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Author

Kelty, Christopher

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A Reply to Roura-Expósito and Alonso González

Christopher M. Kelty

Department of Anthropology, Department of Information Studies, and Institute for Society and Genetics at the University of California, Los Angeles, Box 957221, Campus Mailcode 722105, 3360 LSB, Los Angeles, California 90095, USA (ckelty@ucla.edu). This paper was submitted 23 II 18 and accepted 23 III 18.

I am deeply grateful to Joan Roura-Expósito and Pablo Alonso González (2018) for taking the time to read and respond to my paper (Kelty 2017). Roura-Expósito and Alonso González offer two different critiques—one of which I agree with, and one that I will dissent from. The first criticism is that the paper is not sufficiently ethnographic. To this I plead guilty, and I take the criticism seriously. It might help to know that the article is a draft of ideas from a book that is yet to appear. This is not an excuse, but if I am so lucky as to have any additional readers for the book, I think they will find that it is in sympathy with the approach that is recommended here. The book deepens each of the three stories I tell of the history of participation (worker participation, urban planning and civil rights, and international development) to demonstrate how “assemblages” of participation have indeed contributed to, in Roura-Expósito and Alonso González’s terms, “the growing lack of democracy under neoliberalism.” But not only that.

Although my article appears to be essayistic and nonethnographic (Roura-Expósito and Alonso González accuse me of Platonism; but I like Plato very much, so I will take that as a compliment), I do actually consider the article to be the product of ethnographic research, even if that research is archival, documentary, and historical. My practice in this project is a serious and sustained engagement with cases of participation of many kinds (from those enabled by the internet over the past decade to those detailed in documents, reports, descriptions, and scholarly analyses spanning much of the twentieth century). If this fails to come across in the article, I take that criticism.

The second criticism is that I am not radical enough in questioning the “ideological underpinnings of participation.” This criticism I will resist, because I think Roura-Expósito and Alonso González misread the paper as some kind of naive, idealist philosophy of “a totalizing concept.” The criticism that the paper is “philosophical and abstract as opposed to ethnographic and empirical” would suggest that one has to do one or the other and that, as a result, I can only be some kind of nineteenth-century nominalist philosopher—or worse, that most despised of creatures, an “armchair anthropologist!” My armchair is nice, but it is not the only place I study participation.

Roura-Expósito and Alonso González say that participation is a “privileged setting for the ethnographic exploration of the transformation of governance structures, power shifts, and forms of political domination,” and they cite Collier and Lakoff (2005) as support for this approach. I sometimes think of myself as in sympathy with that project, and I recommend that people read the paper that way. I would actually agree that participation is a “complex assemblage or global form with multiple instantiations in different locations”—but the point of my paper is that it is not only this, and not only contemporary. The present-tense cases that I discuss (Open Government Data, workplace participation schemes, microlending, and crowdfunding) share a complex genealogical relation with the past cases that I discuss—they are not all the same but exist in distinct temporal scales (assemblages, apparatuses, and problematizations, to use the terms of this particular art).

Of assemblages, one should always ask, What is the assemblage a response to? Why are these forms organizing in the ways that they do and at the times that they do? One answer to that question is that participation is a “response” to democracy—that it seeks to fix or enhance democracy. I think that participation is prior to democracy—it is a problem of experience and aspiration. The grammar of participation, as I propose it here, is a way of revealing the “forms of life” that make sense of participation as different kinds of objects. On the one hand, it is an object (an assemblage, perhaps) that introduces and enhances democracy and, therefore, is enthusiastically promoted as a solution; on the other hand, it is an object or assemblage that corrupts or co-opts democratic forces and turns them to other ends, such as exploitation or domination.

Roura-Expósito and Alonso González briefly characterize their project about the rural development group, and it sounds oddly familiar to me. The “internal” criticism of participatory processes that they so nicely illustrate is mirrored in dozens and dozens of works I have read on participation from the 1930s to the present. I would never seek to reduce it to dichotomies “between individual and group participation and between top-down and bottom-up governance”—although I would not be surprised if their actors (and those in the European Union program) used these distinctions occasionally. Rather, I think their case expresses the very grammar I point to and does so quite nicely: on the one hand, an enthusiasm for participation (in this case, from above or outside—the European Union), which is resisted by people as something that is not real or proper participation (in this case, because patrons in a clientelistic setting “modulate the ‘real’ involvement of citizens in public life”).

What is at stake in Spain, as Roura-Expósito and Alonso González describe it here, sounds to me very much like a critique of participation as co-optation: “in Spain, at least, participation is a novel governance strategy that reproduces preexisting power relations, while channeling new economic investment under a technocratic management.” In this, it shares the opinion of Caroline Lee, Edward Walker, and Michael Macquarrie, in what they call “the democratization of inequality” (Lee, Walker, and

Macquarrie 2015). However, it is opposed to the kind of enthusiastic embrace of participation one finds in works like Archon Fung and Erik Olin Wright's *Deepening Democracy* (2003) or, in a slightly more guarded way, Baiocchi and Ganuza's *Popular Participation* (2016). All of these people, however, are deeply ensconced in the complex assemblages of participation they separately describe—the forms of life from which they speak about participation. I myself have found myself occupying both forms of life at different moments of my research and my own participation.

So I would say that I find much to agree with here, and it is unfortunate that the analytical approach of seeing participation through a grammar that indicates forms of life does not seem to be useful—but my article is not an attempt to create a totalizing, abstract philosophy of participation. At best, I am urging that the ethnography of concepts such as participation—or the method of “assemblages”—be more attentive to the his-

torical forms that such assemblages take and make the effort to refine the kinds of conceptual approaches that might help do so.

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