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Received books

## If practices, tasks and problems do not come together

Michele Sernini

It is remarkable that after more than thirty years of participatory practices there has still been no discussion of the changes in this method that have occurred over the years.

The theory has maintained the concept of participation valid per se, an end unto itself, over years and as the actors and situations have changed in the same way that a plan to which participation is linked is often considered an instrument that is independent of its contents and subject matter. The pride of the older generation has led them to boast of the 'practices', the anti-Fordist, anti-government and appropriation stances of the 1960's, that 'we said it first' as the characters of post Fordist and flexible post modernity automatically occurred and were annexed in every political aspect to an extremely generic 'governance': faults and merits, freedom and control, interests and social aspects each confused with the other to varying degrees. Participation in decision making has not always had the same importance and urban practices have not always had the same diffusion, use and success. These two types of participation have enjoyed different degrees of fortune, passing from the movement stage to that which followed it. Participation as part of official decision making, considered lacking and insufficient, came onto regional statute books at the beginning of the 1970's when it became possible to harvest the first fruits of '1968' of which "one of the original and characterising issues was participation". The decline came a little later: as early as 1974 the

word 'peak' was used in connection with this idea. Non institutional urban practices, participation in the government of a city even though not in the official procedures (seen as bureaucratic), benefited much from the initial climate until the movement lost all impetus after the 'metropolitan Indians' of 1977, and the changes to the general context brought it to an abrupt halt. When scholars continued to surround participation with an aura of myth for twenty years they were in reality supporting that form of social participation in the government of cities practised by the most powerful and they certainly needed no encouragement. Contempt for the law and the institutions continued, when it should have been realised that since the 1980's, recourse to the law as a guarantee for citizens could provide protection in times of crisis for popular movements rather than be a bureaucratic hindrance. Important reminders of the importance of law have been made for years and even those who study the phenomenon of participation today recount cases in which co-operation with the institutions can be useful, sometimes over many decades where there has been a mix of conflict and co-operation, and of urban practices and official procedures. Recently, then, after twenty years of crisis and undoubtedly in the presence of delicate issues of extreme everyday emargination, once again evident as in the years of the urban movements and in the uncertain climate where there is a hint of new world wide movements, the impression is that subject of participation has always been the same. Heedless of the difference in conditions between now and then, the hoped for light heartedness

of then, the hedonism of the 1980's which came to an abrupt halt or the careless, business aestheticism of today, this phase acts as if no changes had taken place. It puts the social and political power of powerful actors, that have grown in the meantime, together with the desire of intellectual and political classes and a great variety of groups of different sizes and types to intervene usefully in urban life or on the socio-political scene. Sometimes a participatory anthropological analysis brings to light a city of citizens that is considered more fluid and real than a physical city, a city number two rather than an anticity; but perhaps a 'rhetoric of urban diversity' should be avoided. The discovery will have to occur case by case rather than through the generalised application of theoretical prejudices. Many of the practices often spoken of as events that show a civil society or at times even a city that tends to rebel, are just the normal seething activity of urban life that has always existed; nor is it perhaps as alive today as it has been in other circumstances and periods. Distinctions must be made between different initiatives on the basis of ends and actors, though in the well-known climate of equalisation that reigns today. The purpose is to judge priorities and importance that goes beyond mere recognition of the quantities and differences between things in civil society which occur anyway. Certainly some issues of rundown or inaccessible peripheries, or the acceptance or integration of minorities or the provision of facilities and services are more pressing even if a substantial and complex joint private-public instrument like the Social Regulatory Plan in Rome, which runs together with the Urban Plan and the 'Charter

for Social Quality' may not always be necessary. New examples of creation in public spaces must not eliminate normal undifferentiated use. One must continue to require public authorities to do what it is their duty to do, and popular or intellectual imagination is not always an effective substitute. As concerns the planner-activist, let us not forget that not even the liberal etiquette of civil society frees him from responsibility for decisions concerning 'content'. Traditional planning issues are also considered elsewhere, a sign that some priorities do exist: Amsterdam makes a plan, Paris discusses density, in England they debate whether to build new housing in the expandable Milton Keynes or in Birmingham in decline. The need to give importance to urban practices on major issues may certainly increase in the near future, especially if policies dry up, if sociology insists with attempts to pretend to be a method of marketing or urban decor, if a single line of thought equalises everything or if an increasingly horizontal society, ever more automatically democratic perhaps becomes forgetful of the freedom of others either in small or in big things. With regard above all to settlements, at times the ineluctable mixing suggests a return to 'do-it-yourself' urban planning as more rapid and practical than carefully studied complex urban policies, but policies will have to be adapted case by case, when necessary. Daily life will not be a nostalgic site of local culture but a 'cross-roads of local, national and transnational practices' of place making practices, if it is allowed that this aspect is more important than that of a well functioning generic city.