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Pitfalls of Participatory Approaches

Abstract

Over recent decades, "participation" has become one of the leading mottos of reform-oriented movements in such diverse fields as democracy, technology, finance, management, mass media, culture, social research methodology and, last but not least, social work. Before our eyes the "change of function" (in the terminology of Karl Mannheim) has taken place: what in the sixties and seventies was an incorporation of subversive and alternative tendencies, has been absorbed step by step in mainstream discourses on politics, economy, social science and the helping professions. The discursive dominance of participatory ideas can be manifested when they constitute a prominent message in recent handbooks in the fields mentioned above or provide apparently self-evident justifications in typical applied research projects. This trend needs to be reflected upon if we are not to succumb to the self-destructive potential of participatory approaches.

Introduction

In this short reflection I refer to the issue of participation not only and not primarily in the field of social work, but also in many different areas of social reality, sometimes very distant from social work. I am doing so not because the idea of participation is less evident in the field of social work than in other areas of social reality, but because one cannot understand the role and place of the idea of participation in the field of social work without taking into account the fact that the seemingly exponential increase in attention paid to the idea of participation in the field of social work is part of a much broader trend.

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More specifically, over recent decades, “participation” has become one of the leading mottos of reform-oriented movements in such diverse fields as politics (especially in context of Western democracies and international development), technology, finance, management, mass media, culture, social research methodology and, last but not least, social work. The point of this chapter is to examine how before our eyes the “change of function” as it is termed by Karl Mannheim (Mannheim, 1952: 187–190) has taken place: what in the sixties and seventies was an incorporation of subversive and alternative tendencies, has been absorbed step by step in mainstream discourses on politics, economy, social science and the helping professions; it has been transformed from a critique of asymmetrical power relations into an apology of dialogue, empowerment, creativity, responsibility and the like. In other words, a new version of the dominant discourse has already been developed which consists of corrupted and watered down concepts, once symbolizing resistance against and contestation of an oppressive institutional order, and now eagerly supporting and promoting the new formula of institutional regulation of human conduct. The discursive dominance of participatory ideas can be manifested when they constitute a recurrent message in recent handbooks in the fields mentioned above or provide apparently self-evident justifications in typical research project applications.

This trend needs to be reflected if we are to avoid becoming ensnared in the self-destructive mechanisms and troublesome paradoxes of an emancipatory agenda so lucidly described by Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno in the Introduction to *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (2002/1947: XVI). While they emphasize in accordance with the Enlightenment tradition that “freedom in society is inseparable from enlightenment thinking”, they also point out that enlightenment thinking should systematically reflect on itself, on its own principles, limitations and unintended consequences. Otherwise, enlightenment thinking will neither recognize nor oppose the “regressive moment” inherent in itself. What is more, without self-reflection enlightenment thinking can turn into its opposite: unreasonability, the use of stereotypes and prejudices, or susceptibility to imposing one’s own will on others.

The significance of this issue for social work stems precisely from the fact that this problem applies not only or not primarily to social work, but it is a problem of a more general nature, relating to, firstly, broader trends of development of modern society, and secondly, insufficient critical reflection in many disciplines on these general trends.

This brief commentary consists of three steps corresponding to the changes in the idea of participation from the 1960s until today, outlining (1) the phase of enchantment with the idea of participation; (2) the bipolar phase of mainstreaming and disenchantment, and finally (3) an idea of the search for a new, possibly more positive formula, enriched, however, with the experience of the two preceding phases.

The phase of enchantment

Participation is an ambiguous concept and can refer to various spheres of life of the individual. Depending on what the individual has the right to or should be involved in, we can distinguish different ways of understanding and promoting participation. Such a broad definition of the idea of participation has a long and multifaceted history, dating back much earlier than the 1960s. Two old traditions of thinking about a just social order are here of relevance. In the liberal tradition, which began as early as the age of the Enlightenment, it was (and it still is) about the universal rights of citizens to participate in political life and in the public debate. In the tradition referred to today as the "welfare state", which began later, in the late nineteenth century, and developed first in the interwar period (in particular in Germany in the 1930s), and then after World War Two, it was about the state's commitment to provide public services to the population, and therefore also the state's commitment to supply the population with access to basic infrastructure, services and goods necessary for a meaningful and dignified life.

The 1960s and 1970s brought new, strong and influential cultural and political impulses, lending the idea of participation an attractive, even compelling meaning, and associating participation with a sense of excitement and openness. In fact, participation in the social, economic and political life was meant from that moment to refer to deep existential foundations of a fulfilled life. In the face of people's weariness of the bureaucratic institutional order (for example in offices, factories and companies, schools and universities), based on a system of asymmetric professional relations, and with the monotonous and restrictive nature of representative democracy, new participation began to be associated with ideas of subversive disagreement to the fossilized institutional, economic and political order as well as with the development and promotion of alternative styles of life, work and political activity, based on the ideas of autonomy, dialogue, creativity, freedom of thought and action, and empowerment. An important support for this atmosphere came from neo-humanist and interpretive trends in the social sciences (at that time surrounded by an aura of novelty and rightful objection), which assumed that the essentially open processes of negotiation of meaning in social relations make equality and symmetry possible.

Also relevant in this context were the somewhat later re-evaluations within the management sciences, as well as transformations within management practices themselves: from relationships based on delegating precisely defined specific tasks to large groups of subordinates (deemed too anonymous and objectifying) toward a network- and project-oriented work organization based on small teams of employees, who are expected

to show their own initiative and responsibility. This change is addressed not only by the influential concept of “new spirit of capitalism” (Boltanski, Chiapello, 2005), but also by many other sociological analyses concerning reevaluations in the field of social management organization. For example, Nigel Thrift speaks of “soft capitalism” and its rhetoric, based on the “notion of constant adaptive movement”. New metaphors appear in the new management discourse (such as “dancing” or “surfing”). Their common feature is “concern with looser organizational forms which are more able to “go with the flow”, which are more open to a world which is now figured as complex and ambiguous, and with the production of subjects who can fit these forms” (Thrift, 2005: 32–33). Many authors draw attention to the role of rhetoric promoting empowerment and participation of employees as a factor supporting their innovation: “if we believe that people in organizations contribute to organizational goals by participating inventively in practices that can never be fully captured by institutionalized processes then we will minimize prescription, suggesting that too much of it discourages the very inventiveness that makes practices effective” (Wenger, 1999: 11).

Similar changes occurred in seemingly distant areas such as politics, civil society, cultural life and private sphere. Therefore, transformations in the field of social work are in line with the general trend, which has been, however, defined by the above-mentioned changes in the area of economy and rhetoric that concerns it. Also in the field of social work a significant re-evaluation took place: social work was to abandon the role of a passive link from State to service user, supporting the activities of administration for the redistribution of social welfare, and instead taking on a role in which social workers were supposed to establish interpersonal and possibly symmetrical contact with people in their care, cultivating egalitarian communication skills, both in themselves and within those persons.

The phase of mainstreaming and disenchantment

The 1980s and 1990s saw the beginning of a two-way process of re-evaluation, lasting until today.

On the one hand, the rhetoric of empowerment and participation was absorbed by the mainstream discourses in practically all domains of social life, including social work. Thus, regardless of the intentions, sometimes most noble, of those who advocated these ideas, the process of “change of function” occurred with respect to these very ideas as components of a new mainstream culture of public communication. As mentioned above, what in the sixties and seventies was an incorporation of subversive and alternative tendencies, later on has been transformed into a new version of the dominant discourse in politics, economy, social science, psychology

and the helping professions as well as in the mass media. This way, the emancipatory discourse of the 1960s and 1970s was taken over, "reframed", neutralized and instrumentalized by the new dominant discourse, which is a response to the reality so fluid and unclear that the previous methods of top-down regulation and external control have proven ineffective or even harmful. The contribution by Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello (2005) demonstrated that the formation of a new, network- and project-oriented spirit of capitalism was based on absorption and, therefore, inclusion in the new dominant discourse precisely these ideas that had fueled the earlier criticism of syndrome of "administered world", to use Adorno's terminology (see e.g.: Horkheimer, Adorno, 2002/1947: XI, XII and 232). A similar argument could be formulated with regard to areas of social life other than economy, such as politics, civil society and the private sphere.

As regards media messages, it is worth adding that the rhetoric of participation and empowerment is not the exclusive domain of liberal-leftist discourse (for example in the form of the idea of deliberative democracy, which assumes that political decisions should be preceded by a rational, argument-based public debate with the broadest possible participation of citizens) or neo-liberal discourse (for example in the form of the idea of economic entrepreneurship), but has a vital variation also within the discourses of the conservative right (for example in the form of the idea of recovering national and popular sovereignty and making one's own country "great again").

Of course, the aforementioned absorption mechanism was immediately subject to a critical assessment, which indicated that the mainstreaming concerning the idea of empowerment and participation by no means implies any "humanization" or democratization of social relations in this or that field, but – paradoxically – in practical terms neutralizes the potential of criticism contained in these ideas, and thus, under the guise of egalitarization, asserts the essentially asymmetrical power relations. This way, almost parallel to the process of mainstreaming, the second path of re-evaluation of the idea of participation and empowerment was initiated, namely the disenchantment and critical reassessment, explicitly suggesting that participation is in fact a new form of a disguised tyranny.

It can be argued that two strands of this critical backlash are particularly important. The first one draws upon Marxist inspiration and seeks to demystify the covert economic and political interests hidden behind the promotion of the idea of empowerment and participation. An important impulse providing arguments in favour of this line of criticism includes assimilation of participatory rhetoric by such institutions – one would like to say "citadels of neo-liberalism" – as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, as well as the popularity of participatory rhetoric within international development issues.

However, the meaning of neo-liberalism depends on how one interprets its central idea, namely entrepreneurship. Instructive in this respect are Michel Foucault's comments, who indicated that *homo economicus* formed on the basis of neoliberalism is to be "an entrepreneur of himself", "being for himself his own capital, being for himself his own producer, being for himself the source of [his] earnings" (Foucault, 2008: 226). Therefore, individual care for one's own human capital, supported by one's own initiative, is to be first and foremost a guarantee of economic success. But, as evidenced by the so-called governmentality studies (e.g., Rose, 1999, Dean, 2010, Peters et al., 2009*)*, in the meantime the neo-liberal "entrepreneur of himself" has become a template that an individual is meant to follow in the broadest possible range of disciplines, from politics, civil society, science, culture, and art to family and intimate life.

The "economic" interpretation of the neo-liberal category of "entrepreneurship" is not the only option. One can understand this category more broadly, namely, rejecting the primacy of economic factors and adopting a broad interpretation of entrepreneurship as the willingness to take the initiative in all areas of life. In this perspective, the mechanism of social control is not reduced to the economization of social life, as anonymous relations of power are located on a more basic level than economic relations and follow Foucault's rule of ubiquitous "conducting the conduct" of other people (Foucault, 2008: 186). Power relations in this sense, therefore, entail neither prohibitions nor commands, but indirect guiding how people themselves guide their own conduct. It is obvious that this type of power relations, aptly described by Nikolas Rose (1999: 74, 273) as "government through freedom", requires an intensive use of the rhetoric of empowerment and participation, as well as evoking the sense of autonomy and agency. It is another question, however, whether under "government through freedom" the spectrum of freedom is actually extended and if empowerment and participation do in fact take place.

Searching for a new formula

Let us try to look at the situation today. It appears that two main approaches to the issue of participation are in a state of intellectual exhaustion.

The rhetoric of empowerment and participation, supported by accents of honest enchantment, is still very much present in various fields of social life, despite the widespread and powerful wave of criticism. Persistent adherence to obviously naive forms of this rhetoric would be difficult to explain with intellectual reasons. Perhaps the apparently indestructible character of the rhetoric of empowerment and participation should be

rather associated with the fact that this rhetoric has become an effective and indispensable component of the justifications appearing like a mantra in recognized textbooks as well as in applications for funds for research and training.

However, the rhetoric of disenchantment has also become idle, repeating the same arguments known for years, often focusing only on deconstruction and eschewing positive proposals. A good example are governmentality studies whose invaluable, even groundbreaking merit has been demonstrating the powerful role of soft indirect "government of self and others", to cite Foucault's innovative ideas again (Foucault, 2010), but which are now experiencing intellectual stagnation with evident lack of attempts to formulate new ideas. "[A] real 'industry' in social science" quickly developed around governmentality studies (Korvela, 2012: 75). As a result, readers may have been somewhat fed up with the idea of governmentality, repeatedly presented in a way that is unoriginal and redundant, where the only novelty is the application of this concept to the analysis of ever new areas of reality, predictable in terms of its theses.

An important characteristic of the rhetoric of disenchantment is its deconstruction of not only the rhetoric of empowerment and participation, but also the very idea of empowerment and participation. Here, I think, is the place for the "next step" set out in the ideas of Karl Mannheim (1936: 112; see also Kilminster, 1996: 366), namely developing new ideas on the basis of reflection on the status of disputes and discussions so far. The next step would involve maintaining scepticism about the rhetoric of empowerment and participation, or even ruthless strengthening of the criticism of this rhetoric, while attempting to defend the very idea of empowerment and participation. It seems, therefore, that we need to distance ourselves from the exhausted rhetoric and at the same time develop a new language that would still promote cultivation of such important values as empowerment, participation, and, last but not least, freedom.

To put it in a radically polemical way, one may ask if the concern expressed some 70 years ago by Horkheimer and Adorno is still topical: "It is in the nature of the calamitous situation existing today that even the most honorable reformer who recommends renewal in threadbare language reinforces the existing order he seeks to break by taking over its worn-out categorial apparatus and the pernicious power-philosophy lying behind it" (Horkheimer, Adorno, 2002/1947: XVII).

Three general questions may arise in this context:

– What is the relationship between participatory approaches and neoliberal technologies of "the conduct of conduct"?
– What may a critical attitude mean today, especially with regard to the criteria of critical understanding?

– How it is possible to criticize the “threadbare language” and “worn-out categorial apparatus” of emancipatory *ideas* on the one hand and not to lose commitment to the subversive potential of emancipatory *ideals* on the other?

Conclusion

Shifts in the area of social work are linked to broader economic, social and cultural changes. What implications for social work arise from the preliminary examination of these links? It seems plausible to name a few, although the list will by no means be a complete one. Moreover, these conclusions come from the outside as it were, since I (as a sociologist) lack experience and expertise in the field of social work.

First of all, it is not so that social work (or psychotherapy or other helping professions) focused on participation and empowerment represent the “humanizing” opposition to the “dehumanized” economic and political reality. On the contrary, there are some important similarities between these, admittedly different, areas. There is a general consensus that anonymous rules of economic and political reality apply to the types of activity, types of individuals and types of their motivation to act, and thus do not allow individual differences between individuals to be taken into account. It may be somewhat surprising that there is no difference as regards promoting empowerment and participation, where “individuals’ personal understandings” of what empowerment and participation should be are ignored “in favor of a general and generic definition, against which people are assessed”. “In general, this leads us to think of people as interchangeable, which is another step on the road to a utilitarian mind-set that diminishes the individual in favor of the collective and denies the essential rights we all value as human beings.” I have cited the words of Mark D. White (2017: 40) on the subject of “happiness policy”, which in my opinion also apply to promoting empowerment and participation. It would be interesting to compare modern textbooks on social work with manuals of economic entrepreneurship and international development, as well as debates and controversies in these areas.

Secondly, the advocates of participatory approaches emphasize that an important benefit of this strategy is the ability to access the way of thinking and feeling - generally speaking, to access the knowledge of service users. This raises the question about the purpose of the use of this knowledge, that is the function of participation of service users. There are three key possibilities. The normatively declared variety claims that participation leads to empowerment. But it certainly does not have to be so. One of

the negative variants entails that participation does not serve any other purpose, so it is a purpose in itself, and in this sense is useless. Another negative variant, often pointed out by critics, points at an instrumentalization of the participation of service user in order to obtain better control of contact with service users. Then, paradoxically, participation does not contribute to the user-led social work, but on the contrary, reinforces the paternalistic provider-led model cloaked in the participatory and emancipatory rhetoric. The oft-quoted study by Barbara Cruikshank (1999) on the unsuccessful American programme "War on Poverty" from the 1960s, provides convincing evidence in this regard.

Thirdly, also important are neoliberal contexts (both in the narrower sense of economic initiatives, as well as in a broader one, concerning resourcefulness and initiative in all areas of life). If social work, focused on participation and empowerment, is addressed to people and groups affected by social exclusion, a doubt may arise with regard to the effectiveness of the actions taken. One of the reasons why people and groups are subject to social exclusion is precisely because they cannot find a place for themselves in a world dominated by the rhetoric of empowerment and participation. It is possible that in such a case a social worker would indulge in shamefully hidden direct interventions based on commands or prohibitions instead of promoting the rules of communication which are in fact compliant with professional training but are perceived by service users as foreign and artificial. And that could lead social workers to the systematic application of the principle of two separate forms of conscience: one that is declared (because otherwise it is not allowed), and the other is done (because otherwise it will not work).

Certainly a different point of view on the spheres of risk associated with participatory approaches to social work can be gleaned from practical experience and expertise in the field of social work. A good example of a specialized point of view can be the author of many books in the field of social work, Robert Adams, who (as an advocate of participatory approaches) provides a cautionary list of three forms of corruption of empowerment (Adams, 2008: 44ff). One might add that by analogy it seems plausible to speak about three forms of corruption of participation.

Robert Adams (2008) points out three risks:

– exploitation of service users, e.g. through tokenism (which partly overlaps with the aforementioned instrumentalization of knowledge of service users);
– professionalization of service users (here I am not sure if that necessarily means the corruption of empowerment; it seems that the professionalization of service users rather means that they become independent from service practitioners, which results in a loss of control over service users who are coping on their own); and

– imperialism by practitioners (which is a somewhat misleading term, probably pertaining to a situation in which self-help and user-led activities are considered by practitioners as competition and therefore are allowed to join the community of practitioners; this results in the growing presence of self-appointed experts, writers or media personalities, the phenomenon which might be explained by reference to broader trends in media culture, sometimes labelled as the cult of the amateur).

Finally, it needs to be underlined that examination of the areas of risk does not necessarily entail rejection of participatory approaches or the ideas of empowerment and participation as such. On the contrary, a critical reflection may be more constructive to participatory approaches than their uncritical implementation in practice.

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