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Comment on Anna Carola Freschi and Vittorio Mete/1. Inserting Politics Back In

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Inserting Politics Back In

by Gianpaolo Baiocchi

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Local and state governments throughout the world have undergone radical transformations in recent times. Globalization has produced a tension between the idea of the state as a territorially circumscribed regulatory body and democracy as a form of free political association [Held 1995]. To put it differently, the scales of democracy and that of increasingly relevant modes of regulation have become mismatched. As the state “hollows out,” it does not just “wither away” but its functions are displaced into newer or altered lower- or upper-level state institutions, where new dynamics of political contestation emerge. In many settings the local urban state has emerged as an especially important site, because it is more porous than national states and is situated “in the confluence of globalization dynamics and increased local political action based in civil society” [Keil 1998]. Yet, despite the increasing autonomy and importance of the local vis-a-vis the national, both local and national agents operate in a context increasingly constrained by global contexts.

The meaning of government has changed as well. The ideological landscape – the discursive parameters shaping what is thought to be possible has also shifted. A new lexicon around questions of government has emerged, characterized by a now familiar constellation of concepts: good governance, NGOs, civil society, grassroots action, decentralization, sustainability, local innovations, social entrepreneurship, among others. The new common sense around governance has partially to do justifications for the rollback of government; “big government” is not able to cope

with today's problems, "bloated bureaucracies" and "red tape" are part of the problem, and so on. But it has also to do with a new rationality of government that emphasizes horizontal linkages, societal creativity, governance and participation. Governance, a new networked pattern of coordination of collective action, has replaced government.

Central to this new conjuncture is the importance of participation. "Participation in government" has been advocated with particular vigor by a wide cast of characters since the late 1990s as panacea for an ever wider set of ills. Critical scholarship has followed, not far behind, taking challenging the "heroic claims" made on behalf of participatory approaches while taking participatory boosterism to task for failing to address questions of power, inequality, and politics. More broadly, scholars have begun to point to participation, and participatory prescriptions in particular, as part and parcel of neoliberal governmentality. Absent from the new common sense is a recognition of the importance of politics. Because participation in government is seen as an alternative to conflictive mobilization and disruption, it has been argued that politics has no place in governance. But this common sense at the same time runs counter to the origins of many experiments in participatory democracy in Europe: fostered by left-of-center governments, inspired by the World Social Forum, and connected to alter-globalization networks and imaginary, these experiments would seem the opposite of anti-political.

It is in this context that the Freschi and Mete essay provides an important inquiry and corrective. Taking a distinctively detailed empirical approach, they examine the actual functioning of two electronic participatory experiments in Tuscany to conclude that they contribute to the "domestication of bottom-up participation" and the control of the process by the usual party elites. Tuscany itself would seem to provide a propitious context for more empowered and transformative participation with its left-of-center ruling coalition and its leftist tradition in political culture. Yet, in both Electronic Town Meetings, the agenda and format were set by the government, participation was limited to politically sympathetic participants (which Freschi and Mete interpret as low inclusiveness), and substantive decision-making was essentially non-existent. The conclusion that Freschi and Mete draw is that these arenas provide "the political class with a source of symbolic legitimation which paradoxically replaces the political, drawing on a new sort of expert knowledge, prescriptively de-politicized, and thereby producing a form of power that which [sic] is scarcely accountable."

I believe the article provides an important cautionary note – first and foremost that government brochures are not to be taken as unproblematic evidence of participation and its effects. The detailed empirical work is important ammunition in this regard and the authors ought to be commended for it.

To my mind, however, the article does not deliver on substantiating its most important claims – that the participatory forums depoliticized politics and legitimated ruling elites. And while I am sympathetic to this position in general, and find the claims of participatory inclusiveness in this case very suspect, the article does not actually establish that these forums had these effects. In fact, by challenging the common-sense assumptions that participation is inherently democratizing, and by calling us to examine instances of participation in their empirical richness, the authors set up a high standard that they do not meet with their stronger claims. To establish that the forums actually de-politicized civil society, say, would imply research around the forums and their effects. The first task of political theory, Foucault reminds us, is to “cut off the king’s head”: to not take the words of the state at face value. The authors do that by challenging the promotional brochures about participation in Tuscany, but then go on to imagine that the more nefarious intents of state elites are always-already realized. In fact, reading the article closely other alternatives emerge. One imagines, actually, that the excluded, more combative sectors of civil society would not have been de-politicized by this process, and actually quite the contrary as evidenced by their mistrust of the process. Because these forums are so low on inclusiveness – only politically sympathetic segments participated to begin with, how much consequence could this have had among the populace as a whole? Because the forums were so poorly advertised (especially the second one, when almost no one participated and few were even aware of it), how could this have provided ruling elites with any symbolic legitimacy at all? Certainly one imagines that the intent of establishing these forums had to do with fostering legitimacy, but did they do that? Did these forums really result in increased legitimacy for the ruling party and the domestication of combative sectors?

These questions do not take away from the significant merits of the article, but are part of the broader preoccupations that the article suggests, and which those of us engaged in this problematic must necessarily face.

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Abstract: Based on evidence from empirical analysis of an emblematic case within the Italian context, this article proposes an interpretation of the political meanings implied in the institutionalization of deliberative practice. Through the adoption of a mix of quantitative and qualitative techniques, we conducted contextualized analysis of two experiments of public deliberation which have recently been promoted by the Regional Government of Tuscany. The research findings show that the general effect of the two processes was more the domestication of bottom-up participation, rather than the opening of new inclusive and participative spaces. Relevant political functions have emerged with reference to the internal needs of party elites and to the competition/negotiation between consolidated and new political actors.

Thus, we suggest that institutionalization of deliberative democracy can be better understood when put in relation to the current process of functional adaptation undertaken by some institutional political actors. Through ‘outsourcing’ and individualizing participative processes away from the party arena, ruling elite would maintain the control over their own selection and political agenda. In other words, in some contexts the institutionalization of public deliberation operates more like a complementary instrument than a real remedy challenging post-democratic governance.

Keywords: State, political participation, grassroots movements, political élites, civil society.

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