Citizen participation in neoliberal times

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As we write this introduction, much of the global economy remains in crisis, a wave of ethno-nationalist populism continues to sweep countries across the global north and south, while neoliberal politics reaffirms its firm grip on their future. At the same time the role of borders, both physical and symbolic, acquire renewed importance, creating new exclusionary zones and unsettling modernity's settled concepts of democratic 'citizenship'. How are we to understand citizen participation in this shifting political and economic landscape? What types of citizenship are emerging in neoliberal times?

Our special section addresses these questions through five original studies of citizen participation in different fields and country-settings. The articles tackle a paradox in the discourse of citizen participation: while public institutions around the globe continue to issue calls for 'public deliberation' and 'participation', questions around exactly 'who' should participate in the governance and delivery of public services and 'how' they should do so loom larger than ever before. Although often invoked, citizen participation remains itself a highly contested and under-theorised concept. To address this gap, the special section offers a set of empirically-driven, international studies that theorise today's increasingly contested relationship between citizenship and participation in our neoliberal times. The studies draw on a diverse set of disciplinary fields including: anthropology, development studies, political science, media studies, social psychology and childhood studies, to propose new avenues in the theorisation of citizen participation as a dynamic social practice (Barnes et al., 2004;

Gaventa, 2004; Isin, 2008), accounting more fully for its diverse political, relational, spatial, and affective dimensions.

One the one hand, articles in the special section show how citizenship is more than a set of civil rights and responsibilities conferred on individuals to encourage participation in systems of state governance. They examine citizenship as a site of struggle with institutional power holders and official bodies to determine how rights, relationships, and identities are realised in practice. In doing so the articles attend to *how* citizenship is negotiated in everyday life, illuminating the complex underlying power asymmetries conditioning such negotiation, especially in conditions of heightened global economic instability (Komporozos-Athanasiou and Thompson, 2015; Komporozos-Athanasiou et al., 2016; Komporozos-Athanasiou et al., In Press). On the other hand, the rich empirical and ethnographic evidence offered, covers the full spectrum of little-explored and contentious 'participatory spaces' (Renedo and Marston, 2015), representing different possibilities for citizen influence.

Our point of departure in counter-posing these diverse dimensions of citizen participation is the UK's National Health Service (NHS). Participation in the NHS is particular in that patient involvement is mandated, largely unchallenged critically and normative in practice, yet debates about the 'lack of its impact' abound. In their contribution, Carter et al address the instrumentalism which characterises this increasingly normativised set of participation routines in health. The authors invite us to consider practices that we might think of as a particular type of neoliberal propaganda, yet which are taking place within participatory spaces in organisations established as a socialised form of health care.

It is no accident that the overt and covert privatisation of the NHS, ongoing since the first Thatcher government, has been accompanied by the adoption of a market language and logics, with Public Relations (PR) practices now part and parcel of the business of the NHS. Carter et al offer insights into how PR takes place contemporaneously with a drive in the NHS to engage citizens in decision making, quality improvement and health research. They draw our attention to the recasting of participation as an exercise of reputational management, through a reframing of patient experiences as success stories.

The authors argue that these two forms of practice emerge from different trajectories, cultures and logics of participation, one from the market, the other from 'emancipatory, socially conscious movements'. They show how competing logics are reproduced through this PR model of participation, which merges conflicting understandings of the health service user as a consumer and citizen. In doing so they caution that participation through PR in neoliberal times becomes the only way of articulating 'health citizenship' (Komporozos-Athanasiou et al, 2018), reinforcing the message that – in times of austerity – there is no alternative (TINA).

One possible avenue for challenging the logic of TINA in participation is offered by Nolas et al, whose conceptualisation of children's citizenship critically addresses the topic of how to engage with children's voices and worldviews. The authors draw on 300 collective fieldwork encounters with forty-five 5-8-year-old children living in three cities: Athens, Hyderabad, and London. They mobilise the theoretical lens of a childhood publics to carry out a reflexive sensory reading of what it means and feels like to be a child confronting public everyday life. Their argument is that dominant understandings of listening to children, including in participatory spaces, rely heavily on cognitive, conceptual and rationalist models of an idealised form of communication that ignore the everyday, embodied and lived experiences of 'sentiment devices', or idioms, of childhood.

Importantly, hopeful paths of resistance to dominant framings of participation (such as those typically framed by institutional agendas) may be opened up if we move beyond the usual tropes of 'voice' and 'listening', and instead create participatory spaces that enable attending to the mundane of children's experiences of public life. Formalised strategies for 'participation' often miss what is important – and mobilising critical and innovative ethnographic multimodal methodologies is an important step towards capturing under-represented understandings and forms of knowledge brought to participatory encounters by children.

Barassi's article also focuses on children and families to address an urgent and timely question: how new forms of 'digital citizenship' shape and are shaped by the data cultures

we inhabit today. Barassi shows how critical notions of 'digital participation' are directly interconnected to new forms of digital citizenship and the democratic challenges that they pose. Drawing on research that looks at the impact of big data on children and family life, she argues that in many instances today 'digital participation' is no longer voluntary but 'coerced'. Sharing Carter et al's concerns about the 'covert construction' of neoliberal citizenship, Barassi illuminates how digital profiling constructs children as data subjects that are simultaneously consumers and citizens. This datafication of children becomes possible through use of data that not only personalizes services and advertising, but also serves to grant access or restriction to specific civic rights and freedoms.

Today's children are therefore key to understanding how citizenship is being transformed by today's data-driven cultures. They are the very first generation of citizens who are being coerced into 'digitally participating' to society, from before they are born, because their personal data is digitised, shared, stored, analysed and exploited for them by others. However Barassi's contribution cautions against essentialist understandings of the datafied child as a quantifiable subject. Conceptualizing the datafication of citizens requires instead a focus on process and sensitivity to the complexity and messiness of datafication systems.

The contributions made by Kuhlbrandt's and Mosse's papers echo this concern with the ways by which participation today becomes an attempt to discipline citizens. Both articles point at the co-constitutive nature of participatory processes and outcomes, highlighting the constraints of participation, and grounding them in broader issues at the macro-level of participatory interventions. Kuhlbrandt presents an ethnography of undocumented citizenship in a Roma community undertaken to investigate a participatory community health intervention in Romania. She shows that citizen participation in health effectively becomes a form of governance and social exclusion. The paper illustrates, in specific, the processes by which professional 'health mediators' – a role created to improve Roma health - mediate citizenship and patienthood by trying to discipline communities into 'good citizens' - the very prototype of neoliberal subjectivity.

Mediating becomes a way of policing the boundaries of this type of subjectivities, thus excluding Roma's identities and practices. Participation, in this case can be understood as a

way of perpetuating the status quo and marginalisation of excluded communities by further othering Roma and contributing to their status as deviant. There are important implications emerging from this study, concerning how practices of citizen participation in other realms of life might exclude those unable to govern themselves into the prototype of neoliberal citizen (responsible, productive, competent): by leaving behind their community's ways of being and thinking.

Mosse's article, the concluding piece in this special section, is more optimistic. Mosse points at both the disciplinary and enabling aspects of participation, and highlights how despite constraints, participatory spaces may also engender possibilities for citizens both in terms of new forms of productive identities and types of knowledge, which have a function or a use for communities. He draws on decade-long experience of community participation in India to critically reflect on and inform the field of patient participation in the UK. Participation, the article argues, can act as a form of governance framing how citizens should think and act in participatory spaces. At the same time, however, participatory encounters of citizens and 'professionals' may also entail the co-production of new and hybrid forms of knowing and doing.

The process of negotiating knowledge and identity is central in the making of citizens through participation, yet despite tensions, such negotiation is functional, insofar as it contributes to different types (and scales) of knowledge, and thus responds to diverse and sometimes contradictory demands of participation (Renedo and Marston, 2011). As in Nolas et al's paper, Mosse's argues for the importance of inclusive participatory spaces that help us attune to different types of knowledge, including experiential forms, brought up by participants. Although citizen identities are governed by participatory spaces and engagement practices, these spaces can also be – often unintendedly – enabling, facilitating the development of new social identities, forms of knowledge and even "solidarities" and relational networks.

Considered together, the five articles of our Special Section provide important contributions to our understanding of citizen participation. First, our understanding of the social dynamics of (de) constructing and (re) producing citizenship must account for both formal and informal

spaces of participation. These include quotidian practices of everyday life that contribute to the making of political subjects through multisensory modalities of engagement. Whether citizen participation today is initiated via top down, 'government-sponsored' initiatives or within bottom-up 'citizen-claimed' spaces, involvement at these micro-levels can reproduce the tensions and power asymmetries at the macro-level of neoliberal societies. As we have shown elsewhere (Renedo et al., 2018), such tensions affect not only citizens invited to participate but also officials tasked with having to engage them, who find themselves having to manage different and competing institutional demands and rationales for participation.

Second, in the current context of heightened political and economic uncertainty, it is especially urgent to consider how 'formal' and institutionalised practices of participation that seek to engage marginalised citizens (such as children, vulnerable, migrant and racialized groups), can inadvertently reproduce social exclusion and disciplining into normative ways of being and thinking. Instead of affording spaces of possibility for the co-production of knowledge and collective action that addresses power differentials, 'participation' often becomes a way of governing uncertain and precarious lives.

To return then to the question with which we opened this introduction article, what type of citizenship is fostered by neoliberalism *through* participation spaces and practices? One possible path for tracing this process points to the 'governing technologies' of such spaces, aimed at shaping citizens, from early age, into particular types of people (Bell and Green, 2016) . As confirmed by the articles of our special section, the conceptualization of participation as governance unveils important ways of both shaping and disciplining knowledge and identity in the neoliberal age. Illuminating some of these contested practices and identities allows us to make sense of the conflicting way in which people are moulded into citizens through participation. These contradictory ways of knowing and being that they need to develop in order to participate (Renedo and Marston, 2011) are a reflection of a deeper conflict between neoliberal, democratic and empowerment rationales behind participation rituals (Komporozos-Athanasiou et al, 2018).

We hope that this collection will contribute to further studies of citizen participation that explore the limits as well as possibilities of some of the hybrid forms of knowledge emerging

from participatory practices. An important focus for future interdisciplinary studies would be to examine closer the relationship between the plurality of participation practices and the resilience of neoliberalism as a system of governing citizenship. If the neoliberal model of citizenship is so adaptive of participatory governance, then what can be sources of effective resistance to its tightening grip?

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