

Material Participation

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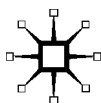
Material Participation

Technology, the Environment
and Everyday Publics

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I once found a phrase, written on a bench in a train station, which said something along the lines of 'you are at home there where you are understood'. At the time, I found myself agreeing, and felt very fortunate that I could. But more recently I have also come to appreciate the daily reminders that mutual understanding is not automatic.

Preface

This book is located at the intersection of different fields of research and it seems helpful to clarify this at the outset. The analysis presented here stages an encounter between the interdisciplinary field of science and technology studies (STS) and political theory, as it develops an account of the role of technologies, settings and objects in the performance of public participation, and more particularly, a form of engagement I call 'material participation'. The exchange between STS and political theory was the subject of my doctoral dissertation, and since then I have explored it further in articles, book chapters, and in discussions with a growing number of people with an interest in the connections between science, technology, politics, the environment and democracy.

This encounter between political theory and STS is considered timely by people approaching it from both sides, though arguably for different reasons. STS has taken an interest in public participation in science and technology since its very inception. But in recent years the need has arisen for a more critical interrogation of this phenomenon, to complement the arguments in support of participation which have been customary in this field. STS has long been an advocate of greater public involvement with science and technology, and, ironically, for this very reason it was quite unprepared for the rise to prominence of participatory approaches in these areas in recent decades, as signalled by catchwords like citizen science, participatory design and the democratic governance of innovation.

As an advocate of democracy, STS had relied on 'off-the-shelf' ideals of public participation, derived mainly from deliberative and post-Marxist political theory. But it is increasingly clear that the participatory turn in science, technology and the environment requires a much broader theoretical and empirical reconsideration of the phenomenon. Those of us in STS taking up this project were fortunate to find interested interlocutors in political theory, where there is increasing interest in theorizing and interrogating the role of nature, matter and non-humans in politics and democracy. As a consequence, the investigation of the connections between science, technology, nature and democracy today takes the form of, if not a shared undertaking, then at least one enlivened and strengthened by exchange.

I should also mention a second, yet more complex, encounter that informs my attempt to re-work the idea of participation in this book, which has to do with the opportunities offered in the United Kingdom to STS, and to a particular approach developed in this field to which I am especially indebted, actor-network theory. In this country, there exist strong links between STS and the disciplines of sociology and geography, and this allows for exchanges between STS and related approaches developed in these disciplines for the study of science, technology and politics. These exchanges have been especially productive, if not always without tension, with critical studies of government and governance inspired by the work of Michel Foucault. What I will call in the pages that follow a 'device-centred perspective' on participation is informed by this second exchange as well.

Different crossovers between disparate fields of research and theory, then, inform the wider project of this book: to move from the study of public participation in science and technology to the analysis of technologies, settings and objects of participation. It would have been nice to be able to make a more 'symmetrical' claim, and to suggest a move to the study of the Science and Technology of Participation, or STOP, to offer the type of acronym that was in vogue in STS in the 1980s and 1990s. But the main focus of this book is on technologies of engagement, leaving the issue of the science of participation for another time and another place, and, I hope, another set of encounters.