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Toward a Unified Conceptual Framework for Participation Research

MOSHE SCHWARTZ[1]
Ben Gurion University of the Negev, Israel

HILLEL NOSSEK
Kinneret Academic College on the Sea of Galilee, Israel

Public participation has gained renewed interest amid the recent crises confronting Western democracies, yet scholarly consensus on its fundamental premises remains limited. This theoretical study reconceptualizes participation as a multidimensional communicative phenomenon by identifying its core dimensions, examining the tensions among competing theoretical traditions, and developing a unifying content-agnostic analytical framework. It contributes to participation research and communication theory in three principal ways: by mapping four paradigmatic approaches to participation; by identifying conceptual bridges that integrate these otherwise fragmented traditions; and by proposing a classificatory framework grounded in the concepts of autonomy and heteronomy. Organized around the intersecting dimensions of power asymmetries and institutionalization, the framework distinguishes four typical modes of participation and enables multidimensional comparison across diverse participatory manifestations and sociocultural settings. By moving beyond hierarchical models, disciplinary compartmentalization, and purely normative classifications, it provides a common analytical language for comparing heterogeneous participatory processes.

Keywords: public participation, theory, autonomy, heteronomy, Castoriadis, conceptual model

Despite extensive scholarship and the widespread use of the term "participation" within academic discourse, there is little agreement among scholars on its nature, definition, or application (Literat, 2016; Lutz et al., 2014). An example of this conceptual vagueness is the disparity between the ordinary, everyday

Moshe Schwartz: schmoshe@post.bgu.ac.il
Hillel Nossek: hnossek@gmail.com
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use of the signifier "participation" and the fluidity of the signified (see, e.g., Allen et al., 2014). Carpentier et al. (2019) and Yuksek and Carpentier (2019) even claimed that academic discourse on participation aspires to be all-encompassing at the risk of turning it into a floating signifier devoid of any essential meaning. Nullifying the concept's analytical value should be seen as a cautionary signal.

While various explanations have been offered for why this concept is contested (Carpentier, 2009) and remains elusive (Vitale, 2006), this theoretical article proposes agreed-upon foundations and a shared analytical research framework for the study of participation. Since concepts serve as tools for conveying and understanding complex ideas, their clarification is essential to enhance the degree of shared meaning among scholars (McLeod & Pan, 2004). In the following pages, we present four central approaches to participation, critically examine their fundamental differences while suggesting bridges across disagreements, and propose a unified conceptual framework for systematically researching, analyzing, and classifying participation.

Method for Identifying Conceptual Approaches

Given the conceptual vagueness of the field, a traditional systematic literature review reliant on search strings across digital databases is exhaustive and imprecise for theoretical mapping. Consequently, we adopted a systematic snowballing procedure (Wohlin, 2014), which is more effective for identifying broad conceptual frameworks.

The first challenge in applying this methodological approach is identifying a tentative start set of papers to begin the snowballing procedure. In cases where multiple keywords are possible (as in participation research), an alternative is to identify a seminal, highly cited article in the field and use it as a starting point. In searching for the start set, it is also important to avoid the bias inherent in searching a particular database, as diversity is important. Accordingly, our primary node was Arnstein's (1969) seminal article "A Ladder of Citizen Participation," one of the earliest, most influential, and most highly cited studies in the field of public participation, explicitly linking participation to citizen power. Using the Litmaps citation network, we searched for this concept and identified Carpentier (2016) as the most theory-driven cited article. Through horizontal network visualization, the set was expanded to include Carpentier (2011), Dahlgren (2014), and Jenkins and Carpentier (2013). These four works constituted our tentative start set, as they met the threshold of recognizing communication as an essential and intrinsic characteristic of participation and covered several paradigmatic concepts of participation.

From this core, we conducted iterative forward- and backward-reference snowballing. Each candidate article was screened to ensure it met the following three inclusion criteria:

1. It acknowledges the central role of communication in enabling and mediating participation.
2. It conceptualizes participation as a social phenomenon rather than addressing its psychological, economic, or bureaucratic aspects.
3. It examines participation as a conceptual construct, representing a broad school of thought with a distinct paradigmatic standpoint or research tradition.

The selection excluded studies on specific social spheres in which participatory processes might manifest (e.g., urban planning, environmental issues, education, art), as well as studies that used adjectives to specify the type or characteristics of participants (e.g., public participation, citizen participation). As we looked for research paradigms, we also bypassed studies that incorporate participation within a political analysis of a concrete political regime (e.g., direct democracy, Marxism/post-Marxism), on best practices for conducting participatory processes (e.g., deliberative projects), and on the problems and failures in their implementation. The iterative process continued until saturation was reached, at which point no further iterations yielded new paradigms. The final corpus comprised 60 texts, from which four overarching conceptual approaches were identified: political, sociological, political-economic, and sociotechnical.

Four Approaches to Participation

A primary distinction in participation literature is between broad social and narrower political approaches. For example, van Dijk and Hacker (2018) distinguish between civic participation, defined as a "behavior that contributes to communities or society at large," and political participation, a "behavior that contributes to the governance of society and tries to affect opinion making and decision making by political representatives and governments" (p. 50). While they suggest civic participation can underpin political participation, they argue that the former can increase independently of the latter.

To a large extent, this conceptualization aligns with the perspectives of other political scientists, such as Teorell's (2006) distinction between responsive and participatory concepts that aim to influence political decision making and a deliberative concept of collective action formation through discussion. Another example is Ekman and Amnå's (2012) distinction between political participation, which refers to the political domain, and civil participation, which refers to the civil domain and includes activities such as lifestyle-related involvement (e.g., music, environments, veganism) or activities within the community to improve conditions for particular groups (e.g., volunteering in social work and charity).

A similar yet differently articulated division is proposed by Carpentier (2011, 2016) in what he terms the sociological and political approaches. The former views participation as taking part in a collective social process aimed at representing shared beliefs and preserving collective identity. It is guided by the view that consensus and cooperation among the various elements of society must be pursued to build a strong, resilient community.

In contrast, the political approach, narrower in scope but more dominant in academic research, understands participation as related to power struggles and decision making. It conceptualizes participation as an effort to "equalize power relations between privileged and non-privileged actors in formal or informal decision-making processes" (Carpentier, 2016, p. 72). Intrinsically linked to the struggle over social power and decision making, the political approach concentrates on these core elements to assess whether participation was successful. Participation is meaningful to the extent that policy gains a broad consensus and public legitimacy (Diamond, 1993) and manipulative to the extent that it is designed to forge consent for prior government decisions (Guttman, 2007; Ryfe, 2005).

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Despite their differences, these theoretical distinctions draw a line between the broad social sphere and the more narrowly defined political sphere. Carpentier (2011) further differentiates their paradigmatic foundations: The political approach is grounded in political philosophy, democratic theories, and, in some interpretations, the critical paradigm, whereas the sociological approach is rooted in the sociological traditions of symbolic interactionism and phenomenology.

The critical political economy (CPE) tradition anchors the third conceptual approach. It embodies the principle of rebalancing power relations as a fundamental aspect of participation, but interprets power in terms of class, capital, ownership, and control over the means of production. Although the decentralized potential of new media challenges the dominance of media professionals (Benkler, 2003), the digital public sphere remains dominated mainly by capital and neoliberal logic. Within the confines of this logic, where capitalism and power mutually reinforce each other, participation should function as a form of counterpower, combining critique of material conditions and dominant discourse (Cloud, 2020).

The most determined advocate of this approach is Fuchs (2014), who argues "participation means that humans have the right and reality to be part of decisions and to govern and control the structures that affect them" (p. 57). For him, participation must be a universal political demand, coded as an absolute human rights category. Without this framing, he warns, "one could say that a dictatorship is a participatory democracy because a ruling elite is 'participating'" (Fuchs, 2014, p. 57).

The fourth approach draws on the sociotechnical paradigm and science, technology, and society (STS) studies. These scholarly traditions steer our attention toward the politics of technology and the assemblage of human agents and nonhuman artifacts. In a mediatized environment where the physical and digital constantly intersect, and the boundaries between the virtual and the material are blurred (DeNardis, 2020), technology is deeply embedded in human experience. As such, examining the interrelationships between communication structures and patterns of human interaction is crucial, as well as understanding how the affordances of communication technology facilitate or constrain human activity and shape participation (Hutchby, 2014).

This sociotechnical perspective offers valuable insights into participation research by emphasizing it as an emergent, coproduced, and co-constructed concept. The publics, issues, and procedures of participation "do not externally exist in a natural state but are actively constructed through the performance of collective participatory practices" (Chilvers & Longhurst, 2016, p. 586). Within technologies of participation, publics are made and remade, constructed, and orchestrated. For instance, Tufekci (2017) demonstrates how digital materiality shaped nonhierarchical, informal participatory conduct in protests, while Rushkoff (2013) argues that the digital media environment deconstructs conventional political discourse, promoting an alternative model of group discussion and collective action.

Clarifying and Sharpening the Differences

The four approaches, along with their main characteristics, are presented in the following table.

Table 1. Comparison of Research Approaches to Participation.

	Political	***Sociocultural***	***CPE***	***STS***
Research traditions	Political philosophy, theories of governance, theories of democracy (deliberative, participatory, direct, radical)	Symbolic interactionism, phenomenology, cultural studies, communication as culture	critical political economy, neo-Marxism, hegemony	STS, sociotechnical approaches, technology/digital affordances
How to define	Ranging from citizens directly or indirectly attempting to influence the political system (delegates or policy) and making it responsive to their will, to the equalization of social power relations, to direct self-government. Mainly with a focus on decision-making processes	Participating in collective social processes that involve negotiating shared values and preserving community relationships and cohesiveness. Focusing on an ongoing process	A universal human right to govern and control social structures and meaning production that affect human everyday life	A co-construction of humans and technology. Focusing on the assemblage of human agents and nonhuman artifacts
Major characteristics	Power realization (especially in moments of decision making), demands against power holders, and deliberation	Ritual and discursive experiences (through social networking, media events, artistic practices), creative power sharing, informal mentorship provision, and an ongoing process	Capital and corporate power, confrontation, materialistically oriented	Physical and digital convergence, technology's emancipatory force, the politics of technology
Main objectives	Empowering citizens; democratizing the social landscape; equalizing power relations; influencing decision making; improving governance; enhancing government	Representing shared beliefs, preserving collective identity, building a resilient community, negotiating shared civil imagination	Counterpower to commercial logic, dismantling big corporations' power, improving accessibility to media production, democratizing	Participation as an ontology of communication technologies

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	accountability, trustworthiness, and legitimacy		ownership structures	
Social relationships	Hierarchical top-down political power relations, social antagonism/agonism	Horizontal community relations, shared values, mutual trust, peer-to-peer support, collective intelligence	Class power relations, extreme social inequalities, human activity commodification	Technology's embeddedness into human experience, deconstruction of hierarchical structures, decentralization, networked society
Typical manifestations	Deliberative forums, citizens' assemblies, public consultations, electoral voting, party/advocacy group membership, campaign activities, protesting (demonstrations, rallies, strikes), civil disobedience. Each can be online or offline, formal or informal, parliamentary or extraparliamentary	Engaging in community activities; codesigned/coauthored artistic performances; online content creation, curation, and circulation; interacting with media texts and through social networks (e.g., fan communities), lifestyle activities (e.g., sports, environmental preservation), prosumerism	Confronting corporate power, alternative and community media, civic journalism, common network infrastructures	Alternative nonhierarchical collective actions, digital activism/ hacktivism

Although the political approach may initially appear more straightforward, the sociological approach presents a more immediate conceptual challenge. It emphasizes the importance of social interactions in constructing meanings. However, these interactions are also central to the political realm, as they cultivate social capital, civic cohesion (Putnam, 1995), and shared civic imaginations that mobilize the communities around common concerns (Jenkins & Carpentier, 2019a). Indeed, Held (2006) uses the term "participatory society" to describe a democratic model that fosters political efficacy and collective responsibility (p. 215).

Despite this overlap, the distinction arguably lies in their primary orientations: The sociological approach focuses on social cohesion and identity formation, whereas the political approach focuses on power dynamics, governance, and decision making. One of the most influential expressions of the sociological approach is Jenkins's (2006) theory of participatory culture, emphasizing artistic expression, sharing, and mentorship. Similarly, Mercer (2002) coined the term "cultural citizenship" to express the link between

citizenship and everyday cultural practices, while Murray (2005) advanced the concept of "cultural participation" as a form of participatory democracy within cultural experience. This emphasis is also reflected in Article 27(1) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which affirms the right to participate in the cultural life of the community. Therefore, the term "sociocultural approach" more accurately captures a perspective that integrates both social and cultural dimensions of participation.

The relationship between participation and interaction, nevertheless, remains debated. The sociocultural approach treats interaction as a defining characteristic of participatory culture, enabling collective meaning making and shared civic imaginations (Jenkins & Carpentier, 2019a). Loader et al. (2014) further argue that political identities are shaped through interactions within self-constructed social networks. Carpentier, on the other hand, distinguishes between these two concepts: Interaction concerns sociocommunicative relations characteristic of all social life, whereas participation specifically involves co-decision (Carpentier, 2011, pp. 129–131).

CPE scholars criticize both the political and the sociocultural approaches for diverting attention from the structural dominance of corporations and media conglomerates. With the rise of neoliberalism, class antagonism intensified, and the public sphere became increasingly shaped by market-state alliances (Fuchs & Winseck, 2011). Admiring creative fandom and active prosumerism is merely lauding "white boys with participatory toys" (Fuchs, 2014, p. 57), accelerating exploitation and commodification. Rather than dismantling corporate power and democratizing media, as it ideally should, participatory culture celebrates commodity culture through an overly simplistic view of audience creativity and pleasure (Fuchs & Winseck, 2011).

The STS framework adopts a distinct critical perspective. It criticizes the absence of a sociotechnical dimension, particularly in the coproduction of technology, science, and social order. According to Chilvers and Kearnes (2020), ignoring STS's insights leads to a "residual realist" understanding of participation, where democracy and the public are treated as "highly specific, pre-given, and external categories imported into the design and evaluation of participatory practices" (p. 349). Participation should be understood as encompassing both technical and socioeconomic dimensions, rather than relying on normatively predefined concepts (Langlois & Elmer, 2013). From a broad ecological perspective, participation is seen as an ordinary, performative, and coproduced practice (Chilvers & Kearnes, 2020).

It is not that the other approaches entirely overlook technology. Instead, they tend to downplay its impact or reject its optimistic emancipatory rhetoric (Literat, 2016). A key difference lies in how they conceptualize technology and its relationship to society. Jenkins (2006), for example, situates technology in a broader social context, arguing that participation is a property of culture, not technology, just as media convergence is more than a technological shift.

A Systemic Analysis of the Approaches Across Four Theoretical Frames

Within the controversy, significant areas of agreement can be traced. An in-depth examination of the core elements of these four approaches reveals four theoretical frames that guide our analysis. Although

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these contentious frames make our task more likely to merely scratch the surface, they help us identify areas of agreement and work to harmonize them.

The Individual and Society

The relationship between the individual and society is a fundamental question in sociology with implications that extend across various fields of knowledge. We narrow this broad question by asking whether participation can be conceptualized at the individual level.

In political scholarship, one can identify activities performed by individuals—such as donating money, signing petitions, commenting on social media, or voting in elections (Theocharis & van Deth, 2018)—along with collective actions like rallies, demonstrations, or political organizations. Cultural studies generally conceptualize participation in collective terms, though more individualistic or interpersonal perspectives also exist, for example, in the field of participatory art (Literat, 2016). Additionally, in education, Ito employs the concept of genres of participation to refer to "a set of practices and conventions that individuals take up situationally" (Jenkins et al., 2015, p. 63; see also Ito et al., 2009). Within such frameworks, individuals are considered the unit of analysis, and participation can be measured at the level of the single participant.

We argue that the very notion of participation is inherently a collective endeavor. Four interrelated foundations support this argument:

1. **Ontological**: The ontology of the individual supports the collective nature of participation. Dewey (1927/1946) emphasized that the distinction between private/public does not equate to that between individual/society, and that the thoughts and decisions of the individual do not mean that their contents and objects are private. Instead, they are modified by the individual's connection with others. Similarly, Ricœur (1992) emphasized the interdependence between self and others in identity formation, suggesting that one cannot be thought of without the other. The interplay between individual and collective identity underscores that participation inherently involves personal uniqueness and a sense of belonging to a community (Nossek & Adoni, 2007).
2. **Symbolic representation**: The role of symbolic representation in shaping human perceptions further reinforces the collective nature of participation. In his seminal book *Communication as Culture*, James Carey (1989/2009) explained that representations "of" and "for" reality structure our thinking. This publicly available collection of symbols indicates that people's thinking is predominantly public and social (Carey, 1989/2009, pp. 28–29).
3. **Institutional**: This foundation underscores the inseparable nature of individuals and their social context. Pateman (1970) argued that participation is founded on the assumption that individuals and their institutionalization cannot be seen as fundamentally separable. Castoriadis (1991) provided a more blunt formulation, asserting that "the individual is not . . . anything other than society" and "the individual/society opposition . . . is a total fallacy" (p. 34). While individuals may have private wills and needs, they are fundamentally social creations "in which institution of society is massively embedded" (Castoriadis, 1991, p. 46).

4. **Communicative**: Participation is inherently a communicative act, and it is also mediated and mediatized. Without this collective nature, participation becomes a vacuous concept. The communicative nature of participation necessitates interaction and mutual engagement among individuals, shaping the way it is carried out. As Anderson (2006) exemplifies with the concept of imagined communities, the social dynamics of nation formation are mediated by communication. Contemporary social media platforms, with their unique vernaculars and affordances, function, according to Kligler-Vilenchik and Literat (2024), as a prime space for youth political expression. This form of expression is profoundly personal yet also a collective practice, as it connects individuals to a broader public, facilitating an emergent model of citizenship.

The Political and the Cultural

In a conversation between Jenkins and Carpentier (2019b), an essential distinction emerges. Drawing on De Huszar's (1945) notion of "do democracy," Jenkins differentiated civic culture—grounded in trust and communal interactions among equals to resolve conflicts and establish collective values—from the political, which involves power struggles for consent within decision-making processes (Jenkins & Carpentier, 2019b). Inspired by Mouffe's (2013) agonistic model, Carpentier (2011) further refined the distinction between politics, which denotes institutionalized politics, and the political, which permeates broader social spheres. This distinction allows for minimalist forms of participation tied to institutionalized politics and maximalist forms extending to everyday sites such as museums, schools, and workplaces. Despite differing views on power, both scholars can find common ground in this distinction.

However, a broader tension exists between the critical research tradition and cultural studies. CPE scholars argue that cultural studies depoliticizes participation by overemphasizing reception, consumption, and pleasure, whereas cultural studies scholars criticize CPE for being overly restrictive and ignoring the broader social spectrum of participatory expressions. This tension highlights the ongoing struggle to define the role of participation in contemporary society and the complexities of integrating political and cultural dimensions into a coherent framework. Many challenged this dichotomy. Grossberg (1995) argued that cultural practices have a critical dimension because they can resist and even oppose power structures (p. 76), while Curran (1993) viewed entertainment as an integral, not deviant, part of politics.

The privileging of rational political discourse is associated with Habermas's (1984) theory of communicative action, which advocates a rational-critical debate grounded in information, contested validity claims, and the authority of the better argument. Critics, however, have objected to the assumption of rationality. Van Zoonen (2004) showed how fan communities combine rational information processing with emotional attachment, while Dahlgren (2014) argued that political deliberation may also be irrational, cacophonous, and chaotic. Papacharissi (2016) further conceptualized affective publics, where online carnivalesque discourse serves a subversive function, challenging the status quo and enhancing civic engagement. Similarly, Bouko (2024) demonstrated how affective citizenship combines rational, emotional, and creative visual expressions to regularly reflect on political issues.

Through their studies on fan communities, Jenkins et al.'s (2016) work has evolved to reflect the political nature of the participatory culture. They introduced the term participatory politics to describe how

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political change can emerge through cultural mechanisms. This evolving perspective aligns with Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) ontology of social relations, suggesting the political/cultural division can be mediated rather than strictly divided. However, if the political is the struggle over and the point of temporal institutionalization, the distinction among (institutionalized) politics, the political, and the cultural narrows the scope to a one-dimensional model of participation. A more multidimensional and integrated framework is needed.

Ethics

The ethical dimension of participation has sparked considerable debate, with many researchers inclined to attribute normatively positive qualities to participatory practices. Harmful or unethical expressions of participation that undermine democracy, termed "dark participation," are frequently treated as aberrations or excluded from conceptual frameworks entirely (Carpentier et al., 2019; Jenkins & Carpentier, 2013). Under current conditions of user exploitation, modern slavery, and privacy violation, CPE shares this normative position, but interprets it as an ethical force that should challenge existing power structures by "speaking power to power in the interest of the many against the rule of the few" (Cloud, 2020, p. 844). Conversely, dark participation can be viewed as an action aimed at weakening participation (Jenkins & Carpentier, 2019b), whereas the STS tradition rejects the notion of assigning normative qualities that precede participation itself.

Emphasizing the ethical qualities of participation risks promoting idealism. In online journalism, for instance, many people refrain from participating in news production for personal, reputational, or attitudinal reasons (Mentzel et al., 2023). The optimistic portrayal of citizen participation was more of an enthusiastic research desideratum encountering commercial interests than a widespread everyday phenomenon (Quandt, 2018). At the same time, movements of nonparticipation and passive resistance to the "dark side" of network culture are rarely recognized as participation in academic research (Lutz & Hoffmann, 2017). Nevertheless, Casemajor et al. (2015) argue that such deliberate refusals should be understood as forms of active nonparticipation aimed at disrupting entrenched power imbalances in political and commercial structures that shape the participatory landscape. Against this backdrop, Quandt (2018) calls for realistic and integrative theories that are driven by neither wishful thinking nor doomsday apocalypse, but reflect life's "glorious shades of gray" (p. 45).

Moreover, attributing inherently positive ethical qualities to participation creates an analytical challenge. Consider two examples to illustrate this. The first is the large-scale manipulations undertaken during the 2017 public consultation on net neutrality in the United States (New York State Office of the Attorney General Letitia James, 2021). Labeling the orchestrated actions of Internet service providers as malicious astroturfing and the college student's effort as beneficial grassroots activism would likely be influenced by one's preexisting stance on the desired outcome of the consultation (Schwartz & Schejter, 2024). The second example is the attempt to hijack YouTube's algorithm to spread leftist thought (Kuznetsov & Ismangil, 2020, p. 216). This action can be viewed as both a subversive and potentially emancipatory act against the injustices of capitalism and a form of subjugation to profit-driven proprietary infrastructures (Gillespie, 2017).

Given these complexities, it may be more prudent to adopt Quandt's (2018) proposal to assess participatory expressions in a sober and empirically grounded manner. Rather than automatically ascribing inherent ethical values, one should adopt a more nuanced conceptualization of participation.

Power

If we perceive the sociopolitical condition as inherently conflictual and structured by unequal distribution of power, then rebalancing power relations becomes a justified objective (Pateman, 1970). By contrast, the sociocultural approach typically views power as only one of several factors shaping participation, emphasizing community, solidarity, and cocreation instead (Jenkins, 2006), yet power is not external to social relations, but rather what constitutes them in the first place (Mouffe, 1999). Cultural studies scholars identify a transformation in participatory culture whereby decentralized and socially distributed forms of cultural production increasingly challenge older commercial models (Russell et al., 2008). Although new forms of power dynamics emerge, corporations continue to exert greater power than individuals, and unequal capacities to participate persist (Jenkins, 2006).

Power struggles are thus intrinsic to participatory culture and cannot be treated as merely one factor among others. This is also evident in communication technology, where networked digital systems exert power by both compelling and preventing action while remaining susceptible to power exertion by others (van Dijk, 2020, pp. 153–168). Still, incorporating social power into participation theory remains challenging. For instance, do "brand evangelists" assisting grassroots marketing campaigns (Russell et al., 2008) constitute a participatory act simply by countering professional advertising? From a CPE perspective, such practices reproduce industry strategies aimed at increasing revenue through engagement and interactivity (Keinonen & Klein-Shagrir, 2017). Since commercial media embed neoliberal logics, participation theory must seriously consider material aspects such as platform ownership. As Peck (2006) argues, maintaining a strict separation between the material and the symbolic creates a false dichotomy, whereas in reality, the two can be conjoined and reconciled.

Ultimately, the primary contention regarding social power centers on scale. Carpentier (in Allen et al., 2014) warns that treating capitalist domination as totalizing risks negating even minimal participatory possibilities, whereas Jenkins (2006) acknowledges power asymmetries and corporate barriers to participation, but disputes the actual balance of power and the mode of action required to address the problem. For many participation scholars, power materializes primarily in decision making. Arnstein (1969), Carpentier (2011), Macpherson (1977), and Pateman (1970, 2012) privilege decision making as the central site of participation. The International Association for Public Participation spectrum (IAP2, 2024) also follows the same logic, defining participation in terms of shares of decision-making power.

However, focusing solely on decision making is problematic. It subjugates participation to institutional power structures (Schwartz & Schejter, 2024), overlooks forms of activism operating outside representative and hierarchical systems (Tormey, 2015), assesses participation as isolated events rather than ongoing processes (Ross et al., 2016), and favors a reactive perspective over a holistic view of cultural diversity (Jenkins, 2006). Since power relationships are reproduced in diverse social practices, including violence, discipline, legitimation, and discourses (Castells, 2009, p. 13), and sociotechnical environments

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also materialize power by enabling and constraining human activities and relationships with other human and nonhuman agents, decision making cannot serve as the sole indicator of power realization. Power, therefore, remains a foundational dimension of participation theory yet requires further exploration.

In Search of Theoretical Foundations for a Common Framework for Participation

In the quest for a unifying conceptual framework for participation, a rereading of Carey's (1989/2009) *Communication as Culture* offers valuable guidance. Advocating a ritual view of communication that emphasizes community and its members' participation in communicating shared beliefs and values, Carey differentiates between modes of participation. Society, he contends, is a ritual order in which media facilitate "the sharing of aesthetic experience, religious ideas, personal values and sentiments and intellectual notions" (p. 31). It is through sharing that individuals exchange ideas, co-create meaning, and perpetuate collective identities. This is a mutual and reciprocal process, fostering equality and enabling social transformation.

However, rituals can also normalize inequality, legitimize dominance, and reinforce authority. Modern media, Carey (1989/2009) observes, enable the administration and control of populations while limiting meaningful participation in vigorous discussions, let alone reimagining collective faith or pursuing change. Governments may therefore invite citizens to formally participate, but this is no more than a game in which everything of significance has already been decided, reducing participation to what Carey terms a ritual of participation (pp. 152–153).

These contrasting modes illuminate the transformative potential of participation and the centrality of power relations. As Couldry (2003) argues, media and rituals must be understood as constructs grounded in highly uneven power to define reality. We must therefore consider modes of participation, assess the initiator(s) of a participatory process, and examine the relationships among its actors. This is not merely a matter of different perspectives on the same process, but different possibilities for classifying participation processes. While a ritual mode of participation expresses a vertical situation initiated by a power holder who incorporates participants into unequal institutional arrangements (in terms of formal position, allocated resources, decision-making authority, etc.), a sharing mode of participation describes a more reciprocal act. It involves participants seeking to jointly take part in a process, implying a potentially more egalitarian form.

A related distinction has to be drawn between "power over" and "power to" (see, e.g., Dahlgren, 2014). "Power over" refers to a hierarchical relationship where power is exercised to impose one's will on another (top-down) or to resist and confront dominant power structures (bottom-up). "Power to" represents the attempt to create social conditions that facilitate joint action to challenge and change social reality and discourse. Digital environments have opened new pathways for realizing forms of "power to."

To further contextualize these observations into a coherent model, an additional theoretical foundation and a bridging framework are necessary. The theoretical foundation, previously hinted at, is institutionalization. Institutions organize social life and structure the social order. They are assemblages of enduring rules, practices, and structures that set conditions for action and provide a cognitive framework for social actors, while nonconformity is costly, and deviations face counteractions by social controls

(Lawrence & Shadnam, 2008). Power and institutionalization are closely interrelated, as power dynamics shape institutions (Castells, 2009), and institutionalization establishes and reinforces power relations (Mouffe, 2013).

A robust conception of this relationship and its intimate connection to democracy can be found in the work of Cornelius Castoriadis (1987), who introduced the concept of social imaginary as the creative force of radical imagination that self-institutes the social reality. Since it is a process of self-creation and signification, social reality is the outcome of society's agency, which bestows ontological meanings on reality through an ongoing, active, and creative process of collective construction (Karalis, 2014).

According to Castoriadis (1987), human history is not exogenous nor governed by absolute knowledge (epistèmè) that eliminates any possibility of political action. Instead, it takes two forms of living (eîdos): autonomy and heteronomy. The first form is a state of instituting society, where citizens collectively and reflexively make their laws, free to create their own form of life and control it: "A citizen is not (not necessarily) a 'party activist,' but someone who actively claims participation in public life and in the common affairs of the city on the same footing as everyone else" (Castoriadis,1991, p. 8). This mode of self-institution and social imaginary is a process of ongoing negotiation among members of society, allowing them to continually question the existing social order and to envision and act on alternatives to existing institutions (Browne, 2014; Karalis, 2014). Rather than providing tools to manage existing power structures, autonomy suggests the possibility of creatively reimagining and actively reconstituting the social order. In other words, it is about politicizing the social rather than socializing the political (Browne, 2014).

In contrast, heteronomy is a condition in which society is instituted through external or seemingly unquestionable principles, with laws and modes of thought imposed and often attributed to an extrasocial origin (Castoriadis, 2010). In heteronomy, people are alienated from politics, which is viewed primarily as a technical and bureaucratic domain, where politicians' authority is justified by their claimed expertise and ability to find rational solutions to problems. This form of instrumental rationality strips political action of its substance, embodying particular groups' attempts to achieve particularistic goals under the guise of the general interest (Castoriadis, 1987, 1991). Another form of heteronomous society is one in which the public sphere is appropriated by private actors (whether oligarchs or business enterprises) and does not effectively belong to the people (Castoriadis, 1997).

In Castoriadis's oeuvre, autonomy is conceived not as a final state, but as an ongoing participatory project. Rejecting linear or deterministic conceptions of history, Castoriadis understood both autonomy and heteronomy as historically produced social imaginary significations. Because contradictory tendencies traverse societies, none is purely autonomous or purely heteronomous. Historical experience clearly demonstrates this dynamic. The Athenian demos consciously entrusted itself with the instituting power (kratos) to create its own laws (autonomos), yet did so within a heteronomous eîdos of slavery, patriarchy, and exclusion. Similarly, the Bolshevik Revolution aspired to radical social transformation, but ultimately reproduced the very processes of bureaucratization, domination, and class division it sought to abolish (Castoriadis, 1997). Neither formation endured, yet both left historical sediments that inspired subsequent efforts to autonomously institute change to challenge inherited institutions. Comparable tensions persist today as youth, feminist, labor, and ecological movements seek to institute alternative norms while

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confronting countervailing forces of privatization, consumerism, and bureaucratization, reinforced by dominant power structures (Castoriadis, 2010).

Historical experience thus reveals a recurring dynamic: the emergence and struggle to institute forms of autonomy within and against heteronomous forms of closure. As Castoriadis (1987) observed:

> Instituted society is not opposed to instituting society as a lifeless product to an activity which brought it into being; it represents the relative and transitory fixity/stability of the instituted forms-figures in and through which the radical imaginary can alone exist and make itself exist as social-historical. (pp. 371–372)

No society is therefore purely autonomous or purely heteronomous but rather constituted through an unstable mixture of both. Autonomy remains partial and fragile, continually coexisting with heteronomy in an open-ended interplay between instituting creativity and institutional closure.

By integrating institutionalization and power, we can describe the instituting society (autonomy) as the realization of "power to" and the instituted society (heteronomy) as the realization of "power over." Incorporating autonomy and heteronomy into the concept of participation adds a normative dimension to the discussion of power, enabling evaluation of participation in terms of its capacity to foster social and political transformation.

A Conceptual Framework of Participation

Participation is a communicative collective endeavor that actively aims at self-institutionalization, exercising both creative imagination and civic power. It is not merely about balancing power relations, but rather about citizens' autonomy to take part in decisions that affect their lives. Creativity and coproduction are thus constitutive elements of participation itself.

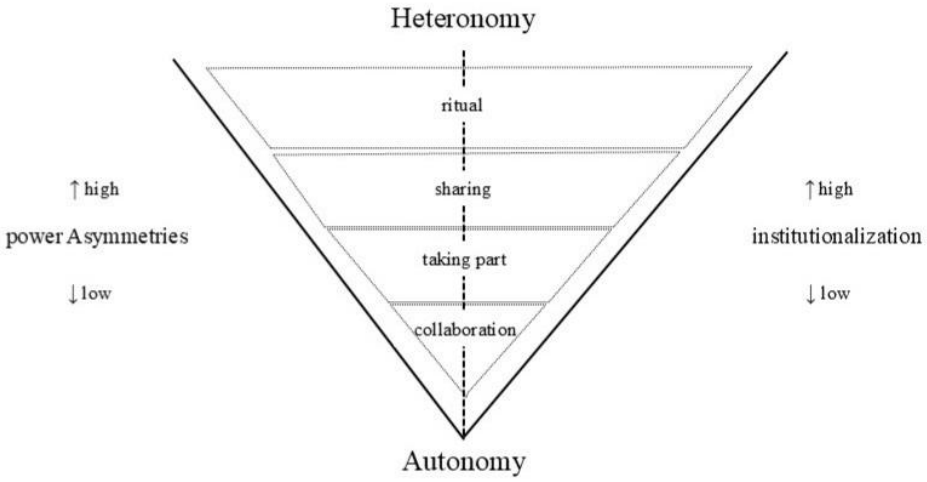

Figure 1. A classifying conceptual framework of participation.

Based on the theoretical foundations discussed and core ideas synthesized from the four analyzed approaches, we propose a common framework for classifying and assessing participation. The classifying framework (Figure 1) is structured around two intersecting V-shaped axes—power asymmetries and institutionalization—each ranging from high to low and reflecting degrees of heteronomy and autonomy. Axes are assessed independently and contextually, as different societies, and even different participatory instances within the same society, may exhibit distinct configurations of institutionalization and power relations. High institutionalization combined with pronounced power asymmetries tends toward heteronomy, whereas lower power disparities and more flexible institutionalization, which enables the imagination and pursuit of alternative social orders, indicate a higher degree of autonomy. Power asymmetries are socially contextual and can take different forms. They materialize wherever power takes the form of power over, preventing society from realizing its autonomous potential. Here, the actors can be high-level social structures, human beings (e.g., politicians, capitalists, organizers, experts, groups of participants), or nonhuman agents.

The analytical framework is designed to orient analysis by mapping participatory instances across a conceptual landscape primarily defined by the tension between autonomy and heteronomy. Four typical modes of participation are situated within it. Close to the heteronomy pole is the mode of participation as ritual, characterized by top-down conditions, high levels of institutionalized force, and domination. A typical scenario involves a formal agency or corporation initiating a process, using its power to shape execution, control discourse, and predefine the desired outcome.

Positioned further is the mode of participation as sharing. Representative democratic elections illustrate this mode: Although highly institutionalized and structurally asymmetric, elections temporarily grant citizens the power to actualize their sovereignty and reshape representation. Following Castoriadis's (1991) observation, the public sphere concerns not only outcomes but also the premises shaping them.

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Conversely, a situation in which all participants engage as equals with the potential to question existing social structures and drive re-institutionalization constitutes participation as taking part. Demonstrations, protests, or participatory art can be classified at relatively different levels of autonomy depending on their actual characteristics. At a higher level of autonomy, with minimal constraints, participation is collaboration, exemplified by open-source projects, citizens' media, or certain types of referenda.

This analytical framework aims to help researchers classify and organize instances of participation within a shared, comparable space. While it does not replace methodological tools based on specific operationalized variables, it allows researchers to consider various parameters along the two axes. Without presenting an exhaustive list, relevant considerations may include, on the institutionalization axis, formal legal structuring, procedural rigidity or openness, and the presence of informal deliberative arenas. On the power axis, scholars may examine human rights protections, the degree of coercive state authority, social cohesion and antagonism, majority-minority relations, and political-economic dynamics. Both axes should incorporate context-specific factors such as the issue at stake, the share of participants, and procedural conduct.

Communication technologies play a central role along both axes, constituting the infrastructure for participation and directing human activity. Social arrangements and technological systems mutually constitute one another in ways that directly bear on the conditions of autonomy and heteronomy. Since autonomy is understood as a function of institutionalization rather than as institutional autonomy, media and technology are therefore not treated as autonomous institutions, but are assessed in terms of how they shape the autonomy-heteronomy configuration. As nonhuman actors and automated actions increasingly enter and influence participation processes, further theoretical reflection is needed.

Demonstrating the Framework's Analytical Utility

Applied to the 2014 and 2017 U.S. net neutrality consultations, the framework illustrates that autonomy and heteronomy coexist in both cases and highlights the struggle over reflexive self-alteration in dynamics of institutionalization and power relations. Both proceedings highlight structural similarities: They were highly institutionalized, marked by strong bureaucratic closure and significant power asymmetries, and shaped by the crucial role communication infrastructures played in undermining participation (for a detailed account of these proceedings, see Schwartz & Schejter, 2024). In both cases, decision makers acted along partisan lines, designed participatory architectures that differentiated among participants, and accorded limited substantive weight to public input. The 2017 consultations demonstrated even stronger tendencies toward a ritualistic mode and heteronomous closure, driven by large-scale manipulations, contested procedural legitimacy, and limited responsiveness. Despite these differences and divergent regulatory outcomes, both processes mobilized large-scale citizen engagement that, to some extent, exceeded the procedural boundaries of formal consultation. This reflexive participation challenged institutional premises and dominant power relations, aiming to reconfigure the instituted paradigms of communication governance and corporate-driven rationality. Normative evaluation would rank the cases differently based on their outcomes; the suggested analytical framework, however, places both cases closer to the autonomy pole, as citizens sought to reinstitutionalize existing arrangements and reconfigure dominant communicative norms.

To take another example, community media can be positioned at different levels depending on varying degrees of institutionalization and power asymmetries. The Cypriot case (Voniati, 2026) illustrates this classificatory framework in a polarized context. Horizontally governed outlets, combining relatively diffuse forms of authority with more open institutional arrangements, occupy positions closer to the autonomy pole. The instituting dimension is sustained by the capacity to reflexively question sedimented meanings and generate alternative narratives and modes of existence within otherwise heteronomous environments shaped by dominant ethnonational frameworks. At the same time, the persistence of self-censorship and symbolic boundaries indicates that autonomy remains fragile and continually negotiated. Hierarchically structured community-based outlets, characterized by concentrated authority and stronger institutional closure, tend to reiterate established narratives, producing closure of meaning and reflexivity and turning participation into ritualized consensus. These findings suggest that low institutionalization and formal inclusion alone do not produce autonomy and participation and that power redistribution becomes largely symbolic. The significance of participation depends on how institutionalization and power relations structure the capacity to institute social imaginaries and collective self-alteration, which is continually threatened by processes of (re)heteronomization.

Concluding Remarks

The proposed framework is spatial and dynamic, moving beyond linear continua or strict categorical ladders. By capturing the interplay between power and institutionalization, it accounts for multidimensional variations that reductive hierarchical models tend to overlook. On one hand, it excludes actions that do not constitute participation, such as certain communication practices like file sharing or instant messaging. These are not expressions of participation any more than a casual Friday evening chat with friends would be. On the other hand, it accommodates diverse types of participation, including passive participation, active nonparticipation, and dark participation.

While normatively favoring autonomy over heteronomy, the framework remains content-agnostic. A strong democracy requires participation; however, participation is not inherently democratic. Because, as mentioned, every society is a mixture of autonomy and heteronomy, the power to determine its own form of being does not necessarily yield to democracy.

The analytical framework enables dimensional comparison across manifestations and sociocultural settings. It moves beyond bureaucratic-legal coding mechanisms based on procedural terms such as "hearing" or "consultation" and transcends the division of participation into separate domains of life. In doing so, it avoids the political/cultural dichotomy and the nonessential compartmentalization, offering an integrated conceptual framework for the field instead.

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