Melissa Brough, **Youth Power in Precarious Times: Reimagining Civic Participation**, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020, 216 pp., $94.05 (hardcover), $24.95 (paperback).

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Youth cultures and civic engagement have been widely researched topics for past decades in many countries worldwide, with several concerns. Regardless, there is still an obvious lack of knowledge concerning particular contexts when it comes to youth participation. This is especially the case in countries in the Global South or other places that are usually ignored by the literature as a consequence of their peripheral status within the hegemonic scientific community of the Global North. **Youth Power in Precarious Times**, by Melissa Brough, is a contribution to overcome this lack by focusing on the case study of youth participation in the city of Medellín, Colombia. Although the book is dedicated to a particular city during a given period of time, its theoretical and empirical relevance goes far beyond the specific case study chosen.
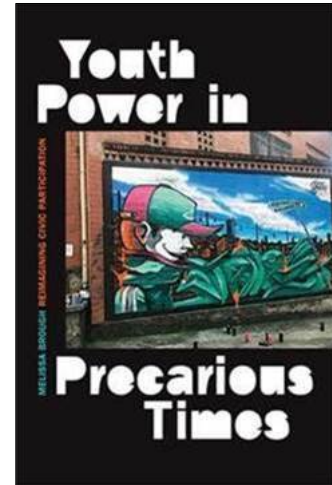
The main objective of this work is to analyze youth participatory practices in a context characterized by remarkable precariousness and violence. To do so, the author carried out a qualitative research project, mainly ethnographic, combining multiple methods of observation with young people from marginalized neighborhoods of Medellín, conducted between 2010–2011, but covering a larger period of time (2004–2011). This was a particular period in which the city of Medellín underwent a significant decrease in violence—from paramilitary activities to gang violence connected to narcotrafficking—as well as a recuperation of its image as a "participatory city" due to local government initiatives combined with marketing.

One of the virtues of this book relies on its ability to shed light over a complex and socially charged reality without falling into a "politically correct" discourse that either mitigates the problems being studied or tries to present simple solutions to overcome them. Brough sets out to "rehabilitate" the concept of participation, not only from an analytical point of view, but also from a practical one as a way to promoting social justice. Her concern is not with participation itself but with youth's key role in social change or, as it is mentioned, with "our ability to understand and better support youth engagement in public life today, and the individual and societal benefits of doing so effectively" (p. 3).

In order to grasp youth's pivotal role in rehabilitating Medellín's "public life," the author proposes an "ecological approach" to participation translated into the concept of "polycultural civics," which is a metaphor

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borrowed from agriculture to understand the coexistence between multiple species or crops in the same environment. In this case, the coexistence between youth grassroots movements and institutional initiatives from local government. This proposal has the merit of allowing us to go beyond binary thinking that opposes "noninstitutional" forms of participation to "institutional" ones. But with that, it raises the problem of how different social actors coexist throughout time under particular circumstances.

The book is organized into five chapters, each one dealing with a particular development of the main argument. The introduction presents the history of Medellín, offering a background for understanding the remaining chapters. This contextualization is particularly useful to readers not familiar with Medellín's history or the intricacies of the power relations and violence culture described. Finally, it presents an informative outline of the chapters ahead, summarizing the main arguments and conceptual frameworks.

The first chapter, "From Participation to Polycultural Civics," theoretically frames the book. One of the merits of this debate is to introduce literature from South American countries in addition to hegemonic Anglo-American references. It starts with a debate about the limits of the concept of participation (with an emphasis on participatory communication and digital media) introducing two conceptual alternatives: "participatory public culture" and "polycultural civics." These concepts are part of an "ecological" way of thinking about participation, in which binary oppositions are eroded. In its ideal form, "participatory public culture" implies horizontal decision making, dialogical communication with low barriers to participation, and valuing the voices of nonhegemonic groups (p. 31). Among other proposals, Brough adapts Michel de Certeau's distinction between "tactics" and "strategies" to analyze different practices and discourses of participation discussed throughout the book. Grassroots movements are typically characterized by their "tactics" (i.e., noninstitutional and contrahegemonic practices and discourses) while institutional actors are typically characterized by their "strategies" (i.e., institutional and hegemonic practices and discourses). An interesting aspect of this distinction is that it operates as a heuristic device that helps in understanding and analyzing specific cases but is not entirely fixed. As mentioned, the tactics of grassroots movements may feed institutional activities, just as the latter may provide resources for grassroots movements practices.

Chapter 2, "Digitizing the Tools of Engagement," focuses on the practices and spaces of participatory culture with emphasis on digital platforms. Again, the author deals with the tensions between institutional strategies of city authorities and grassroots movements tactics. Two initiatives are examined: "Medellín Digital," which describes an official program that offers free access points to the Internet in public locations; and "Comuna Digital," a grassroots initiative aiming at promoting horizontal communication and participation. If the first case study intends to promote digital inclusion based on access and acquiring basic skills, the second case tends to address actual participatory practices. As it is stressed, there is a risk of falling into a techno-utopian rhetoric of participation in which access and use is equated to participation, neglecting the reasons or purposes surrounding the multiplicity of digital media uses by different people. Even if technological design or digital infrastructure are not sufficient conditions to determine the course of participation, the above initiatives are prone to influence it in a certain way. The chapter offers a critical assessment of both initiatives by pointing out that neither of them may be regarded as a perfect solution to the problem of public participation.

Chapter 3, "'We Think about the City Differently,'" concerns grassroots movements dedicated to cultural practices as a form of participation. More precisely, it focuses on the cultural practices of two *colectivos*

(collectives), *La Red de Hip Hop La Elite*—the Elite Hip Hop Network—and *Son Batá*, comprised of youth from one of the poorest neighborhoods of Medellín most stigmatized by violence, Comuna 13 (Subdistrict 13). Both collectives reclaim public space through the use of different "tactics" of reterritorialization. La Elite—a collective managed by youth with institutional support—organizes concerts, hip-hop festivals, workshops and also a "popular school" (inspired by the "Theater of the Oppressed") promoting nonviolence. Hip-hop is one of the most popular youth cultures in Medellín. The socioeconomic and cultural resemblance to hip-hop's origins in New York City in the 1970s, as well as other cities worldwide where it was adopted, is remarkable. This partially explains why it has been fully adapted to local reality. The other group—Son Batá—which shares the same interest in hip-hop and an advocacy for nonviolence—is located in one of the poorest and most marginalized areas of the district—known as *la periferia*—mainly inhabited by Afro-Colombian immigrants. This fact raises additional issues related to identity and citizenship, which led to particular tactics of "resignification" of their marginalized subjectivity. In the case of La Elite, existing tensions between grassroots tactics and the institutional strategies confirm that institutional and noninstitutional dimensions of participation are not always obvious but contain ambivalences that need to be managed. Additional references to other hip-hop culture contexts worldwide that show obvious similarities would have been appropriated here.

The next chapter, "Medellín, Governable and Participatory," is dedicated to the institutional practices of the city government. As mentioned, the time period studied coincided with two city administrations open to citizens' participation. This openness is a direct result of the party behind the government, *Compromiso Ciudadano* (CP), which was mainly comprised of people not usually connected to parties. CP brought members from grassroots movements to the government, contributing to bridging institutional and noninstitutional politics. One of the flags of this administration was the participatory budget (OP), which is a clear example of what the author calls "polycultural civics." Yet, it may be regarded—borrowing a Michel Foucault theory—as a form of "governmentality" since the discourses and practices of citizens help to legitimize existing power relations by participating in government's institutions. If the OP is an actual way of promoting democracy or a mechanism that creates the bureaucratic illusion of participation, this is something that remains to be entirely answered. Nevertheless, the author points out both merits and limitations of the OP, stressing that while it did not solve all participation problems of Medellín, it had obvious advantages for the population, allowing youth to exercise their own agency.

Finally, chapter 5, "Polycultural Civics in the Digital Age," critically reviews all case studies examined. Brough claims that her intention was not to present the case of Medellín as an ideal model of participation. However, there are evident "idealized" aspects in the cases presented. One might argue that the period chosen presents "perfect conditions" to observe participation, since it combines a considerable decrease in violence with a local administration favorable to citizens' participation in public life. In that sense, one might ask whether this was just a sort of "parenthesis" in Medellín's history or if the changes experienced actually made a difference. There is no definitive answer to this question. However, several postobservation comments suggest that some changes appear to have made a difference in the city's public life, while others did not flourish. The fact of the matter, as the author acknowledges, is that it is difficult to assess (and measure) the impact of particular initiatives, since some effects are only noticeable in the long term.

Overall, the book presents an interesting case study mostly unknown by the academia outside the Global South, providing a significant contribution to the debate around participation, youth, and marginalized

populations, while combining a variety of academic fields. In that sense, it may be relevant to readers with different areas of interest and backgrounds—students, academics, social workers, or anyone with policy concerns. One of the book's obvious merits lies in its resistance to binary thinking by proposing a conceptual frame that provides alternative readings about a socially complex reality characterized by obvious tensions and ambiguities between the actors involved. The author also avoids taking obvious sides in the matter, even if she does not hide her "practical" intentions when studying participatory practices.