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Participatory politics and education policy reform: publics and histories

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ABSTRACT

In this theoretical article, we respond to a common education policy discourse that represents community participation in educational policy-making as an essentially rational solution to policy problems and as inherently progressive and democratic. We propose that conceptualising participatory politics as ‘publics’ challenges this discourse and provides new openings for understanding community participation in education policy reform as modes of worldmaking. Historicising the participative turn within the key decades of the 1970s and 1980s, we argue that mobilisations of participatory politics in education reform are complicated by the existence of participatory reactionary or conservative politics and by participatory politics that are either fleeting and unsuccessful, or exceed or refuse the sovereignty of the liberal democratic state. We propose that working with the theories of the publics can enable a richer understanding of the history of neoliberal education policy reform and of present and future aspirations for participatory education policy practices.

KEYWORDS

Publics; counter publics;
participatory politics;
education policy

Introduction

In this theoretical article, we respond to a common education policy discourse that represents community participation in educational policy-making as not only a rationally desirable solution to certain policy problems but also as inherently progressive and democratic. Historicising the participative turn within the key decades of the 1970s and 1980s, we examine how mobilisations of the notion of ‘participation’ in education reform are complicated first, by the existence of participatory reactionary or conservative politics, and second, by forms of participatory politics that are either fleeting and unsuccessful, or exceed or refuse the sovereignty of the liberal democratic state.

Developing upon Michael Warner’s and Nancy Fraser’s theorisations of publics and counterpublics, we consider what kind of openings a conceptualisation of participatory politics as publics offers the field of educational policy research. In doing so we contribute a novel engagement with Warner’s work – emanating from queer politics and activism –

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for the field of education policy research. We also bring Warner's work into conversation with Fraser's theorisations of the public which, in comparison to her theory of justice, has considerably less scholarly attention in educational research. We argue that thinking with the publics supports a set of understandings that look beyond the more obvious pathways from political aims to policy outcomes, both by decentring the state and by paying attention to such things as affect, sociality, and worldmaking. We propose that such an approach can enable richer contemporary understandings of the history of neoliberal policy reform and the present and future aspirations for participatory education policy reform.

The paper's engagement with participatory politics emerged from our historical research on community organising and participatory citizenship in education policy in 1970s–1980s Australia. As an idea (and practice) that took a certain hold and shape in the 1970s and 1980s, participatory politics has been imagined as a part of a contemporary progressive toolkit that seeks to interrupt or remediate the seemingly relentless neoliberal reform and anti-progressive, anti-diversity, neo-conservative interventions into education. The ethos of participation is a central focus of our project, which aims to chart the different forms of community activism surrounding education policy reform during this period. In approaching this research methodologically and conceptually, however, we have been confronted with limitations in the common 'rise' (1970s) and 'fall' (1980s and 1990s) narrative of participatory politics.

In what follows, first, we briefly historicise the participative turn in relation to the key decades of the 1970s and 1980s. Our aim in doing so is to position the ethos of participation in the particular context of an aspiration for the progressive, democratic, and rational development of the modern nation state that was so central to this period. We then turn primarily to Warner's conceptualisation of publics as a means to theoretically recast the discourse and practice of participatory politics, also bringing it into conversation with Fraser's theory of publics and counterpublics. Here, we address two problematics that challenge the presumptive progressive narrative of participatory politics, highlighting contemporaneous forms of community activism from the 1970s and 1980s that disrupt the common ideal of the worth of participation, namely the presence of (1) participatory conservative politics; and (2) politics that refuse the state, that particularly highlight the limitations of conceptions of a modern progressive inclusive state in the context of First Nations' experiences of the settler state. Finally, we reflect on how conceptualising participatory politics as publics provides new openings for educational research and for contemporary challenges surrounding policy reform, the aim of participation, and populist rejections of the bureaucratic state.

The persistent ideal of participatory politics in policy reform

The decades of the 1970s and 1980s are not only foundational to an assembly of contemporary participatory structures and practices but also, occurring within living memory, are key to the contemporary conceptualising of virtuous and progressive participatory arrangements and possibilities. Participatory activity, and the ways in which different kinds of states were shaped and reshaped by it, was driven by a range of circumstances and issues internationally across the 1970s. Fischer (2000) locates the 'impulse for more participation' (p. 112) in European liberal democracies as 'arising from the new social

movements of the '60s and '70s, where a convergence of environmental, feminist and civil rights concerns stressed the importance of communal decision-making and consensus' (p. 119). Publications like Pateman's (1970) *Participation and democratic theory* and Freire's (1970/2017) *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (published in English in 1970) are leading examples of an international flow of rationales, templates and terminologies for participatory action.

Reflecting on the 1970s and 1980s, Yeatman (1990) described this period as the democratic-participative era in Australian public administration (see also Goodwin & Phillips, 2015; Painter, 1992). Governments developed new mechanisms to enable citizen participation and community-based activity of this period has been theorised as central to developments in the Australian welfare state and Australian public administration, and to contemporary community development and political participation ideals (e.g. see Meagher & Goodwin, 2015; Sawyer, 2002). The women's movement, broadly understood, and Indigenous calls for self-determination were important forces in transforming and challenging meanings and practices of participation across their movements and in their demands of the state (e.g. see Blackmore, 1999; Curthoys, 1996; Gaskell, 2008; Lake, 1999; Rademaker & Rowse, 2020; Thomas, 2021). For example, some feminist conceptions of active citizenship drew attention to the narrowness and exclusivity of constructions of political participation as limited to voting or holding political office and stressed the importance of participation in the politics of everyday life, arguing for ways to extend opportunities for women to be involved in the decisions that affect them personally (e.g. see Arrow, 2019; Lister, 2012). In addition, Indigenous calls for self-determination and community control were part of long-term Indigenous resistance and protest movements asserting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' rights to land, culture, political power, and autonomy: to Indigenous sovereignty (Banbuy, McMillan, & Williams, 1991; Behrendt, 2003; Briggs, 2022; Herring & Spangaro, 2019; Lowe, Coombs, & Goodwin, 2024).

Conceptualisations of participatory politics were clearly connected with the desire for policy reform and the possibilities for progressive aims being met by the state. With a central focus on power, voice and inequality, vibrant forms of participatory politics surrounded, encouraged, fought for, and created the conditions of possibility for key education policy reforms. An exemplary case in Australia is the National Disadvantaged Schools Program, instigated in the early 1970s, which Connell, White, and Johnston (1992) described as a product of young teacher activists who 'sought to mobilise the school's 'community' to improve the local educational offerings' (p. 449). They explain –

Its activists felt themselves part of a movement to break down the over-centralised, over-controlled school systems inherited from Australia's colonial past. In 'community' they found an alternative source of authority, or at least legitimation. (p. 449)

Responding to, and spurred on by, openings for participation in the bureaucratic state led particularly by the short-lived progressive Labor Whitlam government, participatory movements in the 1970s both challenged state bureaucracy *and* centred it through the expectation that state institutions would be receptive to participatory practices and demands.

Importantly, the period of the 1970s and 1980s is central to the memorialisation of progressive politics and its relationship to participatory politics and policy reform. Namely, the 1970s is represented as a space and time of possibility that was increasingly retracted

by the end of the 1980s and into the 1990s and 2000s. For instance, Connell (2002), who is a crucial interpreter of this history, reflects on this period:

Though it seems utopian in current political circumstances, a participatory process of educational policy development is truly important. The problems of educational inequality are nationwide (ultimately, of course, global), and require inter-system agreements. Yet social agreements need to be reached through a wide process of consultation, which has not been the case with most ministerial pacts on education in recent years, and is at odds with the market agenda in education. (p. 326)

Thus, the seemingly democratic versions of participation of the 1970s are often characterised as being co-opted and transformed into new forms of governmental accountability and responsibility from the 1980s and into the 1990s (see Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005). In this analysis, economic rationalism of the 1980s and 1990s and neoliberal rule is understood to have incorporated participation into the governmental practices of individualised responsibility, accountability, and the concurrent strategies for shrinking the responsibility of the state (Bottrell & Goodwin, 2011; Campbell & Proctor, 2014; Newman, 2005; Rose, 2000). Such explanations have been crucial in making sense of significant historical shifts, but they are also often contextualised by the living memory of researchers of this period, which support the kind of 'rise and fall' narrative that we have found limiting. This narrative tends to imply a purer version of participatory politics steeped in presumed progressive politics and a progressive arc of state reform interrupted by economic rationalism and then neoliberalism (Gerrard, 2015).

In the contemporary context, both within scholarly literature and policy reform, notions and practices of participation are now a solidified central anchor for new versions of citizenship and policy reform processes (albeit reconstituted and rearticulated) into the present day (Beresford, 2016; Mendes, 2019). Participation has become normalised anew within diverse contemporary international policy prerogatives: from Third Way and The Big Society aspirations of the turn of the twenty-first century to current Participatory Co-design and Co-production imperatives stated commitments to citizen involvement in policy reform and in public services is a policy stable across bipartisan politics, though of course with differing political intentions and levels of resourcing (Farr, 2018; Fawcett, Goodwin, Meagher, & Phillips, 2009). This is certainly true in education whereby a range of policy and practice reforms – such as public school autonomy and school choice are often presented as productive forms of citizen participation (e.g. see Blackmore et al., 2023; Campbell, Proctor, & Sherington, 2009; Gerrard & Savage, 2023).

As we discuss below, we propose that new insights can be gained by a focus on forms of participation that could be considered exceptions or marginal to the main 'rise and fall' trajectory. We argue that the conceptualisation of publics tracks attention on the existence of forms of participatory politics that are not progressive or democratic in intent *and* on the foundational limitations of the state as appropriately responding and interpreting participatory politics, particularly in the context of the settler colonial state of Australia.

Participatory politics as publics

In what follows we work through a conceptualisation of participatory politics as publics. In arguing that participatory politics are usefully understood as publics, it is important to

note from the outset that we are not working with conceptualisations of *the* public sphere (in the Habermasian sense). Rather than attempt to understand *the* public as a kind of 'social totality' (however diverse and inclusive), we purposefully work with the plural term *publics* to directly indicate particularity and multiplicity. To do so, we work with theorists (Fraser, 1990; Warner, 2002) who address the multiple, converging and diverging public practices *and* multiplicity in the meanings of participation and politics. Thus, this conceptualisation is not simply an attempt to empirically identify the diversity of practices, it also opens up the very concept of participatory politics as contested and diversely interpreted. Conceptualised in this way it is possible to argue that participatory politics denotes multiple, converging and diverging meanings and practices which cohere in some way around the announcement (and address) of an 'engaged polis'.

According to Warner (2002), the publics are not simply the 'sum of persons who happen to exist' (p. 51), or a series of rationally configured deliberations. Rather publics are rhetorically and culturally mediated forms that are *both* empirical and notional. This goes beyond classical Habermasian conceptions of the public sphere cohered by the so-called radical inclusivity of rational discourse of individuals coming together to create the 'public body'. In contrast, this conception suggests participatory politics publics are constituted by discourses that are affectively charged and expressed and which gesture towards other possible ways of being, i.e. they are worldmaking. Warner's understanding of publics as worldmaking emerges in part from his reflections on queer culture and practice. Thinking with the dynamic forms of queer existence, Warner postulates that publics are produced through their rhetorical – and discursive – articulations which imbue their activities, identities, affectivities, relations, and cultures. Warner (2002) argues that the discursive basis of publics is central, suggesting that publics exist 'by virtue of being addressed' (p. 50). As such, publics create relations among strangers, that 'might be peculiarly indirect and unspecifiable', but which are loosely cohered through the discursive articulation of the public (p. 56). Accordingly, we suggest that participatory politics create discourses, practices, experiences and world-creating intentions in their articulation (see James, Barin, Putnam, & Warner, 2020).

Understood as publics, participatory politics becomes more widely conceived as a social space that is deeply invested in the creation of worlds through a sometimes intangible relationship of strangers: strangers (including those merely being attentive) are part of the formation of commonality through the public. As put by Warner (2002) –

all discourse or performance addressed to a public must characterise the world in which it attempts to circulate, projecting for that world a concrete and liveable shape, and attempting to realize that world through address. (p. 81)

This is poetic in that it extends beyond rational-critical dialogue (ala Habermas) to the corporeal, affective, and relational. In the two sections that follow, we continue this conceptualisation of participatory politics as publics through a consideration of two tensions or challenges in its attachments to the liberal democratic imaginary, bringing Fraser's theory into conversation with Warner's. Thinking with theories of publics and counterpublics, we examine two key problematics that point to the need for a wider understanding of participatory politics. Our argument suggests that that there is not one specific mode of conduct in order to be *in* a public (or engaging in participatory politics), which

significantly widens the notion of participatory politics and its presumed progressive and democratic normative basis.

1 Anti-progressive participation: conservatism and counterpublics

As noted above, participatory politics is often represented as having an underlying inherent commitment to democracy and inclusion, and thus has been aligned with movements for equity and justice, and of the marginalised. In other words, a base presumption of participatory politics is the benefit of participation, the production of democratic processes, and a commitment to the voices and experiences of the marginalised and oppressed (e.g. Cornwall & Coelho, 2007). Indeed, even in accounts of publics that address multiplicity, the focus is brought to marginalised progressive politics thereby extending and reinforcing the presumptive progressivism. This presumption obfuscates the existence of conservative grassroots forces, that invoke and employ participatory methods.

For instance, in one of the most influential critiques of Habermas' theory of the public sphere, Fraser (1990) puts forward the notion of counterpublics as a means to demonstrate the ways in which *the* (rationally configured deliberative) public sphere is not in actuality 'inclusive'. Drawing on feminist activism, Fraser argues for the need to conceptualise counterpublics; alternative publics created by 'subordinated social groups' as a means to 'invent and circulate counterdiscourses' and to 'formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs' (p. 67). Warner (2002) extends (and challenges) this conceptualisation, suggesting Fraser's articulation 'sounds the classically Habermasian description of rational-critical publics with the word *oppositional* inserted' (p. 85). In distinction, Warner argues counterpublics are not just publics 'comprising subalterns with a reform program', but are publics that 'maintains at some level, conscious or not, an awareness of its subordinate status' (p. 85). He continues, 'The cultural horizon against which it marks itself off is not just a general or wider public, but a dominant one' (p. 86).

We argue, however, that in articulating counterpublics as marginalised Warner moves towards, but does not quite address, the ways in which 'marginality' and 'dominant' are discursively and ideologically projected into public life. What and who is marginal or dominant is contested *through* the articulation of the publics. This is clear in the key decades of the 1970s and 1980s. For instance, these decades were central to the emergence and solidification of a range of religious conservative publics that understood *themselves* as marginalised and oppressed as they fought the rising tide of humanist, secular progressivism (Gerrard, 2023; Gerrard & Proctor, 2022; see also Barnes, Myers, & Knight, 2023; Mclvor, 2019; Thimsen, 2017). The emergence of religiously conservative parent rights groups is one such example. Rona Joyner in the suburbs of Brisbane Queensland, for instance, organised a conservative offensive against progressive school curriculum during the 1970s and 1980s in large part through the publication of her newsletter, ostensibly penned from her kitchen table – STOP & CARE (*Society to Outlaw Pornography & Campaign Against Regressive Education*) (see Gerrard & Proctor, 2022). Similarly, lesser-known Diane Teasedale started her own newsletter in 1980, *Alert*, and the associated organisation, the Concerned Parents Association in Geelong, Victoria. As with Joyner, Teasedale and *Alert* also rallied against contemporaneous curriculum reform, and also

projected their plight as existing on the margins, sidelined by education bureaucrats and academics.

Such movements used many of the same tactics as progressive movements, including an appeal to the grassroots, the common person, and consciousness raising techniques. Joyner's newsletter, for instance, included instructions and templates for how readers could write to their parliamentarians or make submissions to public inquiries (Gerrard & Proctor, 2022). In many cases, their approach to participatory politics was arguably qualitatively indistinguishable from progressive movements, except for their ideological basis that often runs against what their opponents would characterise as a democratic goal or sentiment. As we have explored elsewhere (Gerrard & Proctor, 2022), these conservative mobilisations used letter writing, petitions, meetings, seminars and protests, all mirroring the tactics of progressivism and rhetorically presenting themselves as on the outside of power. It is clear that conservative activism of the 1970s and 1980s did indeed embrace an ideological commitment to the democratic right to participation, albeit in the struggle for anti-progressivism.

However, whilst there is some scholarly attention on conservatism in education (e.g. Apple, 2006; Barnes et al., 2023; Maddox, 2014; Rodwell, 2021; Symes & Gulson, 2008), there is often a hesitancy to understand these forms of activism as a form of participatory politics. For instance, contemporaneous treatments of Rona Joyner emphasises her powerful political connections and almost as a matter of principle disavow any popular support she claimed (e.g. Freeland, 1979). Of course, it is true that some figures like Joyner were networked into conservative dominant politics – in her case, for instance, her friendly relations with Flo Bjelke Peterson and her husband Joh, the Queensland Premier. However, solely positioning her work in the shadow of more elite and formal modes of politics overlooks the social networks, cultural practices, and discursive politics that were also so central to her work.

For us, this presents both methodological and conceptual challenges, suggesting the need for the normative presumptions held in the conceptualisations of, and research on, participatory politics to be unsettled. The persistent presence of conservative participatory politics has serious and thus far unexplored repercussions for the implied progressive democratic impulse of participatory politics. It suggests that participatory politics and the use of public activism is a strategy rather than a normatively democratic practice. In keeping with our analysis here, recent US-based scholarship has highlighted participatory conservative movements. For instance, reflecting on the oppositional politics of 'Trumpism' that pitted itself as marginalised and fighting against the establishment, Thimsen (2017) reflects 'The Trumpian counterpublic may have dissented against the dominant model of campaign finance, but it did not foster greater democracy' (p. 2). The question arises, if participatory politics argue against democracy and inclusion, is it participatory? Bracketing such movements out of an analysis of participatory politics closes off consideration of the rhetorical, performative and multifarious ways in which participation is understood and practised as a political ideal and modality.

2 Participatory politics and the state: refusal and reform dead-ends

Participatory politics is often understood in relation to the kinds of reforms of the state it seeks. Particularly in the field of education – which is characterised by significant policy

activity, intensive state interest, and formal institutions funded by the state – it is perhaps understandable that participatory politics are strongly aligned with policy reform. This means, however, that much of what occurs in participatory politics as publics can be missed: the fleeting and unsuccessful, or that which refuses the logics, norms and laws of the state, can be understood as relatively insignificant and the rich forms of sociality that characterise participatory politics overlooked in favour of understanding impact and influence. This is both a methodological and conceptual challenge. The fleeting and ephemeral are far harder to ‘capture’ in the archive, as is the activity of those who do not create a conventional paper trail of documents such as submissions to public inquiries.

Alignment to the state is highlighted by Warner (2002) in his attempt to think through how publics are rendered intelligible. He writes, ‘... as things stand now, it might be that the only way a public is able to act is through its imaginary coupling with the state’ (p. 89). He writes –

This is one of the things that happen when alternative publics are cast as social movements – they acquire agency in relation to the state. They enter the temporality of politics and adapt themselves to the performatives of rational-critical discourse. For many counterpublics, to do so is to cede the original hope of transforming, not just policy, but the space of public life itself. (p. 89)

For Fraser too, her attempt to identify multiplicity *and* intelligibility is central to her conceptualisation of counter-publics. Building on this, Squires’ (2002) typological account of Black publics, for instance, is one attempt to address the multiple purposes of publics. Squires’ identification of ‘enclave’, ‘counterpublic’ and ‘satellite’ publics aims to address how alternative publics can never simply ‘address’ the state in the demand for change, but that such an address is necessarily – as Warner and Fraser also suggest – interpellated into the poetic act of world-making.

Here, however, we are less concerned with such typological framings as we are with a better understanding of how the relationship between the state and participatory politics, characterised in the field of education by intensive policy reform and state interest in education, makes some forms of politics visible and valued, and others as trivial or unrecognised in education (see also Gerrard, 2015). On the one hand, a wider conceptualisation of participatory politics brings analytic attention to forms of community activism and activity that fail in their aspiration for policy change. On the other hand, it also sheds insight into forms of politics that may strategically engage in policy reform, but which are steeped in a politics that exceeds the logic of the state.

For instance, in the context of settler colonialism the 1970s and 1980s politics of Indigenous self-determination are particularly significant (see Rademaker & Rowse, 2020). Foundational acts of participatory politics of this time– the establishment of self-determined schools (e.g. Thomas, 2023), or the formation of the Tent Embassy (Foley, Schaap, & Howell, 2013; Iveson, 2017) (to name just two examples) – are in part an engagement with the state, but also extend well beyond. For instance, formed in 1972 the Aboriginal Tent Embassy occupied (and still does) the lawn outside the Australian parliament, demanding Indigenous land rights, self-determination and sovereignty. These demands were put upon the state, but ultimately they also highlighted the limits of the settler state and its capacity to reconcile the (past, present and ongoing) acts of colonisation. Indeed, its power lay in its creation of a form of politics that was explicitly outside

of the constitutional sovereignty of the settler state (see Muldoon & Schaap, 2013). Reflecting on the significance of the Tent Embassy, Munanjali and Birra-Gubba scholar Watson (2013) writes –

Grass-roots struggles empower our people to name the invasion that our ancestors lived and the occupation that we continue to endure, and in the process, subvert the benign myth of settlement and the erasure of Aboriginal sovereignty. (p. 284)

She continues, suggesting that the Tent Embassy gave ‘the ability to imagine a future beyond colonisation’ (p. 284)

As Kahnawake Mohawk scholar Simpson (2017; 2014) argues, in many cases forms of Indigenous life and action refuse the legitimacy of the settler state, turning away from the kinds of participation and inclusion offered by the state. This refusal is based on the ways in which Indigenous existence and sovereignty itself have been and is denied and yet persists. Munanjali and South Sea Islander scholar Watego (2021) put it this way, ‘We occupy a social world that refuses to see our humanity, and not because it has yet to discover it, but because its very existence is founded upon our violent erasure’ (p. 116). Such forms of activism, organising and thinking cannot be captured by the liberal democratic imaginary, its formations of participatory politics, and its heralding of progressive reforms. Rather, the politics of these forms of publics orient towards what Warner describes as ‘world making’ – effectively charged publics that create ways of being, knowing, and connecting that extend well beyond the limits of the modern democratic liberal state and its possible reforms.

The foundational exclusion of Indigenous people and the ways in which policy has been – and is – done to Indigenous communities (Nakata & Maddison, 2019) suggests that the ideals of participatory politics are built upon highly constrained understandings and practices. Reckoning with policy making in a settler colonial context necessarily, therefore, involves reckoning with the ways in which the democratic imaginary has not just been thwarted by, but based in, colonial inhumanity that has long demonstrated the limit points of participatory politics in policy reform. To put it plainly, the state – its institutions and its policies (and we would argue its liberal democratic imaginary) – ‘only exists in relation to its dispossession of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders’ (Nakata & Maddison, p. 409). Thus, contemporary rearticulations of participation in neo-liberal or managerial forms must be understood as an extension of settler colonialism (Strakosch, 2019; Tuck, 2014).

Thus, these forms of participatory politics that refuse alignment and capture by the state have important repercussions for how participatory politics are imagined and understood as progressive democratic practices. They immediately suggest the need to ask what are the exclusions in accounts of participatory politics that tie community activism too tightly to the success of reforms or their intelligibility in the public and political spheres. In a settler state such as Australia, how are the logics of colonialism embedded within – even seeming ‘progressive’ – declarations of participatory politics, and how does this render other forms of publics as relevant or even knowable and seeable?

Conclusion

In this paper we began by contextualising the import of participatory politics more generally, and for the field of education more specifically. We grounded our discussion of

'participatory politics' in the 1970s and 1980s, two crucial decades in the formation of contemporary education policy arrangements and practices. We argued that in the contemporary context, participatory politics has become a kind of 'known object': a seemingly recognisable form of public engagement linked to commitments to equity and justice, and mourned in the face of neoliberal forms of governmentality that are seen to have co-opted and thwarted its intent. In contrast, we suggest that whilst the co-option and thwarting of participatory politics, and its subsequent rearticulation as forms of responsibilised neoliberal governance is historically important, there are tensions *within* the notions and practices of participatory politics that reveal deep fissures in the liberal democratic imaginary of participation itself.

Second, we worked with the concepts of publics and counterpublics as a means by which to rethink participatory politics as diverse, worldmaking, affective and discursive publics, and this enabled us to incorporate participatory reactionaries and the limitations of state connectedness and authority into our analysis. Thinking with cultural and political theorists such as Michael Warner and Nancy Fraser, who in different ways have challenged older Habermasian attachments to 'the' public sphere, has enabled us to consider participatory politics *as* publics to reflect upon two important dimensions of participatory practice that appear to sit on the margins in the conventional conceptualisations of participatory politics that we have encountered in our research. These were first, the existence of participatory forms of conservative and reactionary activism, and second, forms or movements that were either fleeting and (apparently) unsuccessful, or exceeded or refused the sovereignty of the liberal democratic state. We argued that these dimensions of participation are not merely asides, exceptions or cul-de-sacs. Rather, they need to be rendered central to any conceptual and empirical representation of participatory politics.

Our aim is to generate scholarly debate on the intersections of participatory social movements, democracy, and education policy reform in ways that trouble redemptive narratives of the possible return of social democratic policy and more buoyant narratives of market-based policy innovation in equal measure. In a field so dominated by the influence of the state (given the importance of the state in the funding, regulation, and surveillance of formal education) *and* hopes for progressive transformation, we see the need for further work that recognises multiple forms of participation that may point to different means and ends. Importantly, the context from which this paper has emerged matters: our thinking is grounded in the political context of the settler colony of Australia, and our argument is strongly influenced by scholarship that seeks to examine the question of legitimacy that lies at the heart of liberal democratic settler nation states, particularly in addressing Indigenous challenges to policy-as-usual. This, we suggest, has implications not only for settler colonies but for broader liberal democratic ideals transnationally. Working with the concept of 'publics' (e.g. Fraser, 1990; Warner, 2002) has enabled us to disrupt the taken-for-granted coupling that is often made between participatory politics and progressive education policy reform, and trouble a kind of overly instrumental reading of participatory activity that focuses only on explicit policy aims and outcomes, sidelining the affective and worldmaking activities of the people and groups who constitute the 'participants'; and in doing so decouple participatory politics from 'the yardstick of liberal inclusion' (Strakosch, 2019, p. 6).

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