratched the surface of the organizational diffusion of participation across fields. Studies like Eliasoph's (2011) that locate participation as part of a package of related reforms, and that explore those reforms' relationship to each other and implementation in practice are difficult, but essential to understanding the still changing place of participation in contemporary organizational politics. This research must expand beyond the study of neoliberal governance to develop a larger meta-narrative of the ways in which different modes of governance integrate and manage participatory, collaborative, philanthropic, and community orientations in their administration (Chen et al. 2013; Powell and Clemens 1998). Challenges in this vein involve the difficulties of collecting empirical data on multi-level, intersecting change processes and connecting them to local experiences (Mische and Pattison 2000; Weare et al. 2014); such research is so underdeveloped that it uses terminology, such as "hybrid events" and "blended forms of social action," that highlights differences from past categories but does not capture the creative substance of new logics (Sampson et al. 2005: 673, emphasis mine).

Despite the wealth of research on participation, a rigorous and objective engagement with its ambiguous promises, complex forms, and variable results is desperately needed. At a time of deep anxieties about accountability and access, participation is, in the Obama administration's latest formulation, reducible to a collaboratively-developed "playbook" of "plays" that organizations and agencies can take to democratize their inner workings easily, productively, and efficiently (US Public Participation Playbook 2014; Zarek and Herman 2014). For those who try to contribute to or use such playbooks and find them wanting, researchers of participation in organizations can provide assurance that many others have faced and are facing similar challenges and the wheel (or ladder, or cube) need not be reinvented. Hopefully, future scholarship will move the study of participation toward a historically-informed and accessible understanding of a participation-saturated culture that is nevertheless riven by structural inequalities.

Short Biography

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Notes

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¹ By "organizations of all types," I mean to include simple and complex organizations and institutions, from small businesses to multi-layered and overlapping forms of community governance.

² By necessity, this review excludes the vast body of psychological research on worker participation and the majority of the extensive work in political theory on civil society and democracy, focusing instead on empirical studies of participation in organizations.

³ For the sake of clarity and concision, these subfield citations are suggested starting points for those looking to gain a sense of the breadth of research in these areas. For readers looking to delve deeper, each area is sufficiently developed that searches for "participation" in relevant specialty journals will yield a wealth of sources.

⁴ The institutional design research has been far more attentive to the use of participation in authoritarian contexts (Dryzek 1996).

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