

The feeling of participation: Everyday spaces and urban change

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Abstract

Initiatives around ‘public participation’ and ‘community involvement’ have become increasingly central to UK government policy programmes, particularly within interventions aimed at disadvantaged neighbourhoods. These initiatives have been the subject of extensive critical comment, essentially focusing on the ways in which power is often maintained by state agencies, whatever the surrounding rhetoric. This article attempts to consider what more productive forms of participation might feel like, through drawing on fieldwork with two small community groups on housing estates in Stoke-on-Trent, UK, to look at how and why they were able to generate successful participation in their activities. The importance of the small-scale interactions and feelings that made up their spaces of participation is explored. These can be characterised through ideas such as ‘feeling comfortable’, ‘feeling at home’, ‘helping out’ and ‘keeping going’, and involve everyday sociability and informal forms of volunteering. If government is serious about supporting political participation in such contexts it needs to consider how official projects might learn from these kinds of spaces.

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1. Introduction

This article will consider spaces and modes of political participation, in order to open up some new ways of thinking about ‘participation’ for both researchers and policy-makers. My argument draws on fieldwork with two small community groups in Stoke-on-Trent, UK.¹ I want to begin by focusing in on an informal chat with Sandra, the chair of one of the groups. Our talk had turned to a local forum that I had recently attended, on a neighbouring housing estate. The forum had been set up to engage local residents under the auspices of a government-led area regeneration programme.² On the evening I went along the meeting had been very poorly attended, with discussion dominated by local councillors. ‘It feels stale up there, doesn’t it?’ Sandra said. She went on to contrast this with

the ‘buzz’ that she felt was generated by the activities of her group, where, as I shall go on to explore, the house they were based in tended to be full of residents taking part in organised sessions, or just spending time together informally. Sandra explained this difference by saying, ‘People up there [i.e. on the other estate] they’ve had things done to them, everything’s been imposed’, whereas she said she saw her own community group as ‘user-led’.

In what follows I want to set these comments within the context of government initiatives to promote the ‘participation’ of local people in the political and civic lives of their neighbourhoods. In line with Sandra’s remarks, the drive towards participation initiated by the state has produced extensive critical comment, from academics, practitioners and those who have been the subject of such initiatives, as I go on to discuss. Such accounts have tended to focus on issues of power relations between participants and those in ‘authority’. Here, however, I want to start from a different perspective, suggested in terms such as ‘buzz’, and ask, what might more productive forms of ‘participation’ feel like? On what do such feelings depend, and what are the implications for researchers and policy-makers?

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¹ I discuss the context and methodology of this research in Section 4, below.

² This was a Single Regeneration Budget (SRB) programme that had recently come to an end.

Indeed, participation in policy frameworks is often understood to involve quite specific activities and spaces, for example attending meetings in town halls. I want to move beyond this to suggest that the work of small-scale community groups can provide a powerful basis for the engagement, and empowerment of local people, in ways that might include, but certainly not be limited to, such conventional forums of direct interaction with the local state. In deliberately broadening the range of activities and spaces which might be seen as constituting ‘participation’ in a local public sphere, new aspects of such collective interaction and action become apparent. This article will use a focus on small-scale interactions, everyday feelings and spaces to explore how and why the community groups were able to generate successful involvement in their activities and in the neighbourhood sphere more broadly. After a consideration of theoretical debates, my empirical material will be presented around a series of key ‘feelings’ and practices that emerged from the fieldwork. From this I hope to draw out implications for how participation in urban change might be thought about, for policy-makers and practitioners as well as academic commentators. Overall, my concern is to suggest how official participatory initiatives might more genuinely enable the empowerment of local people and encourage new forms of collective action.

2. Approaching participation

As already suggested, initiatives around ‘public participation’ and ‘community involvement’ have become increasingly central to UK government policy programmes, perhaps particularly those directed at the kind of ‘deprived’ neighbourhoods where my research took place (Imrie and Raco, 2003a; Taylor, 2002). This can be seen as part of a wider international policy climate of ‘participatory governance’, in both state programmes and development projects (Cooke and Kothari, 2001; Hickey and Mohan, 2004). Within the UK, a plethora of initiatives have been created to develop such engagement, from representation on decision-making bodies, the convening of public meetings, consultations and forums, to more direct volunteer involvement in particular programmes. Janet Newman (2001) argues that these initiatives spring from a desire by central government to exert particular forms of pressure on service providers, as well as a belief in the educative value of such involvement for participants. These goals are expressed in a recent Home Office/ODPM (2005, p. 7) document:

...by enabling communities to help shape decisions on policies and services we will support civil renewal and strengthen the legitimacy of the institutions of government. The more effectively communities are engaged in shaping services, the more likely it is that quality will be delivered.

As already noted, such programmes, both in the UK and elsewhere, have been the subject of extensive critical com-

ment, essentially revolving around issues of how power might operate within these initiatives. Whilst policies and interventions may look like an attempt to open up decision-making to others, the reality may be rather the desire to generate consensus around an already agreed agenda. Imrie and Raco (2003b, p. 29) draw attention to the ‘emphasis on consensus and dialogical processes as the basis for creating harmonious and cohesive communities’. The suggestion here is that by seeking to promote ‘culturally homogenous social relationships’ (Imrie and Raco, 2003b, p. 8), conflict and forms of ‘difference’, seen by some as the very essence of politics (Mouffe, 1994; Young, 1990) are suppressed or excluded. This may mean that such participation is actually closing down, rather than opening up, new forms of interaction and collective action.

Perhaps an even more fundamental critique has drawn on insights from Foucault’s writing (e.g. 1980, 1989) to suggest that participation in government-led or official programmes essentially functions to ‘incorporate’ rather than empower participants, and to shape subjectivities in line with state discourses of citizenship. This persists whatever the intentions, explicit or otherwise, of those actually initiating such processes. Susan Brin Hyatt (1997), discussing ‘tenant management’ policies in the UK, argues that

...methods for constituting active and participatory citizens, such as those aimed at empowering the poor... link the subjectivity of citizens to their subjugation and link activism to discipline (p. 224).

Indeed, such perspectives have also generated a more widespread critique of the idea of participation, as it might be present within development projects and also research, particularly in the Global South. Cooke and Kothari’s (2001) edited collection has been a key intervention within this critique, with contributors working in different ways to pick apart the ‘participatory development discourse’ (Cooke and Kothari, 2001) that participants may inevitably be subsumed by. Cooke and Kothari call for ‘a genuine and rigorous reflexivity’ (Cooke and Kothari, 2001, p. 15) around participatory methods and practices, and many subsequent reflections on participation within research and development practice have indeed continued in this vein of critical writing (e.g. Breitbart, 2004; Hickey and Mohan, 2004; Kindon, 2003; Pain and Francis, 2003).

Recently, however, some reflective writing on participatory processes has worked to move away from general statements about the nature of all participation towards a more nuanced focus on what happens in particular times and spaces. Cochrane (2003), writing about government policy around ‘community’ involvement, argues that it is wrong to think in binary terms of either ‘empowerment’ or ‘incorporation’, but to accept that the state is necessarily involved in the production of ‘community’, and from there work towards a more detailed understanding of the nature of such involvement, and the kind of opportunities for citizens that might nonetheless be opened up. From a more empirical perspective, others have drawn attention to the

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