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**Power, Participation and Political Renewal: theoretical perspectives on public participation under New Labour**

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**Revised paper to *Social Politics*,: 2004, 11, 2: 267-79**

**Abstract:**

This article discusses the contribution of a study of public participation in two English cities to: the theorisation of the relationship between policy context and local action; the conceptualisation of ‘publics’ who get involved; and the micro politics of deliberation within participative forums. It addresses these issues within the particular context provided by the discourses of the New Labour government in the UK, but relates this to broader theorisation of the way in which institutional rules and norms shape access, agenda setting and modes of deliberation; of the mobilisation of collective action within social movements, and of the relationship between styles of exchange and the legitimisation of contributions to a process of citizen/official dialogue.

Contemporary interest in public participation stems from a number of sources: a perceived democratic deficit, a wish to enhance the legitimacy of decision-making and the responsiveness of services, and claims by marginalised and disadvantaged people to

have their say in issues that affect their lives. Public participation and deliberative democracy has been viewed as a means of fostering political renewal in the European Union and across national governments in Europe, Australasia and the US (Commission of the European Communities 2001, Couto 1999 Dryzek 1996, Elster 1998, Fishkin 1991, Rouban 1999). In the UK, developments in public policy under New Labour have resulted in a proliferation of public consultation and engagement strategies across local government, health, policing and other agencies.

This paper highlights a number of theoretical and conceptual issues raised in the study of this phenomenon. It draws on a study of public participation in the UK conducted under the ESRC's Democracy and Participation programme. The research<sup>1</sup> comprised 17 case studies of public participation in two large English cities, including examples both of officially-sponsored initiatives to engage the public in participation and initiatives which had their origins in autonomous groups of service users, community members and activists within social movements. Examples include: two Senior Citizens' Forums, a social services user group, neighbourhood forums, a youth conference in the context of a local regeneration initiative, a black and minority ethnic forum hosted by a community health trust, and a community group working to establish and run their own health centre. All the case studies were selected as examples of on-going dialogue between citizens and public officials, rather than one-off consultation exercises. The research set out to map the range and types of deliberative forums that were being developed; to find out who

takes part in such forums and why they do so; to explore how forums engage with issues of particularity, difference and dissent; to look at how participants understand the 'rules of engagement' that shape access to the process of deliberation; and to assess the impact of deliberation on decision-making by public bodies.

The research is now complete and results reported in a number of papers (Barnes et al 2003 a and b; Barnes et al forthcoming; Newman et al 2004; Sullivan et al 2003; Sullivan et al forthcoming). Our purpose here is not to present empirical material but to raise some of the theoretical and conceptual issues we grappled with as we analysed the data. These include:

- How to theorise the interaction between the policy context and local action. The research set out to study the constraints and opportunities produced as local agencies interpreted and enacted policy, and the consequences for the capacity of deliberative forums to address issues of social exclusion. However we also had to engage with how the rules and norms of engagement were generated in the interaction between policy, organisational strategy and the deliberative process itself, and how 'old' institutional norms interacted with 'new' norms of deliberation and involvement.
- How to conceptualise 'who takes part'. Our approach here challenges the emphasis on individual motivation coming out of rational choice theory in many studies of

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<sup>1</sup> The study (ESRC L215252001) , titled 'Power, participation and political renewal', was conducted between 1999 and 2002. We acknowledge the support of the ESRC, and the work of our research fellow Andrew Knops.

political and social movement participation. The analysis of our data suggested that 'the public' with whom officials seek to engage can be understood as a *constituted* public, and that this process of constitution has consequences for issues of access and exclusion.

- How to understand the micro-politics of deliberation itself. A major focus of our study was the process of dialogue and exchange within forums: what types of discourses and deliberations were evident, and what appeared to be marginalised or excluded. In attempting to theorise our findings we both drew on and critiqued dominant perspectives on discursive democracy.

We explore each of these issues in turn, then highlight the implications of our analysis for understanding the relationship between public participation and political renewal.

### ***1. The institutional context***

In the UK the recent history of public participation can be traced through the community development initiatives of the 1970s, the consumer orientation of the 1980s and the more recent emphasis on creating 'responsive public services' (Cabinet Office, 1999). The current focus on the engagement of citizens and communities in public decision making draws from such sources but also has distinct characteristics. Labour's emphasis on public participation is most explicitly linked to a concern to bring government and local government more 'in touch with the people' (DETR 1998) and to encourage active citizenship in order to strengthen communities and build civil renewal (Blunkett, 2003).

It is also, however, closely linked to the current emphasis on driving up public sector performance. Here the government 'looks over the heads' of public service professionals and managers, inviting the public to exert pressure for performance improvements directly onto local service organisations. This intersects - albeit uncomfortably - with Labour's emphasis on community involvement and capacity building producing a field of tensions that organisations delivering policy must manage (Newman 2001).

These three themes - democratic renewal, performance improvement and community capacity building - have informed a range of important policy developments under New Labour (DETR 1998, 2001; DoH 1998, 2001; Home Office 1991, 1997, 1998; Social Exclusion Unit 1998, 2000). These introduced new mechanisms shaping the form and process of public participation, many of which focus on locality as a site of engagement between the state (in the form of public sector agencies) and citizens (as consumers, users and communities - Sullivan et al forthcoming). Many also contain an element of compulsion in the form of a requirement for participation to be demonstrated in bids for funding, and to be reflected in new organisational and community governance arrangements. Best Value, a key instrument aimed at improving service quality, specifies the need to consult with users and the public. In the NHS, citizen representatives were included on the boards of the new Primary Care Trusts, and national and local forums are being established to involve patients and citizens in deliberation about health care decisions (Department of Health, 2001). Public participation was also evident in the new arrangements established to 'joined-up' local governance processes, with community

representation on Local Strategic Partnerships, and in the various 'Area Based Initiatives' through which social problems, such as health inequalities and deprived neighborhoods, are being addressed (Barnes et al, in press).

Our data suggests that this policy context provided a powerful incentive to local organisations to develop new ways of engaging in dialogue with citizens. The research project set out to explore how this policy climate was being mediated through the two cities in which we selected our case studies; how local organisations were interpreting and enacting policy; and how citizens or service users were responding. However it became apparent that viewing policy, organisations and the public as separate spheres was inadequate for a number of reasons. First, local organisations did not just 'enact' policy but interpreted it in line with existing institutional frameworks (assumptions, norms and rules). These included strong professional norms (based the power of expertise); political norms (buttressed by the power of institutions based on representative democracy); and organisational norms (supported by 'strategic' actors with interests in retaining decision-making power at the corporate centre). The resilience of these frameworks of power meant that the new norms of public involvement, service user empowerment and local deliberation were overlaid on, rather than displaced, 'old' professional, organisational and political frameworks of action.

Second, organisational and public spheres were often connected through dense networks that shaped the process of engagement. For example, many organisational actors had

lives beyond their organisation in which they had participated in social or political movements, while lay members often had extensive experience of organisational politics. Third, policies and initiatives on public participation confront a terrain replete with other forms of social and political mobilisation. Many initiatives built on earlier developments, including those linked to community development or urban regeneration, and those based on the inculcation of a more consumerist or user responsive public services. Some case studies were based on organisations or groups with independent origins, often linked to voluntary, charitable or political activity (e.g. community action groups, self-help groups). These often have a stronger collective identity and more proactive orientation to influencing change. The public, then, do not just 'respond' to organisational initiatives but bring a whole range of assumptions drawn from other experiences of social and community engagement.

This opened up questions about the development and enactment of institutional rules and norms of deliberation. In attempting to theorise this we drew on a range of writers from the new institutional theory tradition, in particular Scott's (2001) typology of rules and norms: regulative (systems of rules that frame and monitor action); normative (prescriptions for appropriate behaviour in a given context); and cultural-cognitive (common constructions of meaning producing templates of 'the way we do things' (Scott 2001: 52-58). These do not derive from the policy context in a direct way but are constructed as local actors - policy, organisational and 'public' - shape the rules and norms of participation. We identified the following points at which rules and norms could



act to facilitate and/or constrain public participation:

- *Access rules*: regulative and normative institutions that delimit participation in forums by describing who the forum is intended to engage.
- *Agenda setting*: normative institutions defining the way in which items are identified for debate and who is able to take part in this process.
- *Rules and norms in deliberation*: normative and cultural-cognitive institutions that guide the conduct of both citizens and officials in the deliberative process itself (Sullivan, et al, 2003)

Together these institutional processes work to delimit the possibilities for change as a result of public participation (Newman et al, 2004). However they are actively made and remade by actors as they engage in dialogue. Such an approach stresses the importance of analysing the dynamic interface between public bodies and the public they seek to engage with, rather than viewing institutions as somehow separate from the public sphere.

## ***2. Who Takes Part?***

The design of our research was intended to understand the way in which power relationships influenced *opportunities* for participation, particularly as we started with an interest in understanding how public participation may challenge or reinforce social exclusions. In doing so we drew on Tarrow's (1994) concept of 'opportunity structures', a concept used to frame the context in which social movements mobilise membership and

construct strategies for action. In the fieldwork we asked individual participants about their background and why they got involved. In analysing the data we drew on concepts of identity, networks and *oppositional consciousness* (Della Porta and Diani, 1999, Mansbridge and Morris, 2001), and on Phillip's work on *presence* (Phillips, 1995) in order to highlight who was actually part of the processes and what that meant for the perspectives and experiences that were available to be debated.

The question of who takes part is not a fixed and static notion. Whilst participation initiatives start with a broad, or sometimes very specific notion of 'who they are for', we found that in practice this involves a process of negotiation, not only between the officials sponsoring initiatives and the constituency that they are designed for, but also amongst the citizens themselves. Such negotiations take place around different views about 'legitimate membership.' This could involve some quite subtle and complex processes of negotiation and, at times, overt conflict as when participants claiming legitimacy deriving from a history of activism based in shared ethnic and local identity came up against officials seeking a broader, representative participation from local residents. In other cases participants adopted greater flexibility about the rules of participation in order to ensure sufficient diversity of membership. For example, initial decisions requiring participants formally to *represent* an organised group could be waived to include individuals *representing* social groups (such as ethnic minorities) not present within the forum.

These concepts of representation and representativeness were crucial resources in these negotiations. There is much confusion and vagueness over what representation means. Political concepts of *representation* and statistical concepts of *representativeness* often get confused by practitioners concerned to ensure the legitimacy of forums that stand outside both bureaucratic and formal political systems. Interviews highlighted the ways in which 'representation' and 'representativeness' informed official expectations about who should be involved, and how. But the case studies also showed how citizens also drew on a range of notions of representation to define their position within the forums, and to establish the legitimacy of their claims by reference to external publics. This might mean their capacity to represent others' views by virtue of their own experience; their capacity to represent a particular group by virtue of particular characteristics, e.g. age or disability; or to represent others with whom they had contact through informal networks. Each suggests how a politics of 'presence', rather than being the antithesis of the politics of representative democracy, is articulated with it in new discursive constructions. However there is a problem in this process of articulation. The concept of representation depends on a simple and static notion of identity. It is based on a set of characteristics considered to define the individual (race, age, gender, sexuality, disability and so on). This fails to acknowledge either the differentiated nature of identity or the significance of the process of identity construction that may take place within the process of deliberation itself.

These concerns led us to begin to theorise public participation as a *constitutive* process in which particular concepts of the public are mobilised, negotiated and enacted. This idea of 'constituting the public' became core to our analysis because notions of 'the public',

'the community' or 'citizens' are social constructions, formed out of a range of discourses that are mobilised in particular ways in specific historical and political contexts.

It became clear that participation may be a constitutive process in at least three ways.

A small number of 'strategic' interviews were conducted as part of the process of forming our understandings of the context of the case study work. These suggested a number of different constructions of the participating public that might influence the ways in which policy was shaped and implemented: for example a consumerist public always clamouring for more; a public differentiated into binary divisions such as the 'usual suspects' versus the 'hard to reach'; a public neatly packaged into distinct groups such as older people, black and ethnic minority groups, disabled people, and so on (Newman et al 2004). Second, the case study data suggested ways in which both lay and official members of deliberative forums sought to legitimate their contributions by reference to wider publics, drawing on discourses of representation and representativeness to mobilise particular identities as legitimate and others as marginal to the topic under discussion. Third, while the impact of deliberation on decision making was limited, the process of deliberation produced negotiated understandings and potential new patterns of identification and allegiance. We consider the process of deliberation further in the next section

### ***3. The micro-politics of deliberation***

Here we are interested in the process of dialogue and exchange within these forums. Our case studies all comprised examples of what might be considered deliberative forums, where there is the possibility of face-to-face exchange amongst members of the public and between members of the public and officials. 'Officials' is our short-hand term for both officers and elected members in local government or the health service. The questions we posed about the nature of the exchange taking place included in what ways the process of deliberation engaged with particularity, difference and dissent. And how the 'rules of engagement' within these new deliberative processes were shaped, accepted, rejected or appropriated to a specific purposes.

In order to address these questions we drew from theories of deliberative democracy which emphasise the way in which claims are made and debated through a process of rational, dispassionate argument and challenge (Habermas, 1987). But we agree with the critics of such theories who argue that it is impossible to 'bracket power' within deliberative forums and that it is important to understand how inequality and difference operate *within* such forums as well as affecting who comes to take part within them. People may be present, but is their way of speaking as well as the substance of what they want to say recognised as a valid and legitimate contribution to a debate about an issue of public policy?

Here we draw in particular from Iris Marion Young's work (Young 1990, 2000). Our analysis of the nature of exchanges that took place amongst citizens and in dialogue

between citizens and officials has identified the role played by 'affirmative rhetoric', narrative and greeting as well as by rational argument. Our data suggested the significance and importance of emotional and figurative speech and content, of experiential knowledge communicated through a process of story-telling, and also the importance of the demonstration of recognition and respect for others if those often excluded from policy making are to take part within it. We noted the way in which the substance of exchanges, the types of discourse that are recognised, legitimated and exchanged in these forums, particularly professional and procedural discourse on the part of officials, and lay and experiential discourse on the part of the public, create a context which can encourage or discourage participation. However, it is evident from our work that it is not possible necessarily to relate particular discursive practices solely to officials or citizens and in considering the biographies and histories of the participants we are mindful of the way in which discursive styles may be imported from other arenas.

Our initial analysis of the nature of participation forums as discursive arenas is discussed in Barnes et al (2003b) and Barnes et al (forthcoming). Here we highlight both the importance of analysing how the purposes and methods of engagement are negotiated among participants of deliberative forums, and how far communicative acts can create new meanings capable of transforming the discourses within which policies are made and implemented. An understanding of the significance of policy as discourse (Fischer 2003) shifts the analytic question from 'can deliberative forums influence policy' to 'can the discourse of policy be re-framed through the process of deliberation'.

## **Conclusion: Public participation and political renewal?**

One way of understanding the contribution of deliberative forums to a process of political renewal is to consider their contribution to decision making in the organisations that sponsor them. The first section of this paper noted the resilience of 'old' institutional norms and rules and the potential of these to delimit the impact of new forms of citizen and service user engagement. These limits were clearly highlighted in our data drawn from interviews with citizens and officials participating in local forums (Newman et al 2004). Citizen participants spoke of their profound frustration with the capacity of public bodies to respond to their concerns. There were many accounts of issues raised but not being taken up, and of the time-lag between issues being raised and any response being received. This was often construed as 'fobbing off' - what might be interpreted as a process of deflection. This was sometimes combined with a process of accommodation - the appearance of response to the views of deliberative forums, but a lack of anything tangible in terms of outcomes. Respondents complained about lack of feedback from official bodies inviting comments on proposals as to whether the comments had been taken up; and about the lack of transparency in public bodies, so that it was hard to know where responsibility for action on particular issues lay. There was also dismay about the practice of presenting citizens with a number of options to debate, all of which are viewed as undesirable. We can also see suggestions of a process of incorporation whereby citizens were drawn into an organisation's own discourses and institutional

practices through repeated cycles of exchange. Many respondents were well aware of the constraints that public agencies worked under - of funding, of capacity, of having to meet central government targets, and often 'made excuses' for the lack of action.

Section 2 - on the constitution of publics - suggested the importance not only of examining the formal ways in which organisations seek to engage with the public, but the ways in which 'legitimate membership' is negotiated and notions of 'the public' are constructed in the context of discourses of community and representation. This analysis emphasised the dialogic nature of the processes through which people are constituted as legitimate participants. Citizens bring to participation initiatives their own sense of who *should* be involved as well as their own histories and experiences that suggest to them that some form of collective action is worthwhile. But this is not a one off decision. In seeking to understand how collective action is mobilised and sustained we need to understand how actors make sense of social relationships, how they come to believe existing relationships need to be challenged, and how the experience of collective action itself impacts their conception of self and social relationships. We also, as the analysis in section three argued, need to explore the micro politics of the process of deliberation itself in order to highlight the capacity of deliberation to reframe policy and public discourse.

However we are also interested in the extent to which the collectivities that we have observed in these initiatives constitute the possibility of new social movement formation. Does the process of



engagement actually come to constitute new collectivities? Are these restricted to the 'citizen' participants or might they also include at least some of the officials who are also involved? We have noted a concern about social movement activists being 'co-opted' to official agendas when they engage in dialogue in officially sponsored forums, but our results suggest that more subtle processes are at work. Some of the officials engaged in these initiatives shared values and objectives with citizen participants and some experienced difficulty in negotiating their own identities as both 'officials' and 'citizens' in such contexts.

We also want to highlight the importance of rejecting any conception of 'the public' as atomised individuals making rational choices about whether or not to participate. The significance of social networks in affecting individual decisions to get involved, as well as the significance of networks in sustaining social movements have been extensively researched (Diani and McAdam, 2003). Melucci (1996) challenges rational choice theory, emphasising the importance of studying the contexts in which interactions between individuals produce both the cognitive and affective schema that can connect individuals to collective action not only at the time of entry but during the course of determining objectives and strategies to achieve them. The question of how far public participation can contribute to political renewal, then, must focus on how far processes of participation foster social networks and enable the development of collective identities, as well as enabling the construction of new discourses within which public policies can be debated.

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