The politics of participation

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Abstract

There is now renewed interest in ideas of participation and involvement. While these are regarded with some caution because of their populist associations, they are also at the heart of a number of important social policy and political debates and developments. This article attempts to put current concern about participation into context, relate it to the recent history of participation and explore some of the issues and implications it has for social policy.

INTRODUCTION

'Participation' is one of those contentious words like 'community' and 'care' which can seem to mean everything and nothing. There is little agreement about its definition. Even its terminology constantly changes, for example, from 'participation' and 'empowerment', to 'self-advocacy' and 'involvement'. 'Participation' generates enthusiasm and hostility in equal proportion. For some it is bankrupt; for others it offers hope. Interest in participation appears to be episodic. Currently we are going through another period when it seems to be heightened. According to our views on the subject, this may be a problem or an opportunity. What it certainly seems to demand is a closer look at participation. It is an enormous idea, but one which frequently seems to be treated in the most superficial and depoliticised way.

Now at a time of major political, economic and social changes, when ideas of involvement constantly crop up in social policy discussions, it is particularly opportune to try and make sense of participation's strengths and weaknesses and to ask some basic questions about it. For example: Why has it had such a chequered career? Can it be helpful? What would be needed for it to have meaning? What implications does it have for social policy and politics more generally? This discussion is offered very much as an initial attempt to explore some of these questions. Hopefully it will generate further debate which will take forward our understanding of 'participation'. First we need to put participation in some context.

THE CURRENT CONTEXT OF PARTICIPATION

The collapse of political regimes in Eastern Europe has been equated in the West with the failure of the left. It is offered as evidence to show that what the architects and supporters of communism and socialism envisaged as an empowering alternative can now be called into question on two key counts. These are first its apparent unpopularity, rejected by the people as over-powering and undemocratic, and second, its economic incompetence, unable to maximise production, distribution or consumption.

The 'collapse of communism' has not only strengthened the political, eco-nomic and military power of western market democracies, most dramatically by reducing the number of superpowers from two to one. It has also con-firmed their own and perhaps other people's view of their credibility and effectiveness.

But fundamental problems associated with western market economies, which first gave impetus to the emergence of the political left, remain unresolved. These include gross inequalities, the concentration of political and economic power, and the failure to reconcile profit and the accumulation of capital with the meeting of need and guaranteeing of people's rights. The market success and rising poverty and material inequality that have been syno-nymous with Britain in the 1980s are symbolic of this unresolved issue.[1]

Yet paradoxically the market is now being offered as the solution to the shortcomings of state and collective action. We are not only witnessing this in the West's interventions in the social and economic institutions of Eastern Europe. It is also happening much closer to home in social policy. It is embodied in the changing economy of welfare, the purchaser-provider split and the new welfare consumerism. With one bound, the market is trans-formed into a remedy for the shortcomings of state policies and services to meet need, although the inspiration of such policies was the market's own failure to meet such need in the first place.

So if left alternatives are now held up as defective with increasing confi-dence, the market's own weaknesses remain unresolved. But the two politics have other important characteristics in common. Both are economics-led. The strength of western democracies is seen to rest on the market. The East-ern European socialist republics were based on state ownership of the means of production. One was led by state command economy; the other by capital accumulation of the market. As more information emerges from Eastern Europe a clearer picture is also emerging of the shortcomings of both on environmental issues and in meeting social need. Finally, both have been associated with a politics that is narrowly based.

But there is also growing interest in and search for a different politics. Its focus is more civil and social than economic. It is reflected in a number of developments and discussions. A key feature which links them is a common

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concern with people's *increased involvement* and *participation*. It is this we particularly want to explore. We shall focus on four of these developments. They are:

— the emergence of new social movements
— the rekindling of interest in human need
— the re-emergence of the idea of citizenship
— postmodernism

While it might be suggested that some of these developments are narrowly based, others draw on wide involvement. Some are international, others are more local. There are also overlaps between them. We don't include them on the basis of any particular allegiance of our own, but rather because all of them appear influential. Let's look at them in more detail.

New social movements

The 1970s saw the emergence of many new movements. These included the gay and lesbian, black, women's, disability and environmental movement. Oliver offers a helpful description of them:

> 'These movements have been seen as constituting the social basis for new forms of transformative political change. These social movements are "new" in the sense that they are not grounded in traditional forms of political participation through the party system or single-issue pressure group activity targeted at political decision-makers.
> Instead they are culturally innovative in that they are part of the underlying struggle for genuine participatory democracy, social equality and justice, which have arisen out of "the crisis in industrial culture". These new social movements are consciously engaged in critical evaluation of capitalist society and in the creation of alternative models of social organisation at local, national and international levels, as well as trying to reconstruct the world ideologically and to create alternative forms of service provision.'[2]

One criticism made of the new social movements is that they have resulted in an over-rapid retreat from class analysis and politics and the possibilities these offer of united action.[3] Another concern has been that their focus on different identities may result in conflict and fragmentation rather than unity and concerted action. At the same time, there is now growing recognition of the overlapping identities that new social movements reflect: disabled women are women too; gay people may also be black people.

Oliver identifies four characteristics associated with the new social movements. These are:

— They tend to be located at the periphery of the traditional political system and sometimes are deliberately marginalised.

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— They offer a critical evaluation of society as part of 'a conflict between a declining but still vigorous form of domination and newly emergent forms of opposition.'

— They are concerned with the quality of people's life as well as narrowly materialist needs.

— They tend to focus on issues that cross national boundaries and thus they become internationalist.[4]

Some analysts are beginning to make links between new social movements and the organisations developed by people who use traditional welfare services to take collective action to secure their rights and needs, for example, disability organisations, organisations of people with mental distress and of people who are HIV positive. These have been described as 'new social welfare movements'[5] although this conceives of their members in terms of services which their struggles are often concerned with challenging.

These groups are increasingly seeing themselves as new social movements, identifying themselves with other new social movements and pointing to their shared characteristics and goals. They share a number of key qualities with them. They:

— experience institutionalised social oppression
— recognise and value their own particular history and culture
— frame their activities in political terms
— 'come out' about themselves and assert their identity instead of tryng to keep 'in the closet'
— take a pride in who they are.

They also highlight the concern of new social movements with participation and empowerment. People are concerned with speaking and acting *for themselves*. It is a primary concern. It extends beyond the involvement of their constituency, to the active involvement of as many members of it as possible. It is an explicit expression of their concern with a different politics; a participatory politics.

Human need

The debate about human need has been a curious one. It is an idea which continues to inform the practice and analysis of social policy and which is still regularly used in much political discourse. Yet as Doyal and Gough argue, it is 'regularly rejected in the domain of theory'.

> 'Economists, sociologists, philosophers, liberals, libertarians, Marxists, socialists, feminists, anti-racists, and other social critics have increasingly regarded human need as a subjective and culturally relative concept.'[6]

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Doyal and Gough have sought to rescue human need from the resulting confusion they see 'for providers of welfare and for those who are committed to the political struggle for the increased provision of welfare.' In a germinal article in 1984, they argued: 'It is time either to defend and refine the concept of human needs or to banish it entirely from our vocabulary.'[7]

Doyal and Gough have condemned the ways in which the idea of need has been abused by professionals, experts and politicians foisting their own demands and perceptions upon people. In the theory of human needs they have developed, they identify *objective* and *universal* needs as well as a range of intermediate needs to which everyone must have access for these to be met. The objective and universal needs they identify are physical health and individual autonomy, because they are essential preconditions for *participation in social life*. They place an emphasis on the social character of human action. By social participation they mean the quantity and quality of social interactions. Doyal also argues more specifically for the involvement of welfare service users alongside providers if these services are to 'optimise need satisfaction'.[8]

Some may question whether such a theory will win the political argument as its authors believe it will. Others have pointed to the importance of people's own broader involvement in the development of such ideas.[9] What is clear though is that ideas of involvement and participation have now become central to the discussion of human need.

Citizenship

The late 1980s saw a reawakening of interest in the idea of citizenship. Just as it emerged as a key concept at the time of the creation of the welfare state,[10] so it again became one when we seemed to be moving into a post-welfare state age.

The debate about citizenship has come from many quarters. Citizenship entails both rights and responsibilities. While the political left and centre have emphasised the social *rights* and *entitlements* of citizenship, extending to pressure for a British Bill of Rights, from the mid 1980s, there has been an emphasis among sections of the political right on its social *responsibilities* and *obligations*. As Lister says: 'The language of obligation is replacing that of rights. These two words "welfare" and "rights" are being uncoupled as attempts are made to reduce expectations of what the State will provide and thereby dependency on the "benefits culture".'[11]

But in this discussion, the rights and responsibilities of citizenship sometimes seem to be confused. For example, if the American writer Lawrence Mead sees the obligation of employment as 'as much a badge of citizenship as rights'[12], for many disabled people and single parents, it is a *right* which they are denied through discrimination, lack of access and lack of child care.

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The citizenship debate is complex and wide ranging and has not always been politically connected. One expression it has taken has been the growing number of 'citizen's charters' produced by local authorities and political parties. In 1986, seeking something more than a straightforward consumerist approach to public services, Clarke and Stewart identified a new approach with what they called a public service orientation where: 'The emphasis is both on the *customer* for whom the service is provided and on the *citizen* to whom the authority is accountable.'[13]

In his analysis of the citizen's charters produced by the three major political parties, Taylor points to the way in which the citizen is confused with the consumer.[14] So far, citizen's charters have been more concerned with consumer's than citizen's rights; with quality assurance, customer care and the rights of redress and exit.[15] They have also ignored citizenship's history. Taylor has argued that to be of use 'the concept of citizenship must be taken out of its liberal history and rethought.'[16]

The citizen idea can be used both to exclude and to involve. As Taylor puts it, it: 'has long been used to marginalise, and is bound up with the republican tradition of male politics organised around an exclusive national culture'.[17]

But the new debates about citizenship are concerned with people's *inclusion* rather than exclusion. As Andrews observes:

'It has often been argued that a concept which has historically been underwritten by a patriarchal, eurocentric and heterosexual consensus, did not admit those whose "private" identities were different. Cultural and gender difference challenges the historical idea of the citizen. However, there are indications that citizenship can remain an emancipatory ideal without entering a new theoretical jungle. New arguments are being produced which are redefining the rights, responsibilities and status of citizens, in the light of difference.'[18]

Taylor argues that:

'The debate of citizenship . . . automatically raises the question of nationality and immigration, poverty and resources, marginalisation from the public sphere through discrimination based on age, disability, sexuality, "race" and gender. It also raises the question of the private and the public. Is citizenship constructed simply through the public world of consumerism or equally through the social relations of reproduction and the family? And lastly, it raises the nature of the power of the citizen. Is the content of citizenship something to be handed down in a charter or something that should be built on the self-advocacy of citizens?'[19]

The idea of citizenship is now being used as a way of highlighting people's exclusions and of giving force to arguments and campaigns for their *involvement*. Lister, for example, challenges 'gender-blind' conceptualisations of

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citizenship to press for the full and equal citizenship of women.[20] Earlier, she examined the ways in which poverty excludes people from the full rights of citizenship, undermining their ability to fulfil eithertheir private or social obligations. This offers a way of reconceiving poverty as well as an argument for poor people's full inclusion and involvement in society.[21]

Postmodernism

Postmodernism is both a set of developments and changes identified as taking place in society and a particular analysis and discussion which is part of this. Both are concerned with major shifts from *standardisation, uniformity* and *universalism* to *fragmentation, diversity* and *difference*. At the economic level, this is characterised by a tend towards differentiation in both production and consumption: from the mass production line to semi-autonomous workgroups; from standardised to diverse products aimed at diverse groups of consumers and by a move from a production to consumption-led economy. The workforce is now more clearly demarcated as a skilled and relatively well rewarded 'core' of largely white male workers and a 'periphery' of low paid, less secure and often black and women workers. At the social and cultural level, there is a greater acknowledgement of heterogeneity and diversity. This is reflected at the political level by the breakdown of traditional class politics and the emergence of a 'politics of identity based on ethnicity, gender and/or sexuality'.[22]

While this debate has not always been concerned with issues of power and inequality, postmodernism offers a framework for focusing our attention on them. In her exploration of the links between postmodernism and social policy, for example, Fiona Williams argues that diversity:

> 'is part and parcel of a complexity of power and inequality. We need to reconnect diversity and difference to the struggles from which they emerge, the conditions in which they exist and the social relations they reflect and challenge.'[23]

Recognition of diversity also offers us a way of going beyond the universalism versus selectivity debate in social policy and of taking account of people's different needs as well as their universal rights. Fiona Williams writes,

> by supplanting the notion of "selectivity" with the notion of "diversity" it's possible to move the debate on to new ground which admits the possibility of people articulating their own needs. It also points to what I think is a fundamental issue for social policy – not the counterposing of diversity to universality, but the need to resolve the tensions between universal principles and policies, on the one hand, and the recognition of diversity, on the other.'[24]

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This it does by recognising the importance of people's own involvement in the process.

LINKING WITH THE HISTORY OF PARTICIPATION

This idea and objective of participation then is central to these debates and developments. It is also of more general importance in modern political and social policy discourses. But participation is not an issue that is always well understood. Frequently it is taken for granted, as if the desire for or commitment to participation is sufficient to ensure it will happen. There is a tendency for such ideas to be used lightly and rhetorically in abstract discussion. There is also a risk that insufficient attention may be paid to the issue of participation in debates which are themselves relatively narrowly based and whose authors are unfamiliar with the practice of participation, whereas people who are directly concerned with their own exclusion on a day-to-day basis, like those involved in the women's, black and disability movements, are only too conscious of the politics of participation.

Because of this it is important that any concern with participation is clearly *connected* with existing knowledge and experience. It is essential to put participation in its historical and political context. Otherwise its ambiguities and contraditions are likely to remain unexplored and unresolved. Ultimately, discussions of participation which are not grounded in an understanding of its practice and politics are likely to be superficial and unhelpful.

In its broadest sense the idea of participation is part of the wider discussion about democracy that extends nearly 3,000 years. More specifically, it is linked with efforts to move from representative to participatory democracy and with arrangements to enable people's direct involvement in political, administrative and other processes which affect them. The modern history of such thinking and developments around participation extends over at least 30 years. We can identify three overlapping developments during this period which are central to it. These are:

— Public participation in land-use planning
— Community development
— User-involvement

A critical examination of all three is likely to be helpful in developing our understanding of ideas of involvement and participation. Let's look at each of them in turn.

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN LAND USE PLANNING

The movement for public participation in land-use planning gained momentum in the late 1960s and early 1970s, not least because of the deluge of bad planning with large scale urban redevelopment and central government's

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desire to free itself of the burden of innumerable appeals. Its two landmarks were the 1969 Skeffington Report, 'People And Planning'[25] and the Town And Country Planning Acts of 1968 and 1971. Provisions for public partici-pation were introduced into both the main provinces of planning: develop-ment planning and general planning control. The notion of public participa-tion embodied in the two Planning Acts was essentially one of public consult-ation and appeal. In the case of local plans, objections would be heard by public local inquiry.

This development in land-use planning marked the first large scale govern-ment intervention in 'participation'. It introduced the term 'public participa-tion' into the political vernacular. It anticipated provisions for consultation in community care planning contained in the National Health Service and Com-munity Care Act by 20 years and through it many community organisations became involved in planning issues.

However it had several important shortcomings. It rested on a model of planning as a technical exercise, as if land use decisions were made on a neutral basis, unaffected by political or commercial considerations. It emphasised planning as a *professional* activity. Some planners have con-tinued to suggest that the professional planner and planning hold the answer to many of society's problems and that planning has a key role to play in regenerating inner city areas, despite the increasing weakness of the planning process.[26] While pressure from community organisations led to some changes, public participation in planning was based on a narrow notion of 'planning issues' and did not pay sufficient attention to issues of social need so that judgements did not distinguish, for example, between the provision of low-cost housing for local people and expensive housing which would exclude them. The picture emerging from research was that the public parti-cipation which followed from this process was limited and biased.[27]

Finally the process of planning and participation was not related to the wider political process. For example, in 1981 in his report on the Public Local Inquiry into objections and representations concerning the Wands-worth Borough Plan, the inspector stated that his recommendations might 'give rise to a need to make more drastic revision of the plan than might normally be expected'. He severely criticised major parts of the plan saying the Conservative Council had turned it into political dogma. The Leader of the Council wrote to the Under Secretary of State at the Department of the Environment and the inspector was himself subsequently admonished by the junior minister who stated:

> 'the inspector made an error of judgement . . . He went outside the proper bounds of his function in his expression of criticism of some council policies, such as those on housing, and in particular, the sale of council houses . . . I need hardly add that these policies accord with those advocated by the govern-ment.'

However they clearly did not accord with the views of local people expressed in public participation. When Michael Heseltine, the then Secretary of State for the Environment, visited North Battersea after the inspector reported, and local people questioned him in the street, reminding him what his inspector had said about the Borough Plan and unmet local housing need, he replied, 'He has his opinion and I've got mine.'[28]

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

The state sponsored community work which expanded in Britain and the United States during the 1960s had it origins in community development approaches used by the west in the developing world, first to integrate colonial territories and subsequently to support western political and economic objectives there.[29]

The emphasis of community work and community development is on collective rather than individual action. Its focus has been both the workplace and the neighbourhood. It has been concerned with the economic infrastructure, for example, housing and employment; with supporting people's personal growth and development, and with work performed by women in the community – often unpaid – for example, in playschemes, nurseries and carers' groups. Community development is an activity which may be undertaken by unpaid community activists, specialised community workers or other professionals adopting this approach. The objectives of community development range from encouraging self-help and mutual aid to politicisation and pressure group activity; from collaboration to confrontation. Commentators identify a wide variety of models. There is no consensus. Twelvetrees identified three overlapping approaches:

— community development: creating and servicing community organis ations, bringing people together to identify their needs and work on them;
— political action: a class-based approach, organising and linking working class organisations and campaigns;
— social planning: promoting joint action between voluntary and community organisations and the local state to change and improve services.[30]

In the 1970s and 1980s community work came in for criticism from feminists and black people for its male dominance and failure to address racism.[31] Women and black people initiated their own forms of community development, leading Dominelli to add two new models of community work to her typology: feminist community action and community action from a black perspective.[32]

While there are different models of community work and community development, they share two common concerns; bringing about change and *involving* people in the process. This is where the first of three important

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tensions emerges which affect traditional community development. These are between:

— change and involvement
— the rhetorical and real scale of involvement
— enabling and organising

Let's begin with the first of these. It is often difficult to reconcile change and involvement. The time and resources it takes in community development to involve people effectively often sit uncomfortably with pressures to undertake initiatives and achieve results. When one has to be sacrificed it's usually people's participation.

While the rhetoric of community development is of large scale involvement – 'tenants got together' or 'local people produced their own community plan' – the reality is more often one of limited numbers or small groups. Broadbased involvement may not even be a primary issue on the hard pressed community worker's agenda. But since community work is 'concerned principally to promote collective action on issues or in areas selected by the participants',[33] narrowly based involvement clearly may pose problems.

The final tension is between support and direction. The role of organiser sits uncomfortably with that of facilitator. Yet community development embraces both.[34] While a supportive approach seems consistent with enabling and extending people's involvement, an organising one suggests a more one-sided relationship, with leaders and followers. This may be a way of creating more 'community' or 'user leaders', but whether that is the same thing as increasing people's participation remains open to question.

USER-INVOLVEMENT

The 1980s witnessed a new focus for participation and new terminology. There has been pressure for a shift away from *service-* or *provider-led* public provision to more *user-centred* services. This has been particularly apparent in the context of welfare services. The demands have been for different, better and more responsive services. A unifying idea underpinning this development has been that of *user-involvement*. A growing view is that the switch to more user-centred services is likely to be achieved by making possible the increased involvement of service users.

Interest in more user-centred services can be traced to a number of broader developments. They come from many quarters. Most can be traced to disenchantment with the British post-war welfare state. They include:

— the rise of the political right and the election of Conservative governments from 1979, with their concern with the cost of public services, dislike of a 'nanny' welfare state which was perceived as creating and

perpetuating dependency, their objections to government intervention and preference for a greater role for the private market.

— more general public disquiet about the poor quality, paternalism and lack of responsiveness of welfare and other public services.

— the emergence of a wide range of organisations and movements of people using such welfare services – from young people in care to people with mental distress – who were frequently not happy with the services they received and wanted something different.

— the struggle for equal opportunities highlighting the frequent failure of welfare services to ensure equal access, opportunities and appropriate provision for women, black people and members of other minority groups. [35]

— progressive professionals and other service workers who wanted to work in different more egalitarian ways, concerned about the oppressive nature and lack of accountability that frequently characterised their services and agencies. [36]

— the appearance of new kinds of support services. By showing that things really could be different, they emphasised the deficiencies of the old. Women's, black and gay organisations, for example, set up lesbian lines, rape crisis centres, women's and black women's refuges, advocacy schemes and buddy schemes. These established different relationships between service users and providers, met needs that had previously been ignored and were often run in more collaborative ways.

— the emergence of new philosophies which gave greater force and focus to ideas of involvement. The theory of 'normalisation' or 'social role valorisation' as it has also come to be called, with its emphasis on social integration and a valued life for people, offered a coherent value base and a participatory framework for services, first for people with learning disabilities and then for other groups, although it has also come in for criticism for its acceptance of dominant values and ideas of normality in society. [37]

— the development by disabled people of a new politics of disability based on a critique of existing services, a redefinition of the problem and an attempt to create an alternative service structure controlled by disabled people. This followed from a social model of disability which emphasises that people's disability is caused by social factors, including the discrimination and oppression they face in society and not by their individual impairments. What disables people is their inability to function in an able-body orientated world which denies or does not take account of their rights and needs. [38]

The interest in involvement that increased concern for more user-led or user-centred services has heralded has not meant that there has been any consensus

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in the conception or definition of 'involvement'. It is easy to see why given the very varied origins of this interest. Two main approaches to user-involvement are increasingly identified; the 'consumerist' and the 'democratic' approaches.[39] While there are some overlaps between the two, they reflect different philosophies and objectives. The first has been associated with the politics of the new right and the second with the emergence of rights, disability, self-advocacy and user organisations.

Both these approaches may have their merits, but they should not be confused. They are very different. The emergence of consumerist thinking on health and welfare services has coincided with the expansion of commercial provision and political pressure for a changed economy of welfare. Service users or clients are now conceived of as consumers. Now the discussion of participation is overlaid with the language of consumerism and the concerns of the market.[40] Consumerism starts with the idea of buying the goods and services we want instead of making collective provision for them. Two competing meanings underpin the idea of consumerism; first, giving priority to the wants and needs of the 'consumer' and second, framing people as 'consumers' and commodifying their needs; that is converting these needs into markets to be met by the creation of goods and services.

In the debate about user-involvement, while the consumerist approach has tended to come from service providers and to address the concerns and needs of services, for example, improving management to achieve greater economy, efficiency and effectiveness, the democratic approach has largely been developed by service users and their organisations. What distinguishes these organisations from traditional pressure groups is that they seek to *speak for themselves* instead of other groups speaking on their behalf. Here the primary concern has been with empowerment, the redistribution of power and people gaining more say and control over their lives.[41] The democratic approach is not service centred. It is about much more than having a voice in services, however important that may be. It is concerned with how we are treated and regarded more generally; with the achievement of people's civil rights and equality of opportunity. This is reflected in the three current priorities of the disability movement; for anti-discriminatory legislation, a Freedom of Information Act and the funding and resourcing of organisations of disabled people. The politics of liberation don't necessarily sit comfortably with the politics of the supermarket.

THE MARGINALISATION OF PARTICIPATION

Participation would appear to be an important idea which demands our attention. As we have seen, it is central to a number of key debates and developments. It is the primary objective of large-scale state-supported initiatives for public participation in planning, community development and user-

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involvement. Yet its achievements seem to be limited and it is surrounded by suspicion. Why is this? Why does participation seem to be marginalised? First, let's look at some of the expressions of this marginality.

However important we may think participation is, its development has been slow and uncertain. A bibliography of public participation in Britain published in 1979 included nearly 1,400 entries.[42] The number has greatly increased since.[43] Yet during this period only two books analysing and exploring the idea of participation have been published in Britain.[44] Both the debate and developments around participation have been hesitant and unprogressive. There is now an enormous body of knowledge and experience, but often this is inaccessible or unavailable and this has made progress difficult. There have been practical problems in the way of recording participation's history. People involved in innovatory schemes often don't have the time or confidence to write about them. Those on the receiving end are even less likely to have the opportunity. Community and user groups have not often had the chance to devleop and monitor their own initiatives.

There have been few systematic studies of participatory initiatives. There has been little cross-learning between different policy areas. For example, community social work initiatives which were intended to involve local people were slow to draw on the lessons learned by community work and community workers. Hoggett and Hambleton commented on the failure of decentralisation debates of the 1980s to draw on earlier practical and theoretical work on public involvement.[45] If ever the cliche 'reinventing the wheel' epitomised an area of human activity, it is in the case of participation. The predominant pattern of participation's history is one of cyclical development which rarely seems to build on, or go much further than what has gone before.

The debate about participation has rarely taken the lead in challenging the exclusions faced by women, black people and other groups. Unless specific initiatives are taken to ensure the involvement of such groups, they are likely to be left out, and frequently such steps have not been taken. Typically participatory schemes have mirrored rather than challenged broader oppressions and discriminations. The average participant of traditional public participation in planning exercises has been typified as a middle class, middle-aged, able-bodied white man. Such participation is likely to have the damaging effect of reinforcing such biases. Pressure for change has come primarily from *outside* participatory debates and structures, from feminist and black organisations. Distinctions have not been properly drawn between the public and private spheres of participation and adequate consideration given to the ways in which women are restricted to the private sphere.

The limited success of initiatives to involve people has not been confined to those emerging from the political right or centre. It has also been true of two major developments from the left in the early 1980s concerned with

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increasing public involvement; the popular planning initiative of the Greater London Council and the decentralisation schemes developed by left Labour local authorities. Hoggett and Hambleton noted that 'whereas rapid advances have been made in terms of organisational decentralisation, progress towards greater local democracy has been faltering indeed.'[46] They were not alone in this view.[47] In her first hand account of 'popular planning not in progress', Mantle described some of the tensions that existed in the GLC's policy. She wrote:

'In terms of funding this meant that although I had learnt the procedures and didn't like them, I didn't make the step of proposing an alternative, more accessible system. Challenging the grant getting system would also mean that you wouldn't get the money so easily, if at all, and this clashed with my wish to see things set up which were needed . . . I regularly felt frustrated with workers whom I regarded as never getting past the initial discussion stage on anything. I felt that the urgent need for these proposals overrode what might be gained if all the emphasis was put on getting active community support for the proposal by getting others involved in the tedious task of getting funding.'[48]

But it's not just the hesitancy of discussions and developments concerned with participation that suggest its marginalisation. It is also its *ambiguity*. One of the student slogans of the 1960s headlined this: 'I participate. You participate. *They profit.*'

Discussions of participation have frequently ignored or underplayed structural issues; the role of the state and market; and been confined within services or 'communities'.[49] When we look at the substantive purposes that participatory arrangements may actually serve, we discover that they are not always consistent with people's effective involvement and increased say. Instead a range of other functions are identified. These include:

Delay: Action is made to wait on people's involvement. The need to consult, to set up 'self-advocacy' groups, is used as a reason for procrastination.

Incorporation/Co-option: People are drawn into participatory arrangements which limit and divert their effective action.

Legitimation: People's ineffectual involvement is used to give the appearance of their agreement and consent to pre-determined decisions and plans. Participation serves as a public relations and window-dressing exercise.

Tokenism: encouraging the minority involvement of members of oppressed groups, unrelated to the representative structures established by their organisations.

Arnstein included eight rungs in her influential ladder of citizen-participation.[50] These were:

8	Citizen control	
7	Delegated power	Degrees of citizen power
6	Partnership	

5	Placation	
4	Consultation	Degrees of Tokenism
3	Informing	
2	Therapy	Non-participation
1	Manipulation	

Most of the current initiatives concerned with user-involvement fall into the last two categories.[51] Dowson describes the ways in which service providers keep 'self-advocacy' safe so that it becomes a means of controlling people with learning disabilities instead of them being able to take control.[52]

Participation schemes have also tended to focus on groups facing particular disadvantage and marginalisation. For example, the focus of community work has traditionally been council tenants on deprived estates in poverty stricken inner and outer city areas. Currently the idea of user-involvement is directed at users of disempowering and devalued health and welfare services, for example, people with learning difficulties, people with mental distress and disabled people.

Now there are powerful reasons why people and groups experiencing particular powerlessness and exclusion should be the special subject of participatory initiatives and special efforts should be made to challenge and overcome the discrimination and oppressions they experience. But a question that remains is whether such a focus serves other functions, intentionally or otherwise. For example, it mirrors the areas where the state can most readily intervene and shape the nature of participatory initiatives and includes many of the groups who are most susceptible to state intervention. This focus also means that we don't have to look more closely at the nature of our overall political structures. After all these groups face special, additional difficulties and problems. For some analysts it can be a short and convenient step from this to seeing the cause of the difficulties and non-participation of such groups in their own particular characteristics and inadequacies. At base this approach allows us to maintain our assumptions that existing institutions and structures *are* democratic. Everything may not be perfect, but we have our elected representatives, political parties and interest groups. There are chains of accountability and formal procedures for complaint and redress.

Against this though we can set the fact that by many criteria people's objective and perceived involvement is highly qualified. It is important not to ignore or underplay the oppressions faced by some groups; differences in power between people, and the different material and other resources available to them to become involved. But at the same time, *most* of us face considerable constraints. The demand for more say is widespread. Even people who can exert a negative influence over others less powerful than themselves may feel they have little control over the world in which they live. Indeed the two may be connected.

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One large-scale local study of public participation in planning, for example, found that the view that the council took little notice of local people extended to *all* social groups and was not confined to council tenants or the worst off.[53] Another expression of such broader disempowerment and exclusion is the emergence of the new social movements of women, black people, gay men and lesbians which we have already discussed.

The limited nature of most people's political and civic involvement is well documented.[54] The fact that citizenship seems to be an idea few people give much thought to, appears to reflect people's more general lack of involvement in the political process and public affairs.[55] Official reports highlight this. One, for example, drew attention to the serious under-representation of women in Parliament, in public bodies, in recognition in the honours system, on Boards and Trade Unions Executives.[56] Another government report showed that in 1985 less than 20 per cent of councillors were women. Home owners, professionals and managers are also greatly over-represented among councillors. Only 5 per cent of councillors worked or used to work in semi-skilled or unskilled manual occupations, as compared with 25 per cent of the general population.[57]

Participation, then is an idea whose development is restricted, whose role is ambiguous and whose focus has been limited. Are these arguments for ignoring or rejecting it? They may be, but a number of other arguments are also offered for paying it serious attention and trying to *increase* people's involvement and participation. They are both practical and philosophical: participation works and it is right. It:

— makes for more efficient and cost-effective services
— ensures accountability
— reflects the democratic ethos of our society
— encourages people's independence and self-determination
— is consistent with people's human and civil rights.

Thus a set of strong economic, moral, political and psychological arguments are advanced for people's participation. Equally important, people *want* to be more involved. What research there is indicates that most people want more say and involvement. Three quarters of a random sample of comprehensive school students said they wanted more say.[58] Two thirds of the people interviewed in the study of public participation in planning referred to earlier, expressed a desire to have more say in decisions affecting them.[59] Two thirds of a random sample of people interviewed in one neighbourhood as part of a study of local social services, felt that service users, workers and other local people should have more say in them.[60] The desire of people for more involvement is also reflected in the large and growing numbers of community, disability, users, and rights organisations which are pressing for more say and involvement over issues and decisions affecting people's

lives and neighbourhood and in the organisations and institutions which affect them.[61]

How do we resolve the contradiction between the possibilities and the frequent reality of participation? The answer seems to be in untangling its ambiguities. At the heart of these lies the issue of **power**.

PARTICIPATION AND POWER

Generally people want to get involved to exert an influence and to be able to make change. Some of the features that are associated with people's desire for more involvement are:

— influencing decisions and outcomes
— changing the distribution of power
— ensuring equal access to marginalised and oppressed groups and constituencies
— providing for broadbased involvement, moving beyond the creation of new leaderships.

That is why terms like 'having a say' and 'empowerment' have become synonymous with involvement in people's minds. But as we have seen they are not necessarily synonymous with the *practice* of participation.

Let's look more closely at power. The model proposed by Lukes may be helpful here. For Lukes power involves conflict of interest, though conflict may also be pursued by power and influence – falling short of the exercise of power. He assumes at least two parties in conflict and that power is exercised when one of them (call them A) gets the other (B) to act in a way which is against B's interests as perceived by B. The two parties need not be individuals. Groups and institutions also exercise power between each other.

Lukes is also concerned with the hidden dimensions of power. Hidden power is exercised, he says, when conflict of interest has been excluded from public debate and decision-making. As a result, though others appear to acquiesce in what happens, in reality their viewpoint has been prevented from being raised. The absence of overt conflict means only that they have been 'denied entry into the political process'. Lukes also proposed a third dimension of power, 'The complex and subtle ways in which the inactivity of leaders and the sheer weight of institutions – political, industrial and educational', serves to keep people out of the process and 'from even trying to get into it'.[62]

Enabling people's participation represents a challenge to all this. It's an enormous challenge and one that is often very unpalatable to powerholders. But involvement and empowerment don't only mean power being taken from one and going to another. They don't necessarily mean losing power. They are not a zero-sum; so that if I have more, then you must have less. Instead

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involvement can be concerned with changing the nature of the relationship bteween participants. Nonetheless, the idea of people's involvement is still frequently seen as threatening by organisations, institutions and their personnel. A way in which they can resolve this tension is by *manipulating the ambiguity* of participation. Participatory initiatives can be a route to redistributing power, changing relationships and creating opportunities for influence. Equally they can double as a means of keeping power from people and giving a false impression of its transfer. They can be put to two conflicting purposes, according to whether their initiators want to hold on to or share power.

RESOLVING THE PARADOX OF PARTICIPATION

Recognising the two faces of participation helps us to understand why it is so often treated as a rhetorical flourish rather than a serious policy and why it has become so devalued. But there may be a problem in then just dismissing the idea of participation out of hand. As we have seen many people seem to want to be more involved. If their aspiration remains unsupported then it is likely that they will continue to be excluded and existing dominations perpetuated. We may find ourselves colluding in this process unintentionally.

The answer may lie not in rejecting participation but first in being clear about its nature and objectives; where control lies and what opportunities it may offer. Then people can make rational decisions about whether to get involved. We also need to draw a crucial distinction. Participation does not only mean participatory initiatives set up by state or service providers. It is also about people struggling to gain more say and involvement for themselves and working to enable the broader involvement of their peers in their own organisations. This mirrors the distinction emerging between 'democratic' and 'consumerist' approaches to 'user-involvement'. As people involved in community, rights, disability and user groups quickly learn from experience, power is generally not something that is handed over or can be given. It has to be taken.

We should therefore distinguish between state or service provider-led schemes and initiatives for involvement, and our own initiatives and organisations to achieve it. Increasingly organisations of disabled people and other groups are only getting involved in initiatives over which they have control.

As Richard Wood, Director of the British Council of Organisations of Disabled People has said:

'It's a growing concern. Our participation is expected to be free . . . Money must be found for disabled people to develop their expertise. We're getting a bit fed up with being asked to participate in events which are meant to be about user-involvement where on the day the professionals who are involved in organising these things and talking about user-involvement show very little

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evidence of being committed to it. They're just picking our brains. We've decided we've got to put what ever resources we've got into disabled people's organisations . . . If you want us to participate, you go and find more money and we can get some development workers.'[63]

This opens the way to a twin-track policy of checking out the aims and objectives of provider-led initiatives, to be able to make a judgement about our response to them and working for broadbased and anti-discriminatory involvement in our own initiatives.

As well as being clear about the nature and limits of participatory initiatives we also need to understand how to support people's involvement effectively. Two components seem to be essential here, if people are to have a realistic chance of exerting an influence and all groups are to have equal access to involvement. These are *access* and *support*. Both are necessary. Experience suggests that without support, only the most confident, well resourced and advantaged people and groups are likely to become involved. This explains the biased response that participatory initiatives have typically generated. Without access, efforts to become involved are likely to be arduous and ineffectual.

Access includes equal access to the political structure at both local and central government levels and to other organisations and institutions which affect people's lives. In the more specific context of services it includes physical accessibility; the provision of services which are appropriate for and match the particular needs of different groups, and access points providing continuing opportunities for participation within both administrative and political structures, including membership of sub-committees, planning groups, working parties and so on.

The need for *support* arises not because people lack the competence to participate in society, but because people's participation is undermined by or not part of the dominant culture or tradition. Gaventa used Lukes' model of power to explain why poor Appalachian farmers appeared to accept domination and oppression by large corporations. The formal rights and channels open to them remained unused. Gaventa argued that focusing on people's apparent choices, we ignore the possible use of power to stifle and exclude conflict, 'blaming the victim for (his/her) non-participation'.[64] People may not know what's possible or how to get involved; may not like to ask for too much or be reluctant to complain. There are four essential elements to support. These are:

— *personal development*: to increase people's expectations, assertiveness, self-confidence and self-esteem
— *skill development*: to build the skills they need to participate and to develop their own alternative approaches to involvement
— *practical support*: to be able to take part, including information, child

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care, transport, meeting places, advocacy etc.
— *support for people to get together and work in groups*: including administrative expenses, payment for workers, training and development costs.

A number of routes to achieving people's greater participation at both micro and macro level are already apparent. These include:

— People working for it in their organisations and social movements
— gaining support for the enterprise from allies in public services and state institutions. For example, as Chamberlin has observed, the support of radical mental health workers has been one of the features which has characterised the growth of the mental health system survivors' movement in Britain. [65]
— Clarifying the issue of participation in order to develop effective strategies to pursue it.
— Learning systematically from existing experience.

PARTICIPATION AND SOCIAL POLICY

Another lies in a changed role for social policy. Before we turn to this, let's look first at the roles the welfare state has traditionally been seen as serving. These have been typified as:

— palliating and compensating for the inequalities of the market
— acting as a form of state control

Functions ascribed to the welfare state have ranged from ensuring cohesion, managing conflict and appeasing the public. More recently it has been criticised for perpetuating traditional dominances and mirroring oppressions on the basis of age, race, sexuality, disability and gender. Williams suggests that we see the notions of family, nation and work as three central and interconnected themes in the development of welfare, within the context of the shifting relations of patriarchy, capitalism and imperialism and argues that: 'welfare policies have both appealed to and reinforced (and occasionally challenged) particular ideas of what constitutes family life, national unity and "British culture".'[66]

The idea first propounded by Marshall and more recently restated by Dahrendorf of the welfare state providing a floor safeguarding people's rights by ensuring their social citizenship is now widely seen to have failed.[67] Le Grand has also suggested that the 'strategy of equality' has been unsuccessful, arguing that: 'In all relevant areas, there persist substantial inequalities in public expenditure, in use, in opportunity, in access and in outcomes.[68]

What has unified social policy of the political left and right and also been a common characteristic of the British welfare state under governments of contrasting political colours has been the *very limited* involvement of its users

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and other citizens in shaping and controlling it. In this it has reflected the political systems of the left and right to which we referred at the beginning of this discussion. The regulation of the market has been replaced by state paternalism.

Partly because of the groundswell of dissatisfaction with such paternalism, there is currently a great debate about participation in social policy. But it has predominantly been framed in narrow terms of consumerism and 'user-involvement'. In the discussions of disability and user movements and among supportive workers, though, something different is emerging. Just as people are seeking a third way in politics, so these discussions suggest a third option for social policy, beyond both the old paternalism and the new consumerism. *People's participation* is the cornerstone of this third approach to social policy, just as it is of the new politics. Some of the features associated with such social policy include:

— citizens having an effective say and involvement in the development and management of social policy
— user-led services
— people being accessed to the mainstream instead of being segregated in separate provision
— equal access for groups facing discrimination, and services and provision consistent with and supportive of people's cultural and other differences
— policy and provision which are consistent with and safeguard people's civil rights
— support for people to secure their own rights and involvement.

This list reflects the struggles of disability and other movements of people who use welfare services to gain access to the mainstream; a say in support services and the achievement of their civil rights.

It also makes clear that participation in social policy need not and probably should not only be conceived in narrow terms, for example, as the province solely of the subjects of marginalising policies and services. Instead it is linked with much broader issues. Indeed we would argue that participatory social policy can offer a route to a more participatory politics. It can make this possible not only by providing a series of settings and opportunities for people's participation, but also by *enabling* and *supporting* their participation. This is implicit in the characteristics we have identified, but it also becomes explicit if we consider any particular policy from this perspective. Take education, for instance. This could enhance people's capacity to participate, by ensuring their involvement through:

a participatory process of learning: based on shared learning which supports our self-confidence, increases our assertiveness and encourages us to challenge and question.

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learning how to participate: both by gaining skills and having a say in our own education and the services and policies associated with it.

learning about participation: finding out about the rights and responsibilities of our citizenship.

CONCLUSION

In outlining these ideas, we do not underestimate the structural constraints restricting people's involvement or the obstacles that are likely to be in the way of increasing it. We, alongside many other people, have long experienced these in our own efforts to gain more say. Instead we are arguing the importance of *clarifying* and *highlighting* the issue of participation. Earlier we identified this as one of the strategies for increasing people's participation. Much work has already been done on supporting people's greater say and involvement in education, health care, social services and other social policies. But often this has not been pulled together as a basis for action or theory building. We are arguing for participation to be taken seriously in social policy. Then social policy may escape from its prescriptive past and come to have an empowering role in people's lives and in public politics.

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