

Francesca Cognetti

# What forms of participation today?

## Forms, pressures, competences

### Participation, Deliberation, Interaction

The field of participation is an already mature area of policies, which has gone through different cycles intertwined with the issues of urban government and social mobilization. Today, the varied framework of experiences requires a careful examination of the origin and the pressures concerned with the different cases (in a combination of top-down and bottom-up pressures); of the forms taken by processes (of deliberative nature or action-oriented), of the outcomes, especially in terms of improvement in social and institutional capabilities. Starting from these three interpretive lenses (forms, pressures and outcomes) the paper investigates the conditions under which participation, from being a planning technique, can constitute itself as a practice of active citizenship.

The theme of involving many actors in urban and territorial policies has been treated in some niche experiences during the Twentieth Century in Italy (Savoldi 2006; Laino 2010), but it has had a wide diffusion since the Nineties due to some new political, social and administrative conditions.

The design and the adoption by the European Union of a first set of programmes, which pushed the member States to make participation one of the main instruments of intervention, is one of the key elements that allowed administrators and local entities to

directly cope with these issues. The first experimentations of integrated urban regeneration programmes, in the national field, like *Urban Pilot Projects* (1993) and *Urban 1* (1994), and the consecutive Italian versions *Contratto di quartiere I* (1998) and *Urban Italia* (2000), belong to those years.

Moreover, it is possible to remark that, in the same years, broad and structured participatory paths combined with a practice of political leadership connected with direct commitment by administrators. The success of many participation experiences effectively depended on the capability of institutions to listen to citizens and inhabitants during decision-making processes. The implementation of the direct election of Mayors helped to change the style of government, leading to the rise of personalities able to connect visions of the future with mobiliza-

tion 'from the bottom up' and 'political piloting' capability, through the redefinition of a field of practices, competences, routines and rhetorics (Balducci, Calvaresi 2005).

If, in previous times, pressures towards the activation of participatory processes were basically bottom-up, and possibly forced institutions to accept instances and requests advanced by social movements, in 1990s we can see the implementation of design practices in which public administrations try to involve and to include citizens.

The background of these changes has to be found also in the high complexity of social context and of decision-making areas: the crisis of political representation and intermediate structures, together with the weakness of public actors as sole decision-makers, made evident the necessity to extend the arenas (to include different institutions, but also associations, organizations of interests, groups of citizens). More than a decade after the first experimentations, the institutional paths to participation have become diffused in Italy. Today, participation is significant in new urban renewal programmes and, always more frequently, adopted by new plans for the government of territory at the urban scale (projects to reuse public spaces, participation processes within the design of new urban plans, participatory budgetings).

After all, a new social entities' awareness has grown up about the opportunity to look for forms of interac-

tion with the institutional sphere, without adversarial relations, which can combine pressures 'from the bottom up' and pressures 'from the top down'.

### Cycles of participation

According to a classification proposed by Fareri (2004) it is possible to identify some references about the origin and the characteristics of participatory approaches in Italy, identifying a legacy derived from different cycles of participation.

The first one dates back to the 1970s, we can define it as the 'social conflict' cycle. It is characterized by the establishment of social movements 'from the bottom up', which «coincide with the break into the city, and about the issues related to the city, of movements that until then had remained inside the factories» (Fareri op.cit.)

These movements were clearly characterized on the ideological level and by homogeneous social composition; they redefined the proletariat on the urban level and played on the antagonism against institutions, claiming a right to alternative ways of city making. The characteristics of the 1970s movements are related to the general features of social movements (also those arose in recent years, at the global scale); they are entities based upon shared beliefs and solidarity, committed to antagonistic approaches mainly expressed through protests. Protest, when covered by the mass media, is seen as a political resource by powerless groups, which can be meant as groups lacking resources that can be directly exchanged with decision-makers (Della Porta 2009).

In the perspective of protest as a form of request for a larger public intervention, the diffusion of forms of participation 'from the bottom up' affected many fields, with a strong identification between territories, political realities and local communities. On the level of policies, as a result of actions carried out by neighborhood committees, one of the consequences of this diffusion was the establishment of decentralized bodies like the *District Councils*, the mission of which was to 'bring into neighborhoods' the local government functions and to create territorially well-established arenas for discussion.

This attempt to institutionalize local movements is perhaps one of the reasons that led to the decline of this cycle. Although they were an innovation and wanted to ease the relations between citizens and administrators, these institutional bodies were affected by many rigidities and by the difficulty to really engage with the local situations where they operated.

"In the years that followed, the 1970s participatory and protesting wave has been in some way reshaped and harnessed by these new instruments of 'subordinate participation', they almost deprived it of its radical contents. The recognition of the scarcity of results is, perhaps, one of the reasons for the downturn in interest in participation for several years" (Petrillo 2006).

This decline has been followed by the rise of a second cycle, at the beginning of the 1980s. It had

different features and was associated with the so-called 'NIMBY (not In My Back Yard) Syndrome'. The previous form of mobilization, which was tied to an 'actor-movement', faded into new characteristics of self-organization. It concerned groups of citizens getting together to deal with a specific issue, especially to oppose the implementation of great urban transformation projects fostered by institutions. Citizens' committees established themselves *ad hoc*, with the only aim to oppose a project or a public policy, and they were destined to dissolve once the case was over. They were neutral arenas, without political belonging, tied to a delimited goal, which also defined their duration. This dynamics "facilitate the consensus of 'common citizens' and forms of involvement that can be intense (in the immediate present) and few demanding (in the future). The informal character allows flexibility and room for maneuver, which are barely practicable by more official and structured organizations" (Bobbio 1999). These entities establish themselves very quickly, entrenching themselves in a narrow social tissue that has a poor repertoire of forms of protest. Their characteristics are decisively 'reactive'. This defensive trait underlines the will to 'participate' not so much to obtain some benefit, but only to avoid decisions that are considered as damaging. The outcome of this approach is a proper 'clash', through an attitude inspired by rejection of any project-oriented logic, in the name of a local and particular interest. Therefore, these organizations ask the political world 'to not intervene', to dismiss the project or to move it elsewhere. The diffusion of these groups in the 1990s can be related to the gradual lack of forms of mediation between society and institutions, which led to proliferation of forms of direct representation that gave voice to local complaints. This phenomenon can be seen as a "signal of a renaissance of basic democracy (meaning that they allow the expression of requests that, in the past, would have been softened by political mediation) or as the menacing display of the 'anti-politics' (in the sense that they refuse to take any responsibility for the 'common good')" (Bobbio op.cit.).

The third cycle of participation relates to the 1990s and it rises, at least in part, as an attempt by institutional entities to deal with the problems of decision-making and effectiveness created by the difficulties of the past period. In some way, there is a reversal of perspective. If, in previous cycles, pressures towards the activation of participatory processes were 'from the bottom up', and institutions possibly accepted instances and requests advanced by movements, in the 1990s design practices were established by public administrations to involve and to include citizens in the decisions for the city. That is also the period in which the dominant models of public intervention fall into a definitive crisis, and the involvement of inhabitants therefore becomes a condition for both understanding objectives (and perceptions) of the policy recipients, and researching new solutions on the level of economic sustainability and of

services management.

It is possible to highlight some elements that characterize this third cycle: participation is proposed 'from the top down' toward society, and it is meant as a mode of design and government (by institutions) rather than an instrument to play the conflict (by movements). The working field of participation is the local area, and inhabitants become central as bearers of the specificity of a particular environment. In the background, on the one hand, public policies lose part of their universal nature, and, on the other, the roles of administrators (and the technicians supporting them) as sole policy makers disappear: actions begin to be established as social and design processes, in which all the actors can play a significant role.

### **What forms of participation today? Where do they meet? From the 'top down' or 'bottom up'?**

When trying to outline how the field of participation is constituted today, it is possible to say that we are registering the permanence, in various ways, of the aforementioned cycles, but also the development of new methods. In the last decade, it seems increasingly evident the need to adopt new forms of city government, which have to include ways of interaction with a plurality of actors. Terms such as *inclusion*, *partnership* and *participation* characterize different projects and policies in the field of urban transformation, but also in the field of social cohesion, of cultural animation and integration. Therefore, many new areas of participation are established, which are often promoted by institutions, but this diffusion does not necessarily correspond to higher openness and effectiveness of the processes. On the contrary, there is the risk that participation will change into a 'procedural form' that leads to the loss of its innovative tension. This is one of the paradoxes of participation (Miessen 2010): the areas in which it is produced can also be reduced to 'weak' forms of consultation, which have low capability to influence public choices merely in terms of consensus building and conflict containment in a perspective of renewal of conditions for a 'good politics', which is important but not sufficient. The risk is that of creating a 'selected access' arena (Paba 2009) in the sense that only those forces (institutional, private, third-sector entities and associations) that have instruments to access the real areas of design are involved, therefore there is not a significant redefinition of power relations and structures of democracy. The paradox is that participation itself can become a way of exclusion, especially of the weaker actors, who do not have instruments to represent themselves. On the other hand, participation 'from the bottom up' has structured itself in forms that are partially new, not always plainly confrontational as they were in the past. Today actors with a history of conflict, but also the more recent ones arose from the pressure at 'making' (Cellamare 2014), undertake initiatives that effectively deal with the realization of projects, testing their ideas and capabilities. Social disadvantage

and exclusion, top-down mega-projects, disused areas, neglected green areas and models of consumption are some of the issues experienced by promoters as fields to work on in a perspective of social and physical transformation of the city, often starting from small gestures of the everyday life also linked to new lifestyles (Jegou, Manzini 2008). These experiences are also important occasions to 'cultivate sociability' in connection with the promotion of a project, experimenting relations, sharing of knowledges, new expressiveness, alternative models of consumption: in many cases these are 'social experiences' that concern the dimension of appropriation and the creation of common paths.

Therefore, many pressures towards participation coexist today, and they have two opposite origins: from the top and from the bottom. If, in fact, the start of participatory processes mainly depends on the initiative of local administrations, which for various reasons are oriented towards an enlarged management of their power, it is also true that, in other cases, it is possible to reach structured experiences of participation through long-lasting disputes and claims arose from civil society. All projects of participatory nature combine these components (top-down and bottom-up) in different ways, depending on the game between actors, in a *continuum* in which opposite poles are represented, on the one hand, by the processes of listening to citizens (which are established by institutions to see the policy recipients' point of view), on the other hand, by self-organization experiences of groups and committees in the absence of public institutions. Between these two extremes there is an interesting range of 'hybrid' experiences (such as the management of public property spaces, the 'conduct' of proximity services and the activation of urban spaces), in which it is possible to find forms of collaboration between different actors. In these cases, the roles and responsibilities of institutions and citizens are pushed to find new orientations beyond the business-as-usual.

### **The forms of participation.**

#### **Deliberative processes vs. design processes**

Participatory processes are characterized by networks of promoters, but also by the forms they take, which are of different types. Schematically, it is possible to identify processes that are oriented to the opening of arenas for the definition of public problems, or processes oriented to deal with a problem through the construction of an action-project. Starting to distinguish between 'deliberative processes' and 'design processes', within the large framework of processes of interaction, can be useful in recognizing different ways of interpreting and addressing participation.

On the one hand, in fact, participation is aimed at performing the match (and the 'translation') between political will and people's desires. The main purpose is to construct arenas for discussion and sharing that favor the possibility that "interested actors will constitute themselves as an 'investigating commu-

nity' supported by mutual and collective learning between co-protagonists" (Sclavi 2010). The outcome is an increased awareness of public choices, a new 'decision' for the government of the city, a renewal of the places for discussion and debate. The idea is to broaden public discussion, involving all those who bear the consequences of specific decisions. It is through this enlargement that it is possible to open up a debate about the subject of choices and their implications, which can improve the content of decisions and increase collective intelligence. In other words, inclusion is aimed at allowing a "cognitive enrichment" (Bobbio 2013).

Participation of deliberative nature, therefore, operates on cognitive resources and on the creation of a relational context: on the one hand, rulers can recognize citizens' preferences and prove their accountability, on the other, citizens can express their point of view and then inquire about decisions (Florida 2012). This process is not necessarily an occasion to remove differences and conflicts, but it can create an arena in which disagreements can be expressed in a reflective and informed way.

Those who practice this kind of participation emphasize that places and instruments of discussion have to be structured with the higher care in the identification of participants, the offering of debate, the conduction of processes and the organization of the physical space; citizens should be enabled to get balanced informations, to consult experts with different backgrounds, to express their opinions. These practitioners also underline that deliberation itself can be structured in very different ways, depending on the territorial and political context (Romano 2012).

Participation, when oriented toward the construction of design processes, can be called 'interactive design' or "design via social interaction" (Cognetti 2012); it is the kind of collaborative process that is aimed at treating a complex problem, also through the realization of a project or the implementation of a policy. We can say that the result of participation is not so much a decision or the opening of areas for discussion and debate, but it is an outcome that is primarily concerned with territorial and urban issues (policies, scenarios of change, reuse projects, modification programmes, and transformations). Interaction aimed at a physical structure helps participants to develop a real argument made of small advances in contents, which often take place more easily if concerned with the dimension of 'making' and the construction of a common space, which is not a deliberative space but a physical one.

Design via social interaction is an attempt to "construct a meaning and a common space, starting from the direct sharing of the 'things to do' related to interests and common goods" (Laino op. cit.). This activity does not necessarily refer to the design of spaces, but to design processes - in a broad sense - that start from places (a small garden, a disused building, an urban plan, an event in public spaces, a community center, etc.); it also refers to the pos-

sibility to establish new links with the territory based upon design and action, upon the construction of collective spaces of identity and self-representation. It can be called "a cultural process starting from places" (Hannerz 2001). The process of *place making* (Cottino 2010; Silbergberg 2013) should wisely combine very different elements: uses and practices, mechanisms of appropriation, transformations, functional structures and management structures. Experiences are not only specific physical changes; they are also processes that seem to be associated with potential for innovation on two different levels. The first level concerns the dimension of relations, in which places often become the scenario of "local micro-processes" (Bergamaschi 2012) based upon direct involvement and upon the opportunity to configure new spaces of action in the city. The second level concerns the methods of directly taking charge of urban problems, in which processes also affect the dimension of public policies in the perspective of establishing themselves as "public policies *de facto*" (Balducci 2004).

The distinction between participatory processes of different nature (deliberative and design processes), which help us to distinguish between different outcomes and dynamics of interaction, allows us to say that "in a deliberative democracy, after having argued, finally you vote or agree on a decision, whereas in participation you build up and, just because you don't vote, interaction must become more intense, forcing actors to build up" (Paba 2009).

### **The construction of social and institutional capabilities. In all the cases, work on competences**

One of the issues that is often in the background, when talking about participation, is related to competences: the actors' capabilities required to sit at a 'table of discussion', to assume a design role, to listen to the point of view of others, to make choices and decisions. These are competences held by individuals *ex-ante*, but they are also capabilities that can be acquired during the participation process, and the process should in part take charge of them. The emphasis on competences is important because it questions the legacies of participation: participatory processes are time-limited, but what remains at the end of the course? Among the results, an important aspect is concerned with what the different actors have learned. Also important it is what they have acquired both in terms of new instruments for collaboration, discussion, exchange, and in terms of new knowledge and awareness of problems and solutions. The "approach to capabilities", outlined by Sen, puts special emphasis on these aspects in the theoretical perspective of "basic social justice". It raises a fundamental question about democracy: what can each person do or be? Some important issues about the government of society derive from this question, they relate to (Sen 1999): the creation of opportunities for everyone (every person is a target); the defense of freedom of choice

(holding that the most important good for society is the promotion of a set of opportunities that people can put in to practice, or not); the attention to social injustice and entrenched inequalities (in particular, the lack of capabilities caused by marginalization and discrimination).

Capabilities, as defined, are both individual and interior, but they are also “combined abilities” (Nussbaum 2011), which are expressed through an exchange with a social, economic and political environment. The emphasis on capabilities, as a balance between the interior expression of self and the possibility of an exchange (collaborative or confrontational) with an external environment, has a central role when reflecting upon participation.

Under current conditions, where the arenas for discussion and decision arise from plural pressures, the construction of capabilities of society is side by side with the building of institutional capabilities. Therefore, participatory processes can be meant as processes that potentially work both on the “social activation” (Laino 2012) and on the “activation of institutions”.

Institutions are required to have new capabilities to act within horizontal processes of discussion, in which administrators are actors within others. Many participatory processes

do not deal very much with what the administrative machine learns, with how technicians open themselves to argument and with a certain inertia expressed by institutions. The administrative apparatus should accept innovations in terms of involvement; innovations should create lasting changes in the ordinary structures of management of the public policies, which could develop new procedures and techniques. Instead, very often, participation is perceived as a factor that slows down the processes and as a ‘forced’ step simply related to consensus building.

On the level of citizens, the habit to participate and the capability to share resources and to develop a design thinking approach do not belong to everyone; therefore, it is important that a participation process takes charge of the real possibilities of expression and choice that are developed within the process itself. Participation can therefore be seen as generative of contexts that allow to ‘make’ and to participate, giving more power to society but also taking charge of increasing people’s opportunities to satisfy their needs, interests and expectations.

The matter is not only about forms of redistribution of power and about the creation of a new culture of urban government; it is also about the opportunity to work on inclusive processes able to valorize social and institutional capabilities, to reinforce them, but also able to create new ones.

## Conclusion

Today the field of participation is characterized by different pressures, which have to be carefully recognized and investigated. Each of them has a point from which it derives, and this origin can be identi-

fied. The institutional dimension of processes, in fact, is often combined with tensions ‘from the bottom up’ that find new ways to channel their expression and to channel debate. Sometimes it creates a sort of ‘procedural form’ of confrontation, in which interesting premises and great expectations are followed by weak results in terms of innovation of policies. These situations are also tied to an approach that is mainly concerned with techniques; this kind of attitude has certainly helped to spread “participation” as a necessary element in the field urban policies, but also transformed it into a guided and structured path of interaction between actors. Whereas in Italy the possibility to adopt structured instruments of dialogue and interaction between citizens and institutions, on the different levels of urban government, is today consolidated, the outcomes seem to be more questionable (even in cases in which considerable resources are available). Sometimes, however, participation can establish itself not as a planning technique, but as a policy of active citizenship (Crosta 2003), generating interesting forms of learning both among institutional entities and among social entities. In order to make it happen, the capabilities of all the interacting actors have to be put to work and improved: from deliberative arenas to collaborative projects, these new contexts of interaction require completely different ways of expression and debate from everyone of us, and they cannot easily be practiced.

## References

- Balducci A. (2004), La produzione dal basso di beni pubblici urbani, *Urbanistica*, no. 123.
- Balducci A., Calvaresi, C. (2005), "Participation and leadership in planning theory and practices", in M. Haus, H. Heinelt, M. Stewart (eds.), *Urban Governance and Democracy. Leadership and Community Involvement*, Routledge, London.
- Bobbio, L., Zeppetella, A. (eds. 1999), *Perché proprio qui? Grandi opere e opposizioni locali*, Franco Angeli, Milano.
- Bobbio L. (2010), Types of Deliberation, *Journal of Public Deliberation*, no. 2, vol. 6, article 1, available at: <http://www.publicdeliberation.net/jpd/vol6/iss2/art1>.
- Bobbio L. (2013), Democrazia dei cittadini e democrazia deliberativa, in *Cosmopolis. Rivista di cultura*, no.1, vol. IV.
- Cellamare C. (2014), "Self-organization, appropriation of places and production of urbanity", in Carlo Cellamare, Francesca Cognetti (a cura di, 2014), *Practice of reappropriation*, Planum Publisher, Roma-Milano.
- Cognetti F. (2012), "Praticare l'interazione in una prospettiva progettuale", in Cancellieri A., Scandurra G. (eds.), *Tracce urbane. Alla ricerca della città*, Franco Angeli, Milano
- Cottino P. (2010), RE-inventare il paesaggio urbano. Approccio di politiche e place making, in *Rivista ricerche per la progettazione del paesaggio*, Firenze, available at: [www.unifi.it\\_in-vista](http://www.unifi.it_in-vista).
- Crosta P. L. (1996), Istituzionalizzare l'interazione sociale in pratiche professionali?, *Urbanistica*, no. 106.
- Crosta P.L. (2003), "A proposito di approccio strategico. La partecipazione come tecnica di pianificazione o come politica di cittadinanza attiva?", in Moccia F. D., De Leo D., *I nuovi soggetti della pianificazione*, Franco Angeli, Milano.
- Della Porta D. (ed. 2009), *Democracy in Social Movements*, Macmillan Publishers, London.
- Fareri P. (2004), Innovazione urbana a Milano: politiche, società ed esperti, *Urbanistica*, no. 123.
- Florida A. (2013), *La democrazia deliberativa: teorie, processi e sistemi*, Carocci Editore, Roma.
- Hannerz, U. (2001), *La diversità culturale*, Il Mulino, Bologna.
- Laino G. (2010), Costretti e diversi. Per un ripensamento della partecipazione nelle politiche urbane, *Territorio*, no. 54.
- Laino G. (2012), *Il fuoco nel cuore e il diavolo in corpo. La partecipazione come attivazione sociale*, Franco Angeli, Milano.
- Jegou F., Manzini E. (2008), *Collaborative service. Social innovation and desing sustainability*, Polidesign editore, Milano.
- Miessen M. (2010), *The nightmare of participation. Crossbench Praxis as a Mode of Criticality*, Sternberg Press, Berlin.
- Nussbaum M. (2011), *Creating capabilities. The Human development approach*, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, London.
- Paba G. (2009), "Partecipazione, deliberazione, auto-organizzazione, conflitto", in Paba G., Pecoriello A. L., Perrone C., Rispoli F., *Partecipazione in Toscana. Interpretazioni e racconti*, Firenze University Press, Firenze.
- Paba G. (2010), Radici. Alle origini della progettazione interattiva, in *Contesti. Città, territori, progetti*, no.1.
- Petrillo A., (2006), *Villaggi, città, megalopoli*, Carocci, Roma.
- Romano I. (2012), *Cosa fare, come fare. Decidere insieme per praticare davvero la democrazia*, Chiare lettere editore, Milano.
- Savoldi P. (2006), *Giochi di partecipazione*, Franco Angeli, Milano.
- Sclavi M. (2010), I grandi cuochi della nuova democrazia urbana, available at: [www.marianellasclavi.com](http://www.marianellasclavi.com).
- Sen A. (1999), *Development as freedom*, Oxford University Press, New York.
- Silbergberg S. (2013), *Places in the Making: how placemaking builds places and communities*, Massachusetts Institute of Technology.