



**“Excuse us if we don’t give a fuck”:
The (Anti-)Political Career of Participation**
—Darin Barney

“Participatory democracy must become a way of life.” —Philip Haid, “Marketing Voter Participation to the MuchMusic Generation” (33)

Participation was present at the origins (at least in the Western context) of thinking about citizenship. For Aristotle, the citizen was strictly defined as one who participates—one who “takes part”—in the offices of the city, a definition that extended its career more or less intact from the ancient Greek city states to the Roman Republic, was negatively affirmed by the absolutist monarchies of the Middle Ages via their denial of extensive participatory opportunities and citizenship to most subjects, and was confirmed decisively in the early modern European republics and later modern European and American liberal revolutions that established the rights of citizens and a variety of representative institutions in which they could exercise their citizenship by participating, by taking part. Participation is also central to notions of citizenship in modern republican and liberal political

thought. More recently, the idea of citizenship as participation has been revived in democratic political critiques that point to the participatory deficiencies of increasingly bureaucratic and sporadic representative processes and institutions, and that call for increased opportunities for more inclusive and routine, *deliberative*, democratic engagement by citizens. These have been met in some cases by attention on the part of liberal democratic governments to provide better and greater opportunities for citizen engagement and consultation between elections. Beyond government, the goal of enhancing civic experience through more extensive and robust participation has also animated a range of scholars, policy-makers, activists, and organizations that have cohered around the problem of declining *social capital* due to a deficit of participation in the sort of community organizations and groups that

bind and stabilize civil societies.

Participation, it would seem, is what citizenship is *about*. The prospect I would like to raise is that *citizenship-as-participation* is something altogether different from *politics*: that if participation, or taking part, is what citizenship is about, the possibility looms that neither citizenship nor participation necessarily conduces to politics. Indeed, as I suggest below, it may be the case that citizenship-as-participation is our best security *against* the possibility of politics.

Just as it has been central to mainstream republican and liberal democratic conceptions of citizenship, participation has also had a career on the left, in the form of something called “participatory democracy.” In his outstanding little book, *The Life and Times of Liberal Democracy*, C. B. Macpherson describes the genesis of “participatory democracy” as follows:

It began as a slogan of the New Left student movements of the 1960s. It spread into the working class in the 1960s and 70s, no doubt as an offshoot of the growing job dissatisfaction among both blue- and white-collar workers and the more widespread feeling of alienation, which then became such fashionable subjects for sociologists, management experts, government commissions of inquiry and popular journalists. One manifestation of this new spirit was the rise of movements for workers’ control in industry. In the same decades, the idea that

there should be substantial citizen participation in government decision-making spread so widely that national governments began enrolling themselves, at least verbally, under the participatory banner, and some even initiated programmes embodying extensive citizen participation. It appears the hope of a more participatory society and system of government has come to stay. (93)

Macpherson’s account alludes to the migration of participatory democracy from the marginal left to the mainstream, but there is even more to say about the work participation did on, for, and to the left itself. “Participatory democracy” was a crucial element in the shift in the organized Anglo-American left in the twentieth century from a posture of “democratic socialism” to one of “social democracy.” For democratic socialists, fundamental transformation of the capitalist economy and state along socialist lines is the goal, but revolutionary violence and authoritarianism are eschewed as means for reaching this goal in favour of competing for power in established democratic institutions. For the social democrat, the goal is not so much a socialist transformation achieved by democratic means as it is an expedited and fuller realization of the liberal democratic principle of equality, extended to the economic domain via redistributive measures that nevertheless leave the capitalist economy and liberal



... the social
democratic left
accepted “participatory
democracy” as a viable
substitute for the more
threatening project of
establishing a socialist
economy and society.



state fundamentally intact. In the Canadian context, we are talking about the difference (and distance between) the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation of the Regina Manifesto of 1933 (which famously declared that “No CCF government will rest content until it has eradicated capitalism”) and that of the 1956 Winnipeg Declaration of Principles (which conceded the necessity of private ownership, called for a Bill of Rights, and replaced the pledge to eradicate capitalism with “The CCF will not rest content until every person in this land and in all other lands is able to enjoy equality and freedom, a sense of human dignity, and an opportunity to live a rich and meaningful life as a citizen of a free and peaceful world”). With the social democratic turn heralded by the Winnipeg Declaration, the socialists of the CCF had arguably become what Louis St. Laurent and others had always thought they were: “Liberals in a hurry” (qtd. in Zakuta 194).

What I am suggesting is that one way to interpret the deradicalization of the Anglo-American left in the latter half of the twentieth century is to say that, at a certain point, the social democratic left accepted “participatory democracy” as a viable substitute for the more threatening project of establishing a socialist economy and society. Macpherson himself was keen to point out the basic compatibility of liberalism and participatory democracy, describing the latter’s commitment to “the equal right of every man and woman to the full development and use of his or her capabilities” as embodying “the best tradition of liberal democracy” (114). It came down to a question of strategy. Leftists, Macpherson included, had always known that the liberal promise of individual freedom and equal opportunity was empty without the sort of material equality that could come only from a serious redistribution

of power and resources. Perhaps socialism, or at least some sort of radical economic egalitarianism, could be smuggled in with the Trojan Horse of participatory democracy. This is the horse on which the social democratic left placed its bet. What it perhaps did not foresee, however, was the ease with which liberal democratic states and capitalist industry would be able to accommodate the demand for increased participation without any significant redistribution of economic and political power. Indeed, it goes even further than this: the liberal state and the capitalist economy no longer simply *accommodate* increasing levels and diverse forms of democratic participation by citizens but, rather, they *need* it and they *thrive* on it.

Participation has also enjoyed a career in the fields of art, aesthetics, popular culture, and criticism, a career that was similarly motivated by an anti-capitalist impulse. This part of its career reaches back to Dada and Brecht, but it really takes off with the Situationists and Guy Debord's scathing critique in the 1960s of the "empire of modern passivity" (10) sustained by the "Society of the Spectacle," a structural malaise that called for the creation of situations that would demand active participation by those exposed to them. A priority on participation also arises in poststructuralist literary and critical practices that sought to destabilize the hierarchy of authors and readers, holding out against presumptions of authorial integrity and in favour of active, creative co-construction of meaning

through insurgent reading practices. What art historian Claire Bishop has described as "the artistic injunction to participate" (13) arguably culminates in Nicolas Bourriaud's highly influential theorization in the late 1990s of the paradigm of "relational aesthetics," meant to encompass all those forms of contemporary art that seek not only to *critique* the passive, privatized, and spectacular nature of capitalist commodity relations, but moreover to *embody* and to *materialize* collaborative, intersubjective, egalitarian, interactive alternatives to that purportedly hegemonic form. Here, the artwork is presented as a "social interstice," staged in the "sphere of human relations" (160), such that it might catalyze a broader social and political conviviality in which "'new life possibilities' prove to be possible" (166).

There is no reason to dismiss the political intentions of relational aesthetics or of any of the other forms in which the "injunction to participate" has been mobilized in artistic and cultural practices that are aimed at disrupting or challenging the status quo. However, there is good reason to question whether these attempts have lived up to the hopes assigned to them. For while it is true that art-as-participation may have been borne of efforts in good faith to disrupt the hegemonic function of spectacular, authoritative, mass culture, those invested in these attempts perhaps could not predict the extent to which what Cayley Sorochan has called "the participatory complex" (1) would



Participation is now
compulsory.



itself come to serve a hegemonic function in relation to the capitalist economy and state, effectively bolstering the very configuration against which these artists intended their practices to be arrayed.

Liberal democratic ideology, social democratic compromise, and utopian aesthetics have all played their parts, but none is uniquely or even primarily to blame for the speed and ease with which participation has come to occupy such an indispensable position in the cultural and material framework of contemporary liberal capitalism. Crucial to this development has also been the proliferation of a diverse range of emerging media technologies that would appear to hard-wire participation into the very fabric of our being, materializing what could be described as “participatory ontology.” Emerging media provide an ever-blossoming range of opportunities to vote, rank, comment, mash up, contribute, produce, present, mark up, post, tag, choose, share, customize, network, link, navigate, discuss, play, provide feedback, and collaborate via an equally diverse array of devices. These opportunities extend beyond online experience to encompass conventional media and cultural sites, the workplace, domestic space, and urban spaces in which we are continually presented with a matrix of opportunities for network-mediated information transaction, commercial and otherwise. The name customarily given to these participatory opportunities is “interactivity,” but to describe our encounter with interactivity as the availability of “opportunities” to participate is somewhat misleading. Owing to the crucial role these modes of exchange play in various state and commercial systems, participation is no longer simply an opportunity we can choose to take up or not. Participation is now compulsory.

This technological development marks the current stage in the political career of participation: the stage at which participation

becomes the object, rather than the aspiration, of political critique. Reservations concerning the political value of participation have emerged from several quarters. Art historian and critic Hal Foster questions the political value of art that posits dialogue, sociability, and collaboration as good for their own sake, art that ultimately works to “aestheticize the nicer procedures of our service economy” (195). Foucaultian scholars of surveillance document the manner in which increasingly mandatory forms of participation mediate our enrolment in the disciplinary apparatus of the state and the consumer economy, spontaneously providing it with the data it needs to accomplish its work of categorization, ordering, and knowledge production; while those drawn to Foucault’s later accounts of governmentality and biopower emphasize participation as the means by which we perform and reproduce ourselves as self-responsible, empowered, and flexible subjects adapted to the demands of neo-liberalism (Andrejevic). Lacanians such as Slavoj Žižek locate the ideological function of participation in the injunction to enjoy—in this case, to enjoy the sensation of doing something without enduring the burden of actually doing anything: interactivity as a sublimated form of “interpassivity” (111). And, finally, there is Jodi Dean’s comprehensive account of the role that the “fantasy of participation” (31) enacted and encouraged by emerging media technologies plays in bolstering the regime of contemporary communicative capitalism.

Whether one agrees with these assessments or not, at the very least they raise the question of the status of participation as both a political end and as a critical category under contemporary economic, social, and technological conditions. Participation is ambivalent, as open to stabilizing prevailing arrangements of power and injustice as it is to disrupting them. Thus, from a critical perspective, it would appear necessary to stipulate that participation is not an absolute, but rather only a contingent value: one whose worth is not intrinsic but rather derived from the ends it serves in any given context. Further, in the context of a hegemonic political and economic culture that not only accommodates participation but actually embraces, thrives, and insists upon it, and in light of proliferating technologies that effectively render routine participation obligatory, the ends that participation presently serves cannot be said to be unambiguously worthwhile. If we are looking for something to which we might attach our aspirations for a more just society, we might have to look for something other than mere participation. What we might actually need is politics, not just participation.

It was suggested above that participation is what citizenship is about, but that citizenship-as-participation is something altogether different from politics. Much turns on what one thinks politics *is*, and on what one thinks politics is *for*. Along lines suggested by Jacques Rancière, I think politics arises in

moments when we are confronted with a fundamental and structuring wrong, a miscount, a radical and unjust exclusion that cannot be tolerated, moments in which we are seized with the courage to judge and to act on that wrong. Politics arises, as Rancière puts it, on the part of those who have no part, those who cannot take part, those who are excluded from participation. Its form is not that of asking or being invited to participate on current terms, but rather that of contesting the wrongs upon which the categories and benefits of public and citizen, categories and benefits of inclusion and power, are built at any given time. The basic logic of citizenship is inclusion and participation; the basic logic of politics is exclusion and refusal. And this is why a culture of liberal democratic citizenship, a culture of the universalized invitation to participate, tends to produce politics only at and beyond its borders and margins. At the 2010 meetings of the G20 in Toronto, politics took place outside the barricades, in action that exceeded the liberal right to express one's opinion freely, not inside them, where ostensibly "political" leaders went about the business of managing the progress of global capitalism. And it is in this sense that earlier I described citizenship-as-participation as our best security *against* the pathological possibility of politics. As John Locke so perceptively put it in his design for a liberal government that would be up to the task of securing capitalist property holders against the political predations of the propertyless, a well-established right to resist is "the best

fence against rebellion" (231). Citizenship has always been a technology of depoliticization, and participation has always been one of its most effective mechanisms.

This might shed light on the oft-repeated imperative, expressed in the epigraph to this essay, to inculcate young people with the spirit of participation as a "way of life." Fears concerning the political potential of disengaged youth are long-standing. Socrates, we might recall, was condemned by Athens for corrupting its youth, a corruption that manifest itself in that most horrifying of outcomes: disengagement. The good citizens of Athens feared that under Socrates' critical influence, their sons were becoming disinclined to assume the privileges and responsibilities of citizenship—the "way of life"—into which they had been born. They were refusing to participate. More recently, in France, a group of well-educated, middle-class young people who had read one too many radical philosophers (which is to say that they were marginalized on account of their ideas, not their social position), moved to the village of Tarnac in the Corrèze region, where they established a communal farm, delivered food to elderly and infirm people, reopened the General Store as a co-operative, and established a local film society and lending library. In 2008, nine of these young people, now known as the Tarnac Nine, were arrested on terrorism charges, accused of sabotaging power lines in an act that threw high-speed train service around Paris into chaos for several hours.

The manifesto *The Coming Insurrection*, written by the Invisible Committee and widely attributed to the group (and cited by French security services as evidence of “pre-terrorism”), includes not only a scorching critique of the contemporary capitalist state and culture in France, but also what can properly be described as a call to organization and action in opposition to the culture of participation. “We are not depressed,” the authors write, “we’re on strike. For those who refuse to manage themselves, ‘depression’ is not a state but a passage, a bowing out, a sidestep towards a *political* disaffiliation” (34). Making explicit reference to concerns about the “political stability of the country,” they reply: “Excuse us if we don’t give a fuck” (44).

Nothing could be more politically volatile, more fatal to the stability of an established regime, than a

refusal by its youth to participate. And this is why the most consistent and enduring teaching in the history of Western political thought has been that the central task of any political regime is education. The survival of the prevailing order depends upon depoliticizing young people by making good citizens of them, by inviting, or even compelling them to participate. It is with good reason that we have long pathologized the figure of the disengaged, apathetic youth, and groped frantically for therapeutic aids that might entice young people to participate (forgetting that time tends to make good citizens of us all). And it is no wonder we have invested such hope in the potential of emerging media to engage young people and to encourage them to participate. Participation, in the end, is truly much safer—and much easier to deal with—than politics.

Works Cited

- Andrejevic, Mark. *iSpy: Surveillance and Power in the Interactive Era*. Lawrence: UP of Kansas, 2007. Print.
- Bishop, Claire. "Introduction: Viewers as Producers." Bishop, *Participation* 10–17.
- , ed. *Participation*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006. Print.
- Bourriaud, Nicolas. "Relational Aesthetics." *Participation*. Ed. Claire Bishop. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006. 160-171. Print.
- Cooperative Commonwealth Federation. "The Regina Manifesto." 1933. Web. 10 Oct. 2010.
- . "Winnipeg Declaration of Principles." 1956. Web. 10 Oct. 2010.
- Dean, Jodi. *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies*. Durham: Duke UP, 2009. Print.
- Debord, Guy. *The Society of the Spectacle*. Trans. Ken Knabb. New York: Rebel, 1983. Print.
- Foster, Hal. "Chat Rooms." Bishop, *Participation* 190–95.
- Haid, Phillip. "Marketing Voter Participation to the MuchMusic Generation." *Electoral Insight* 5.2 (2003): 31–35. Print.
- The Invisible Committee. *The Coming Insurrection*. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2009. Print.
- Locke, John. *Two Treatises of Government*. 1689. London: Everyman, 1986. Print.
- Macpherson, C. B. *The Life and Times of Liberal Democracy*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1977. Print.
- Rancière, Jacques. *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1998. Print.
- Sorochan, Cayley. "Flash Mobs and Urban Gaming: Networked Performances in Urban Space." M.A. thesis, McGill U, 2010. Print.
- Zakuta, Leo. "Membership in a Becalmed Protest Movement." *Journal of economics and Political Science/Revue canadienne d'Economie et de Science politique* 24.2 (1958): 190-202. Print.
- Žižek, Slavoj. *The Plague of Fantasies*. London: Verso, 1997. Print.

Darin Barney is Canada Research Chair in Technology & Citizenship and Associate Professor of Communication Studies at McGill University. He is the author of *Communication Technology: The Canadian Democratic Audit* (UBC Press, 2005); *The Network Society* (Polity Press, 2004); *Prometheus Wired: The Hope for Democracy in the Age of Network Technology* (UBC/University of Chicago Press, 2000) and *One Nation Under Google: Citizenship in the Technological Republic*, the 2007 Hart House Lecture.