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Essay Review

Remaking Participation: Or, cheering on participation

Jason Chilvers and Matthew Kearnes (eds.), *Remaking Participation: Science, environment and emergent publics*. London: Routledge, 2016.

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Remaking Participation does for public participation what alcohol does for drinkers in the adage 'the best way to avoid a hangover is to stay drunk'. Apparently if you imbibe enough participatory elixir you can be saved from having to face any of the actual challenges of deliberative democracy revealed by either theory or practice. Chilvers and Kearnes (the editors) accomplish that evasion early, pouring cold water on Arnstein's ladder of participation model, apparently because Arnstein dared to rank participatory practices according to the degree to which they enable citizenry power. *Remaking Participation* is aimed at specialists, and Chilvers and Kearnes advertise the book as developing an "altogether different view of the reality of participation … not simply as externalized, fixed and pre-given models … but as actively and materially made and remade through the performance of situated participatory practices" (xvi). Chilvers and Kearnes seek to discredit efforts to conceive of public participation as something subject to being "externally validated as a final outcome" (xvi), and they suggest we eschew any "holistic multilevel theory of participation" (52). Instead they recommend we map "collective struggles and ongoing processes of (re)making" (xvi), and "map the relations" and "document the ways" participatory ontologies are (re)made (52). "[O]ur intention is to highlight the active and contingent" (13), say Chilvers and Kearnes, and they succeed. But along the way we are thereby invited to limit the normative horizons of deliberative democracy to what the analyst is on site to observe. How did Chilvers and Kearnes arrive at such self-prohibition? What is at stake for Science and Technology Studies (STS) if we adopt a similar self-prohibition?

My explanation for Chilvers and Kearnes' self-prohibition is that they deny to themselves the theoretical resources for dealing with their own conclusion, that "*participation and democracy is always to come but already exists in powerful ways*" (283; italics in original, for no obvious reason). They assert that the "dynamic interplay between stabilities and emergence … has not formed a significant element of the imagination of participatory democracy" (283). That assertion relies on an absurd reductionism applied to most political theory. Were STS to follow Chilvers and Kearnes on participation, we would quickly find that the only theoretically supported side of the dynamic is the 'emergence' side. The limits of our normativity with regard to deliberative practice would be set by the methodological fetish of being there while it happens and watching it turn out just that little bit different each time. While the book's co-production idiom helps clarify emergent properties, in that idiom stabilities remain under-theorized and tend to be surreptitiously imported as backdrop to ongoing moments.

Note these opening critical remarks do not apply to the individual chapters in the book, which comprise a series of excellent explorations of participatory practices in our science and technology drenched democracies, showing how those practices are continually (re)configured during unending contestations over democracy. The strength of the volume resides in those excellent chapters, and in the good intentions of Chilvers and Kearnes to outline a critical account of participation, but weaknesses emerge as the book plays out in three stages. In the first stage Chilvers and Kearnes outline a theory of relational co-production to account for public participation, but they tend to display a systematic lack of generosity toward existing scholarship. In the second stage the individual chapter's advance many solid insights, but they also constantly push beyond the co-production strictures Chilvers and Kearnes lay out. The coherence of the theory said to frame them is brought into doubt, along with the wisdom of Chilvers and Kearnes limiting themselves to being franchisees of Sheila Jasanoff's co-production idiom. In the third stage Chilvers and Kearnes (final chapter) seek to go beyond that idiom, but at that point their anxiousness about independent theorizing threatens to drown out their constructive spirit.

The fundamental weakness of the book is that the co-production idiom is permissive about descriptions but covetously restrictive about explanations. Sure enough, the individual chapters exemplify the virtues of the relational co-production framework when following its orientation toward 'emergence' and performative enactment, but challenge the framework when matters turn to explaining 'stabilities'. The theoretical ingredients of the volume are spiked with the usual suspects STS deploys when talking about complex mixtures forming over time, such as Latour's focus on heterogenous (hybrid) objects, Dewey's (resuscitated *via* Marres') issue-oriented conception of democratic politics, and Wynne's complaint about deleted publics. Some STS-friendly political theorists also get a word in, such as Barry and Brown on how *not* to think about politics. Nevertheless it is fair to say that like that other (boring) pearl of wisdom of drinking advice – 'never mix, never worry' – Chilvers and Kearnes attempt to rely almost entirely on Jasanoff's co-production idiom to diagnose and remedy bad habits in how we think about participatory democracy. The result is an unbalanced cocktail.

Cocktails that do not taste right often lack balance, and Chilvers and Kearnes' intoxicating extension of Jasanoff's co-production idiom into "an alternative constructivist conception of participation as co-produced, relational and emergent" (13) is a bitter cocktail in need of some salt. The salt in question could fruitfully come from Chilvers and Kearnes relaxing their prohibition against what they call the "residual realist account of participation" (10). Residual realism is said to undermine both affirmatory and critical accounts of democratic participation. "Affirmative" or "deliberative" discourses (9-10) - including Benhabib, Habermas, and Bohman and Rehg – are said to "adjudicate practices of public participation against theoretically defined and pre-given procedural standards, for example of inclusiveness, representation, competence, social learning and so on" (9). "Critical" or "agonistic" (9-10) discourses – including Cooke and Kothari, and Mouffe – are said to focus on the way participation can exclude, disempower, smother dissent under a quest for consensus, and generally conceive of participation as modes of social control (9). Both are charged with sharing "realist accounts of an objective public" (9) and a "commitment to pre-given normative models of democratic politics" that are "ready-made and external to the situated, material performances of democracy and participation" (10). Both are chastised for their assumptions about the "asymmetric relations between contending political constituencies" and for assuming "knowledge-politics" might be

"propelled by" things like conflicting interests, understandings and perceptions (10). Both are derided for being "*a priori*", which apparently equates to the methodological sin of 'importing' and projecting "evaluative frameworks and normative commitments" (40-41).

Chilvers and Kearnes have a moment of self-criticism, admitting it "would be unwise" (10) to lump affirmative and critical discourses under the label "residual realist". Regrettably it is not an ongoing moment, because the grounds for developing a new account of participation are based on that unwise conflation, with its associated reductionism. Chilvers and Kearnes itemize their posited residual realist account into eight commitments (11-12), and counterpose them with eight aspects emphasized by a relational co-production account (15-16). No single theorist or even an actually-existing School of thought is associated with all eight sins of the residual realist or even a significant sub-section of them. Nor should critics try to rescue Chilvers and Kearnes' by tracking down their residual realist. Doing so would be like the mistake Eugenie Scott (1994) suggested critics of Creationists often make, of wasting time chasing "half-truth non-sequiturs that the audience misunderstands as relevant points". Chilvers and Kearnes' account of the field of democratic theory cannot be taken seriously, for the shibboleth of residual realism is really just a cheap foil to smuggle in the relational co-production account unopposed and artificially inflate its novelty.

Where does all this leave those individual chapters? Space constraints demand some brevity here, so I will skim over the distinct contributions each chapter makes to reimagining public participation, focusing instead on the way the chapters implicitly problematize the relational co-production account. Ironically, the strengths of the individual chapters often stem from the fact they did not box themselves into the stilted idiom of co-production. Amongst those chapters we have a series of (six) theoretical reflections: four by Irwin (and Horst), Michael, Wynne, and Felt; plus the two Chilvers and Kearnes chapters discussed above. We also have six empirical chapters, packed with insights derived in part from the authors exercising their right to theoretically think for themselves (Ehrenstein and Laurent, Soneryd, Davies, Waterton and Tsouvalis, Selin and Sadowski, and Vob).

The four (non-editor) theoretical chapters reinforce the artificiality of the residual realist foil, by helping themselves to that banned set of resources. Irwin and Horst (Chap 3) discuss a citizen forum on climate change, along the way deploying the "ideal type of the policy-maker" (74) and suggesting ways to make participation better (77-78), thereby questioning the injunctions against *a priori* concepts and theorizing procedural improvements. Michael (Chap 4) interrogates mundane technologies like Velcro and wheeled baggage, and goes against Chilvers and Kearnes' rejection of the sin of seeking "methodological refinement" (16). Michael is so taken with his method that he thinks it facilitates the "accessing" (95) of publics, affects, and issues not yet foreseen or expressed. Wynne (Chap 5) repeats his worries about the way public meanings get deleted by "transactional forces of neoliberal intervention" and "the medium of science" (101), and he sees public participation as unfortunately an outgrowth of modes of social control. Wynne is entirely right but also an example *par excellence* of the kind of critical discourse Chilvers and Kearnes rebuke for 'scoring' participation against imported standards. By contrast Felt's (Chap 9) rumination on the concept of time is an affirmative discourse. Felt glides past Chilvers and Kearnes' instruction to not use "theoretically defined and pre-given" standards like "social learning" (9), instead suggesting we need to see participation as part of "societal learning" (194), especially if we aim to understand the pre-emergent facets of our identities that influence whether citizens "feel empowered" (189).

The six individual chapters present some challenges to the relational, emergent co-production account, though also some resources for the practical and constructive version Chilvers and Kearnes say (Chap 13) they would like to get to one day. Should we aim for guides to good participatory practice? Chilvers and Kearnes (11) discredit such efforts as the fourth sin of residual realism, but Ehrenstein and Laurent's (Chap 6) discussion of State experiments with public participation about nanotechnology and deforestation ventures a "theory of the State" (140) as way to theorize the role of the State in encouraging or hindering good practice. While Chilvers and Kearnes (16) say only those silly residual realists obsess over producing better representations, Waterton and Tsouvalis (Chap 10) deploy Latour's prosaic model of non-human agency and Barad's feminist post-humanism to expand the array of actors (to include non-humans) and thereby claim to be able to much better represent the relations around blue-green algae in lake water. Where Chilvers and Kearnes say a relational co-production account leaves behind any pining for "popular will" (11), in Vob's (Chap 12) discussion of a Berlin citizen forum into future challenges to participation he laments places where the popular will *fails* to ground representational practice or justify political order (239-240). Note Vob also moves between the affirmative and critical discourses Chilvers and Kearnes sought to discredit, drawing on each to theorize both worthwhile participatory designs and the opening of critical engagements (respectively).

It is a shame that the kind of productive use of different theoretical resources evident in Ehrenstein and Laurent's, and Vob's, chapters is rendered contentious by the monastic prohibitions of Chilvers and Kearnes' relational co-production account. The mistake Chilvers and Kearnes have made is analogous to mistakes in the process of distillation, where the brewer fails to take account of the fact that different substances have different boiling points. To the extent assumptions and conceptualizations from the so-called affirmative and critical discourses exist, the wisest move is to test the various boiling points of their constituent parts rather than reject them *tout court* for not being franchisees of the co-production idiom. Davies (Chap 8), for instance, discusses a nanotechnology-focused science education network and illuminates both pitfall and promise via an eclectic invocation of theory where appropriate. Davies skillfully combines resources from the affirmative and critical approaches – noting the way participation tends to overflow our frameworks (168) - to highlight the way the embodied and the affective, along with the discursive, are needed to reimagine deliberation on science (172).

Ehrenstein and Laurent, Vob, and Davies thus demonstrate the virtues of constructively working with social theory, rather than draining the life out of it just to make a little room for relational co-production. Soneryd (Chap 7) and Selin and Sadowski (Chap 11) continue in that constructive vein by demonstrating a more productive way to deal with 'stabilities' than the over-extended rhetoric of the co-production idiom. Soneryd (Chap 7) draws upon two case studies (nuclear waste management in the Czech Republic, and a citizen forum held across seven European nations to discuss future research agendas) to offer Chilvers and Kearnes hints to how to deal with 'stabilities'. Soneryd charges STS with lacking a "concept that can capture *institutions* … and how they can produce similarities" (145), suggesting we need such a concept if we want to deal with stabilized blueprints for public engagement. Unlike Chilvers and Kearnes' uncritical celebration of reflexivity (16 and 267; and Wynne's Chap 5), Soneryd argues that the reflexivity of organizations is often part of the participatory problem not the solution (146; see Durant 2008, 2015 for a broader argument to that same effect). Soneryd articulates two kinds of reflexivity, a bureaucratic

kind aiming to control and a Wynne-kind calling for the opening up of issues. If we know Wynne-style reflexivity is habitually deployed in STS as a normative standard, does that not render nonsense Chilvers and Kearnes' denunciation of importing standards?

Selin and Sadowski's (Chap 11) fascinating discussion of nanotechnology and the city (via exploration of novel forms of engagement like walking tours) further complicates Chilvers and Kearnes' relational co-production account. Selin and Sadowski begin by noting that "tending to obduracy is a neglected area of STS" (221). Using examples like nano-coating on a parking lot, wherein persistent practices of the local council ended up over-writing the intended anti-heat-sink effect of the nano-coat (228), Selin and Sadowski flag the need to attend to both "complex, dynamic patterns" and those that are "immobile and stable" (218). Yet Chilvers and Kearnes' obsessive emphasis upon performative enactment and distrust of prior theorizing leaves a relational co-production account theoretically privileging emergent over obdurate practices. Selin and Sadowski rightly worry that "our political commitments to contingency and democratic intervention" can blind us to "the staying power and influence of sociotechnical systems" (231). It seems to this reader at least that Selin and Sadowski could be referring to relational co-production accounts when they note some accounts "cast as deterministic" anything that speaks against "wide-open possibilities" (231).

It is almost last drinks, so where are Chilvers and Kearnes now? Whereas they began the book saying their account was "grounded in" and "inspired by" Jasanoff's co-production idiom (13), they end the book by announcing they would like to "move beyond … co-productionist studies of participation" (263). Well that party did not last long. Like drinker's remorse, Chilvers and Kearnes are astute enough to capture a tension in the book itself: between the interpretive and the analytic, or between the "situated pragmatics of participation *as it is* in-the-making" and "more normative concerns with what participation *could and should* be" (264). Chilvers and Kearnes now relinquish their opposition to *both* affirmative and critical discourses by *importing* a new standard with which to *critically* score public participation, saying it needs to be "remade in ways that are more cosmopolitan, reflexive, responsible and pluralist" (262). I share this "constructively critical project" (263) with Chilvers and Kearnes, but I suggest the route forward for their good intentions lies in co-opting (like-minded) political theory rather than derisively caricaturing all of it just to make a little breathing room for the co-production idiom. For instance, the classical political theorist Robert Dahl (1998) is Chilvers and Kearnes' kindred spirit, evident when Dahl specified criteria for democratic processes while admitting even unattainable ideals could form serviceable standards "for shaping and reshaping concrete arrangements" (37-38, 42). Chilvers and Kearnes are eminently capable of continuing that classic tradition if they are prepared to adopt a more circumspect attitude toward social theorizing, valuing the descriptive richness provided by Jasanoff's co-production idiom but admitting the import of their own implicit intuition that prior demarcations and standards can be relative not just absolute. If they do decide to venture out on their own theoretical path it is the idiom they need to move beyond, per their own admission, not convenient shibboleths like residual realism. The first port of call *for their interests* is probably Emirbayer's (1997) 'relational sociology' and his eloquent discussion of the choice between substantialism and relationism. Moreover, it will probably pay to at least grapple with Estlund's (2008) warning about the way procedurally-focused accounts of public participation can never really escape procedure-independent standards. They might also explain why they have no need to tackle doubts about the utility of participation *in principle* not just *in practice* (Brennan 2016).

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