

BOOK REVIEW

Participatory Politics: Next-Generation Tactics to Remake Public Spheres

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*Participatory Politics: Next-Generation Tactics
to Remake Public Spheres*

Elisabeth Soep

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In ‘*Participatory Politics - Next-Generation Tactics to Remake Public Spheres*’ Elisabeth Soep explores and discusses the rise of new activities that drive youth involvement in civic life. These new forms of participatory politics that Elisabeth Soep identifies in the book comprise both digital and face-to-face encounters. She sees participatory politics as a transline activity, not online or offline, based in peer relationships, a kind of activity that do not develop automatically even when youth have been raised on digital media and mobile devices. She examines and discusses several of these cases in which young people tend to merge the cultural and the political to carry out civic activities that reshape public affairs. These findings confirm that young people are increasingly producers of media and culture and users of new ways to

enter politics. In common, all these new kinds of civic initiatives seem to share a distrust of traditional institutions and conventional policy making processes, a perspective similar to that behind numerous initiatives that led to innovations in citizen e-participation in the field of urban e-planning.

The book is organized into four chapters, besides Introduction and Conclusion, is supported by an updated bibliography, and addresses three main research questions: “What specific tactics are young people experimenting with to exercise agency and intervene in public affairs? How can these activities grow in quality? What work is required to ensure that opportunities to engage in participatory politics are equitably distributed among youth, including youth who are marginalized from digital access and other forms of privilege? In the first chapter (‘Participatory politics: what sets it apart?’), Elisabeth Soep explores the activities that constitute the core features of participatory politics (e.g., circulation of information; dialogue and feedback; production of original content; investigation about issues of public concern; and mobilization of others for a grassroots effort). In the

following chapter ('Five tactics of participatory politics'), the author identifies, based on the existing literature and on her own research, five tactics which she hopes will motivate discussion and through that will contribute positively for young people's role in democracy and, I would add, for a growing youth civic engagement in urban planning issues too: pivot your public (mobilizing civic capacity within networks that form out of shared personal or popular culture interests and communities); create content worlds (using inventive and interactive storytelling to achieve public attention and influence); forage for information (finding and sharing through public data archives to discover trends, fact-check, and juxtapose claims with evidence, including the use of big data); code up (designing tools, platforms, and spaces that advance the public good); and finally, hide and seek (covering tracks and protecting information from discovery as actors engage in politics that only selectively emerge into public awareness).

The next two chapters explore the literacy required by these new forms of participatory politics ('Literacies that support participatory politics') and the risks associated with it ('Mind the risks'). Each tactic seems to require different competences, in other words different forms of know-how that can power participatory politics. Youth tend to learn these practices or skills through peer interaction and mentoring although they can also be learnt in conventional settings. If digital tools remove some of the barriers to civic engagement they also eliminate some of the protections of conventional participatory procedures exposing participants to different kinds of risks. Among the risks that need to be minimized, Elisabeth Soep refers the following: simplification (tendency to sacrifice important nuances in the messages), sensationalization (sensational stories that distort the truth), slip-page (the risk that the conditions that call for a specific action will slip out of focus), unsustainability (the difficulties of keeping something going), and saviorism (when exposed to faraway struggles without sufficient context).

Finally, in the conclusion, Elisabeth Soep discusses shifting dynamics that underlie youth participatory politics in this era of digital

communications and how the different tactics, literacies and risks interrelate. Participatory politics in the sense adopted by the author and the new activities that drive youth involvement in civic life are certainly critical issues that urban e-planning should consider, notably the potential use of these new forms of civic e-engagement in urban planning and the risks associated with them as referred before. This evidence ought to be considered by those engaged in urban e-planning, in particular in the design of citizen e-participation processes. For instance, the flow of information in these new forms of participatory politics seems to be increasingly shaped by the community and not so much by restricted elite groups. While these structures for communication tend to be much less hierarchical they also have a propensity to incur in some new risks. If in the old system of institutional politics, including therefore urban policy, formal and established gatekeepers controlled the flow of information, defined the conditions for dialogue and participation, in the new context of participatory politics the political elites continue to play an important role but citizens, including youth, have now a much greater room of maneuver to pursue, analyze and critique information about public affair issues. At the same time, youth seem to turn increasingly more towards their peers for the development of their civic activities than before and have a tendency to do that increasingly through social media and mobile devices.

In sum, although the book is based on examples not specifically concerned with urban e-planning, in which young people use digital and social media to exercise agency on a wide variety of topics, it deals with issues that urban planners and policy makers should not ignore. In other words, all these new possibilities for youth engagement in public affairs have a direct interest for urban e-planning. For that reason, the evidence provided in the book and the innovative insights on the next generation tactics in participatory politics make this book a useful resource for researchers, planners and policy makers engaged in citizen e-participation processes.

Carlos Nunes Silva, PhD, Institute of Geography and Spatial Planning, University of Lisbon, Portugal. His research interests are mainly focused on local government policies, history and theory of urban planning, urban and metropolitan governance, urban planning ethics, urban planning in Africa, research methods, e-government and e-planning. His recent publications include 'Citizen e-Participation in Urban Governance: Crowdsourcing and Collaborative Creativity' (2013), 'Online Research Methods in Urban and Planning Studies: Design and Outcomes' (2012), and the Handbook of Research on E-Planning: ICT for Urban Development and Monitoring (2010). He is member of the Steering Committee of the International Geographical Union Commission 'Geography of Governance' (2012-2016). He is the Editor-in-Chief of the International Journal of E-Planning Research (IJEPR).