

## A Book Review: Carpentier N (2011) Media and Participation - A site of Ideological-democratic Struggle

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### Book Review

This book is composed out of two parts. In the first one, citizens' participation is discussed in the light of most interesting social theories by author's choice. Therefore this part represents an interdisciplinary background overview. As such, it is unavoidably focused on a reduced list of theoretical approaches. Carpentier analyzes participation in frameworks of: spatial planning, social development, arts and museums and communication. There is no explanation why these and not others - such as economic, social care, education contexts aren't revisited. However, it is true that going further the author could have extended the book endlessly. On the other hand, the impression is that this theoretical overview is adapted to the choice of case studies presented in the second part of the book. It brings to readers a serial of case studies describing concrete peoples' attempts to engage in participation. The author treats participation as a structurally unstable concept which, in order to be obtained, demands everyday ideological and political struggle. For, citizens' participation is the normative token in all models of democracies. But, it is by no means warranted that participation will be exercised in democratic practices.

This gap between normative and praxis is conceptualized by Carpentier as the difference between the *minimalist* and the *maximalist* versions of participation (pp.17). Dimensions of minimalist participation are guaranteed by rights and freedoms of citizens aiming to protect them from bad consequences of power imbalances between governors and governed. Despite of this, a rather poor participation appears often in current political cultures. In some cases, minimalist concept finishes as a "political culture of silence" e.g., apathy (pp.50). This kind of non-participative behavior, during elections even, is clearly visible in many contemporary democracies. On the contrary, political apathy could be taken as a new citizen's right not to be involved in politics even if being properly informed.

The author clearly favors maximalist political participation and informs his preference in two ways. Firstly, by presenting maximalist versions of participation in democratic theories; and secondly, by describing encouraging examples of citizens' participation in various social domains. As theoretical platforms in favor of maximalist participation Marxist perspective, anarchism, New Left, deliberative democracy and radical democracy e.g., post Marxism, are discussed (pp.26-38). These theories are elaborated extensively, precisely and functionally. In most cases, the discussion is based on analysis of original works.

In order to go beyond democratic theory the author points out citizens' participation, that is exercised beyond the traditional field of politics. It basically occurs hand in hand with cultural changes which influence institutional political processes too. Practices described are limited on social realms in which participation still does exist. These are: spatial planning, social development, arts and museums and audience participation in public communication. Social development is one-sidedly elaborated, because the text relies on World Bank sourcebooks and arguments. Yet, Carpentier is aware of this shortcoming saying: "The mainstreaming of participation in development approach received harsh criticism" (pp.53). So far the revival of participation through

arts is concerned, only three artistic movements-situationism (in Europe), happening (in USA) and neo-concretism (in Latin America) are discussed. They were, maybe, the most radical attempts to change relationship between the artist, the artwork and its audience in XX century. Many other artistic canons are neglected. Still, author's choice is quite logical, for participatory art in XXI century can't become a canonized movement any longer. Similarly, after expansion of Internet and arrival of virtual museums, potential visitors aren't divided to those having a chance to visit them and those who don't. In this way, what is discussed as the participatory museum theory is pretty irrelevant.

In the chapter dedicated to audience participation through communication, the author starts by opening debate on participation again. He firstly considers active and passive articulation of audience and finalizes by presenting the figure showing the minimalist and the maximalist audience participation in communication (pp.70). Going further, Carpentier suggests the semiological approach to participation as a struggle for signification. Author is of opinion that participation in media production, in society through the media and in interaction with media content must be analyzed in this frame. In deployment of democratic maximalist participation models, Marxist and anarchist, soviet theory of the press, deliberation and public sphere and UNESCO and WSIS debate are presented.

Political economy of the media and cultural studies are acknowledged as the long lasting inheritance of Marxism. Anarchist theory perspective is less elaborated. Interestingly, Carpentier adopts the concept of "narodnost" (translated as "popular orientation") and criticism of the press, as forms of audience participation deployed from Soviet theory of the press. This is strange, because in the soviet theory the pivotal role of the media was to work as collective organizer and propagandist in favor of a new social order. Such a role didn't open space for ordinary people to participate in communication. The discussion on public sphere, inherent to deliberative model of democracy, is well presented. Inventor of public sphere (Habermas) describes it as a space in which citizens form a public body by entering conversation. However, as early as in 1962 Habermas has expressed disappointment with modern societies noting that public discussion has been replaced by "manipulative publicity". This is why public sphere concept was revisited in light of very informed critique (by Garnham, Hartley and especially by Fraser). Carpentier supports an alternative model known as Fraser's theory of pluralistic

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public sphere. She describes the public as a discursive arena through which all social groups (subordinated as well) can circulate counter-discourses and create counter-publics. Discussion about NWICO, developed in seventies by Non-aligned countries, is rather déjà-vu. Originally, NWICO was a struggle for free and more balanced flow of information aiming at three goals: peoples' access; participation; and self-management into media. Underdeveloped countries had assigned a stimulating role to the state, what caused bounces of NWICO by liberal-democratic countries. The biggest members left the UNESCO in protest. Afterwards, the concept of NWICO has disappeared almost completely from UNESCO agenda. The most current international debate on audience (citizen) participation in public communication takes place within UN through the World Summit on Information Society (WSIS 2003 and 2005). In this forum two sides bitterly confront about the notion and substance of communication rights in postmodern societies. Civil sector representatives strongly express a common desire to build people-centered, inclusive and development-oriented Information Society (pp.93). On the contrary, other stakeholders, such as postindustrial states and corporations persist on full protection of intellectual property and economic benefits gained from information flow. The right to privacy is seen as a constitutive part of individuals' rights to participate in communication by civil society proponents only. However, the disclosure of tracing and spying activities by states (Wiki Leaks, Prism, NSA) and by private companies will, for sure, recreate the debate about right to privacy of individuals and nations.

The arrival of Internet and new (digital) media brings about a totally new, many-to-many model of communication. This turn affected deeply the discussion about participation in the media/communications. Digital technology makes structural changes which recreate popular expectation that maximalist participation will finally come into existence. In order to grasp relevant literature on this topic, the author starts from the early phase of digitalization. In these days the presupposition was that with digital media an active and influential audience would appear. The potential to make virtual communities as structures capable of improving participatory culture was also celebrated. According to Carpentier, after 1990 and Web-2.0 theoretical discussion went into several directions such as: interactivity versus participation, deliberation through the net and participation, user-generated content and de-professionalization of journalism. In all cases mentioned, participatory potential of virtual communities had to clash with traditional agents of social power - states, political actors and private corporations. For, power holders imagine participation as something what they can start and stop, channel and reroute, commodify and market (Jenkins, at pp.124). However, digital platforms such as blogs, wikis, forums, podcasting, social networks, content sharing sites, etc. have been surviving and obtain the infrastructure for people to empower their participation if they are keen to do so. Since technological changes continue, this chapter of the book is open for further writing.

In second part of the book there are five chapters, presenting case studies (mentioned below) describing practical examples of media/communication participation (pp.137-337). In each chapter a keyword determinates the scope of the struggle for audience participation - in media production, content and access. These keywords are power, identity, organization, technology and quality.

The starting standpoint is participation understood as struggle of socially underprivileged groups for more power. The author distinguishes discursive from material power. Obviously, the first one is the frame for assessment of media contribution to peoples' fight to re-evaluate ideologies and to resist hegemony. The discursive power

is not limited on the language only. Alternative, material power exposes an influence upon material objects and bodies (in accordance with Foucault). The discussion about power upon ideas and bodies, discourses and objects, is systematized at the diagram intertwining power with social domains. Focusing on media power the author is far above traditional "effect model". Accepting poststructuralist and post-political concepts he gives credit to media as the source for counter voices, counter arguments and counter public spheres, concluding: "The media sphere cannot be considered the magical fountain of discursive origins, which produces the original discourses that then are distributed throughout the social. On the contrary, the media sphere is an inseparable part of the social, interacts with many already-existing discourses, and competes with many other discursive machineries" (pp.146).

First case study is Belgian live discussion program *Jan Publiek* designated as an example of minimalist audiences' participation. The show enabled ordinary people to add their discourse into mainstream media content. Second case study, researched more qualitatively, deals with another program of Belgian public service - *Barometer*. In fact, this was the program composed out of video clips done by audience members. Hence, being selected and edited by media professionals these video letters confirm power imbalance in favor of invisible medium production team.

The keyword for next two case studies is identity. Again, the section starts with rather long discussion about identity theories to conclude that presence of the "other", seek for lacking and construction of reality are necessary components to recognize and change ones identity. Such a construction of "ordinary people" was the starting point to analyze participation in media and their content in the case study which is, once again, the audience discussing TV program *Jan Publiek*. Using focus groups, this case study follows how participants have articulated their antagonistic position towards more powerful actors of the show such as: celebrities, experts, politicians and media staff. Second case is the reality TV show *Temptation Island*, originally designed in USA and reproduced on two commercial TV channels in Belgium and Holland. It is an extensive essay rather than a research piece, elaborating change of subject positions and process of disintegration of reality show participants. In sum, the case explains how audience members reconsider love, morality and sexual fidelity exercised by reality show participants. At the end, by referring to online discussion among show viewers, the author reports about changes of their subject position and their disagreement with the reality show constructs.

Keyword for next chapter is organization. In theoretical introduction Carpentier has shown how organization was traditionally treated as mechanistic, organic or bureaucratic entity. This discussion was an introduction in order to support an alternative model of media institutions as a rhizome. Its most important characteristic is steady openness and multiplicity of entryways. Rhizome model is far from mainstream media model and its logic. It comes into existence by alternative and community media, which open the space for experimentation with content and form. Communities of alternative media users are the subject who challenges principles of mainstream media organizations. There are some variations of maximalist participatory media concepts presented at the figure (pp.227). Four models of media networking with participants/users are suggested. The case study of *BBC Video Nation* serves as an example. It was the product of the Community Program Unit established in 1973 as a sub-structural inland within BBC structure. In the first phase, it was an outcome of the use of camcorders by a limited number of viewers. In the second phase, *Video Nation* was a selection of video shorts on BBC

website launched in 2001. The third phase started in 2009 as the video submission website. This endeavor of audience intervention in BBC structure showed three facets: visibility of everyday life of ordinary people, proof of the cultural diversity of society and partnership of participants and media organization team. The most interesting author's conclusion is the possible shift of professionals from gate-keepers to gate-openers. The second case study deals with media organization *Radio Swap*. This project, at the time when studied, consisted of six Belgian, alternative, networked radio stations in 2002. Again, with the development of Internet *Radio Swap* project entered in 2007 in its website phase (*Radio Swap.net*) gathering 81 affiliated organizations. The result of *Radio Swap* was the establishment of a rhizome like international media organization and technology. According to the author, this case has demonstrated how a new trans-local community of interest based on exchange of self-produced radio content can be established (pp.259).

Technology is the keyword for chapter five. Therefore, it starts with a discussion about technology and society in general. In this regard, the author has identified three concepts: technology as material, technology as driving force and technology embedded in the social context, e.g., never neutral one. "This implies that media technologies attribute meaning to the proto-machines, their uses (in the field of both production and consumption) and their place in society" says Carpentier (pp.271). Case study on *Kinoautomat* shows how a film projector as technology had enabled the process of participation and social construction of meaning. Briefly, the case study describes an interactive film shown to the visitors of the Czechoslovak pavilion during the 1967 Expo fair in Canada. Although it was difficult to stimulate participation of visitors by obsolete technology, spectators of *Kinoautomat* were keen to vote for one of two possible, pre-filmed storylines. Their voting was both visible and effective. This experiment was the most successful happening at Expo '67 and therefore a temptation to be repeated later in 2006 as a film and 2008 as a DVD. But, these attempts were rather unsuccessful due to big changes in technologies and audiences' behavior in XXI century. As noted by author, interactive film was appreciated by its audience, but was unable to deconstruct a movie-going culture. Hence, it was the first remove of the ramp between spectators and film in the history of cinematography.

Last couple of case studies goes under denomination quality. Again, the key word is at the beginning reconsidered theoretically. The idea was to show how the quality of media content could be assessed democratically and its rigidity deconstructed. Author prefers the concept of social quality to be applied in the fields of politics and community development. According to old concepts, the quality was assigned to high culture only, making audience types as included or excluded from this culture. So it was until XX century when audience based approach to quality of art work, seen as a text, prevailed. At the same time the mass culture, especially TV production, went as a social construction in all debates about quality. In line with this is Carpentier's figure (pp.317) on which five models of quality, depending on

producer, artifact and reception mode are suggested. These are artistic, professional, audience based, social and technological models of post-modern quality. Classification served as an introduction to proclaim democratic quality concept as the pillar of maximalist participation into cultural production process. By words of the author: "The preference for more maximalist (participation) is the key normative (phantasmatic) position in this book" (pp.318). Author continues this typology of democratic, quality media practices first published in another of his books (the reader *Reclaiming the Media*, 2007) where four clusters' to evaluate quality in communication are suggested. These are: information and control; representation of communities and social sub-groups; representation of the political; and participatory role.

Case studies that follow aimed to test theoretical concept. They are based on qualitative methodology. Focus groups' (15) debates about the social network *16plus* and audience discussion program *Barometer* (the latter was mentioned above) are the case study. First mentioned program was televised on Belgian public service in period 2006-2009. Focus groups' participants evaluated the sample of 9 short clips on the *16plus* video social network in 2007. Evaluation was basically negative so far the social relevance and aesthetic and technical quality of videos was concerned. When it comes to positive evaluations, participation of ordinary people, learning of film making skills and pleasure of amateur producers were identified. In case of *Barometer* 14 focus groups were organized to appraise four episodes shown in 2002. Their critiques were less about aesthetic and technical quality, but focused more on lack of social quality instead. All findings are illustrated by utterances of focus group participants.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, paradoxically, mainstream media are seen as the masters of aesthetic, narrative and technical quality. Discussants say that audience entries to *Barometer* offer authentic perspective on everyday life. On the contrary, they were evaluated by participants of focus groups as manipulative, offering a poor perspective on social reality. In the same chapter is the section dealing with the concept of the negotiated quality. It is separated from case studies, because the author presents his interviews with radio producers and administrators of four community radio stations in two European countries. Nevertheless, thanks to them, the definition of negotiated media quality is offered. It refers to the establishment of a dialogical-participatory process in which all actors, including audience members, define what the quality of media program should be.

The book written by Nico Carpentier is his own contribution to the ideological-democratic struggle for participation, especially in communication enabled by old and new media. The author is clearly on the side of maximalist, both material and discursive concept of participation of the ordinary people. For him "Democracy and participation are always processes 'in the making', and never establish situations, however eager we are to believe that democratic harmony can be established in the last instance" (pp.352).