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Networks, Movements and Technopolitics in Latin America

Critical Analysis and Current Challenges

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Foreword—The Era of the Both

It is my pleasure and honor to welcome you, reader of *Networks, Movements & Technopolitics in Latin America* to these first pages of the book. I can only tempt you to continue reading this book, in any way you deem fit, as I believe that it will be a pleasant and enriching experience.

I believe this book raises a set of significant questions about our contemporary world, and stimulates an in-depth reflection about participation, activism, social movements and democracy. One issue, I believe, merits our special attention. This is the paradox of the growing levels of participation in a variety of societal fields and the decreasing levels of control over the levers of societal power. Often, this paradox is mediated and "solved" through a defense (or a critique) of either utopian or dystopian perspectives, where this dys/utopianism is sometimes related to communication technologies, or in other cases to citizen or civil society powers, or to state or company powers. I believe we need to heed this paradox much more *as* a paradox, as a *seemingly* contradictory statement. We need to take both components of the paradox serious, acknowledge that there is a history of coexistence combined with a present-day intensification, and scrutinize how they dynamically and contingently relate to each other. In other words, we need to gain a better understanding of how we now live in the era of the both.

If we apply a *Longue Durée* approach (Braudel 1969) to the establishment and growth of democracy, we can hardly deny that we have come a long way. Of course, the history of our diverse democratization processes

is characterized by continuities and discontinuities, dead-ends, contradictions, and horrible regressions. But what Mouffe (2000: 1–2) called the "democratic revolution" "led to the disappearance of a power that was embodied in the person of the prince and tied to a transcendental authority. A new kind of institution of the social was hereby inaugurated in which power became 'an empty place'." Even if we zoom in on the twentieth and twenty-first century, it is hard not to see the differences with the past. It is equally hard to ignore that the history of more than 200 years of democratic revolution has brought us more participation, in a variety of ways and levels.

Of course, it makes sense to clarify what I mean with (more) participation, as this is a slippery notion—an empty signifier—given meaning by two structurally different and competing approaches (see Carpentier 2016, for a more detailed discussion). What I have labeled the sociological approach defines participation as *taking part* in particular social processes, which is a very open and broad perspective, that tends to conflate interaction and participation. We find this approach, for instance, in the field of cultural participation, where a museum visit is defined as a form of participation. The second approach towards participation—the political studies approach—uses a more restrictive perspective, defining participation as a process of *power-sharing* in particular decision-making processes. Interaction, however socially and politically relevant it is, then becomes distinguishable from participation, allowing for a more fine-grained analysis of participation. To return to my museum visit: In the political studies approach, attending a museum is seen as a form of art access, allowing for interaction with cultural artefacts and other texts, a particular cultural institution, and other visitors. But, as the museum visit does not allow a visitor to co-decide on the creation, or display, of these cultural artefacts, or on the policies of that cultural institution, it is not a form of participation. This second approach, which is also the one I prefer, allows us to notice and validate practices that do allow for (arts) participation, as they have been, for instance, developed by the community arts movement (Binns 1991; De Bruyne and Gielen 2011). Somehow, the work of Boal (1979) also comes to mind…

Even if we take the second approach as our guide, with its more narrow definition of participation as power-sharing, we still have to acknowledge that the democratic revolution has brought more participation, even though a more qualified and careful analysis becomes

necessary. Here I want to refer to Jenkins's words: "This is in part why I see participation more and more in relational rather than absolute terms—a matter of degree rather *than* of difference. So yes, all culture is in some sense participatory, but the more hierarchical a culture is, the less participatory it becomes. I am today more likely to talk about a shift towards 'a more participatory culture'." (Jenkins in Jenkins, Ito and boyd 2015: 22) If we look at the histories of media participation (Ekström, et al. 2011; Carpentier and Dahlgren 2014), we can identify several key moments where citizens' communication rights have been structurally strengthened, discursively (e.g., the development of the concept of communication rights in the first place) and materially (by the increased availability of communication technologies).

Of course, this evolution towards more participation has not remained restricted to the media field. Also the relationships between citizens and their political leaders, between employees and employers, and, more in general, between ordinary people and the fluid assemblage of societal elites, has changed over the past decades, sometimes in societal fields that would not immediately come to mind. Take, for instance, the domain of health, where patients have become more empowered in the past decades, with the development of patient rights and other legal frameworks (e.g., euthanasia laws) as a result. If we aggregate these participatory practices across the many different societal fields in which they are located, we can find support for the idea that power has become more decentralized, and that this decentralization is sometimes accepted, and even institutionalized, and in other cases can be wrestled from societal elites by a combination of tactics, struggles, resistances, disobediences, and activisms.

Of course, I do not want to imply that these changes have led to societies that are characterized by omnipresent power balances and equalities, where leadership, expertise and ownership have become fully democratized, where difference is acknowledged and respected, without it resulting in the capacity to dominate others. Full participation, as Pateman (1970: 71) labeled it, or maximalist participation as I prefer to call it, has not been achieved on a large scale, even though there are some maximalist participatory Temporary Autonomous Zones (Bey 1985) throughout the world. I also do not want to imply that the present state of democracy, with its minimalist levels of participation, has not been paid dearly, with the pain, blood and tears of the generations that came before us, and is still costing contemporary generations a lot in

order to maintain the current participatory intensities. And finally, I also do not want to claim that the democratic revolution is a merely linear historical process, that will necessarily and unabatingly continue throughout time, eventually bringing us at the gates of a participatory heaven. Whatever has been gained, can still be lost. To use Enwezor et al.'s (2002) words: Democracy is unrealized, it is an horizon that is never reached, and that serves a crucial purpose as ideological reference point. But there is also no guarantee that we will continue heading towards this horizon, as we might have set out on a course towards a much darker future.

This darker side merits our attention, also because it is not situated in a distant future. Arguably, the (stronger) presence of minimalist participation coexists—in the era of the both—with a series of undemocratic forces, that centralize power. Here we should keep in mind that war and violence are opposites of democracy. Some of the armed conflicts, and the structural violence they encompass, have caused intense suffering, but also structural disruptions of democratic practices. Armed conflicts, such as the war in Afghanistan, the civil wars in Iraq and Syria, and the drug war in Mexico—to mention only the most bloody armed conflicts of today—create large enclaves where democracy is suspended, and where participation ceases to be a prime concern, as it is replaced by mere survival. But these undemocratic forces do not remain contained to the enclaves that I have just mentioned (and to the many other medium-intensity conflicts, for instance, on the African continent). Not only are many countries from the northern hemisphere military involved in these armed conflicts, these conflicts are also imported and transported to other parts of the world, where the involved states (in the northern hemisphere), their populations, and foreign fighters (often labeled terrorists) become involved in a downward spiral of discrimination, oppression, violence, destruction, and death. One component of this process is captured by Agamben's (2003) argumentation that we are living in the state of exception, where civil and human rights are curtailed in the name of security. Another component is the rise and mainstreaming of antagonistic xenophobic, racist, and nationalist ideologies in democratic states, combined with calls for strong leadership, that pave the way for populist and authoritarian regimes, for the legitimation of corruption and other forms of unethical behavior, and for the politics of fear (see, e.g., Wodak 2015).

This also has theoretical consequences for our thinking about participation, because it raises questions about the instrumentalization of participation and the hijacking of participatory techniques by non-participatory forces. How to handle situations where authoritarian and intrinsically undemocratic leaders use participatory tools to manufacture consent—a concept I borrow from Herman and Chomsky (1988)—or to mobilize populations for undemocratic purposes? What to think about radical right-wing groups (Caiani and Parenti 2013) that use the online to live out their nationalist and racist fantasies in ways that make use of participatory techniques, at least accessible to the members of these groups, and to those who are ideologically aligned with them? As argued elsewhere (Carpentier 2017: 96), this brings us to the distinction between procedural and substantive participation, which is inspired by the difference between procedural and substantive democracy, or between "rule-centered and outcome-centered conceptions of democracy" (Shapiro 1996: 123). In parallel with these concepts, we can distinguish between procedural and substantive participation, where procedural participation refers to the mere use of participatory techniques, while substantive participation refers to the necessary embedding of these participatory techniques in the core values of democracy, especially those of human rights and (respect for) societal diversity.

If we return to the role of communication technologies in the era of the both, we have to acknowledge that they are an integrative part of the two constitutive components of this era of the both. This book, with its ambition to move beyond the online/offline divide and to avoid the trap of digital utopianism, which artificially separates the "virtual" from the "real," allows us to reflect better about how communication technologies, more than before, span the both. Surveillance technologies coexist with sousveillance technologies, black propaganda with dialogical communication, media legitimations of war and violence with pacifist messages, celebrations of bigotry with respect for diversity, sealed-off media empires with maximalist participatory media platforms, spirals of silence with practices of voice, symbolic annihilations with the politics of presence, media-induced amnesia with deep-rooted historical awareness, the defense of the status-quo with the loud propagation that another world is possible.

This leaves us with two final questions: What is the role of the critical intellectual in the era of the both, and can we avoid the scale being (further) tipped into (what I consider to be the) wrong direction? The

era of the both is characterized by increasing levels of diversity, but this diversity also includes the uncanny combination of the democratic and the undemocratic in one glocal assemblage. Which tactics should be deployed by those actors who are committed to what Mouffe (1988: 42) has called the "deepen[ing of] the democratic revolution" and what Giddens (1994: 113) labeled the "democratisation of democracy?"

These are questions that merit more attention than what I accord them here. But to give a fraction of an answer: I would like to argue that there is a strong need for the deployment of a double tactic, or better, two sets of tactics. One set of tactics consists out of the radically critical and radically contextualized analyses of the current problematic state of representative liberal democracy—one interesting example is Van Reybrouck's (2016) critique of elections, but many others exist, and many more are needed—and the equally problematic state of the capitalist economies entangled with our representative liberal democracies. The second set of tactics is more difficult to put into practice, as it is a more generative approach, grounded in the critiques that result from the first set of tactics. This second set of tactics consists out of the further development of a participatory-democratic ideology. This ideology needs to articulate a participatory communicational ethics, a strong commitment to agonism—or in other words, to the democratic taming of conflict without denying it—and clear articulations of democratic leadership, democratic ownership, and democratic expertise (see Carpentier 2017), among many other elements.

In an intellectual landscape where critical intellectuals are dispersed throughout many regions, institutions, academic disciplines, and other frameworks of intelligibility, collaboration becomes a requirement. For that reason, I would argue that this double tactic has to be grounded in a global and multivoiced project that uses the strategy of modularity, where sub-networks of intellectuals collaborate within their disciplines and fields, in order to build ideological modules grounded in their expertise, in combination with interdisciplinary articulatory practices that connect and integrate these different modules into one counter-hegemonic participatory-democratic project (see Carpentier 2014 for a more developed argument). This book, with its broad geographical span, with its commitment to intercontinental dialogue and with its search for ways to deepen democracy and to intensify contemporary participatory levels, is, in my very humble opinion, one of the contributions towards the establishment of this new republic of letters.

Nico Carpentier

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