Introduction

We are Everywhere

The time I first heard about "participatory democracy" was in a jam-packed basement at the City University of New York Graduate Center. It was the summer of 2003 and dozens of us were attending a panel on how to make NYC more democratic. The first speaker—a budget expert from a good governance group—described in ruthless detail how the NYC office of the mayor ignored public priorities, intimidated the city council, and manipulated the tax code. We were incensed and depressed. The second speaker shifted the scene to sunny South America and talked about how a town there had solved many of these problems with a process called participatory budgeting (PB).[1] The mood immediately brightened. But then we were stunned, confused, and offended: elected officials in some third-world country turned over millions of dollars to city residents who designed their own process to spend the money in a way that reduced corruption, increased accountability, addressed real community needs, and was creative, efficient, and empowering!? We were stunned because the achievement was so impressive: how could "regular" people set up their own process? But (here was the confusion) why would elected officials help them? Then we were offended: wasn't democracy born in Greece, developed in Europe, and then innovatively scaled up by America's Founding Fathers? How was it that this breakthrough political mechanism was happening in a third-world country amid the shantytowns and rainforests? Our own cultural biases came to the fore.

I became confused (again!), though, because people whom I encountered who praised this participatory democratic process had such different politics

and rarely agreed on anything else. Liberals liked it for its transparency and accountability. Libertarians lauded PB for taking money away from the government and giving it back to the people. Socialists commended it as an example of how the state could help the people develop popular power. Even antistate anarchists sometimes said nice things about it because they saw it as a transfer of power from the state to the people, a real example of self-government. As if that ideological range of approval weren't startling enough, others praised PB for embodying the "good governance" paradigm, especially since it led to more efficient public spending (more bang for the buck) and enhanced the legitimacy of the government. Even the World Bank, so despised by the originators of PB, praised it and promoted it (as do the United Nations [UN] and Rockefeller Foundation). Despite all these different perspectives praising PB, when a few of us went down to Porto Alegre to learn more about PB, we were told that such a program would never work in the United States because people here are too lazy (or busy), too stupid (or disinterested), too selfish (or satisfied). I was once more offended: so why then would it work in a country with higher illiteracy, more poverty, and outright civil unrest? But, again, I was hooked and so was the tenacious Josh Lerner, and with the support of the generous Gianpaolo Baiocchi we went on to form an organization to get it started in the United States.[2]

Early on in those efforts we realized we were not alone. There were many others researching and running organizations that were committed to empowering individuals and communities, reducing inequality, and promoting solidarity across borders and sectors, including worker and consumer cooperatives, community land trusts, grassroots health clinics, fair trade alliances, democratic unionists, community development organizations, urban gardens, and public banks.[3] I was stunned (again!): even though participatory democracy seemed so demanding there were examples of it all over the place. But why didn't more people know about it? One reason was lack of a common language. People practicing or praising PD call it by all kinds of names: direct democracy, community control, horizontalism, grassroots democracy, self-determination, commoning, the subsistence perspective, mutual aid, cooperativism, solidarity economy, P2P, the next system, and on and on. This was in part because people from diverse political frameworks praised the same forms but for different reasons and defined key norms such as community, equality, freedom, solidarity, participation, and justice in different ways.

So where were the political philosophers to sort through all these conceptual confusions? The ones that did like PD tended to be ideological and that limited their appeal and the potential for a broader politics since if you didn't subscribe exactly to their political program you were probably excluded or turned off. Second, in the United States at least, there was (and still is?) a real skepticism toward participatory forms that share power. This was/

is true of academics, activists, and "average" people. Influential PD advocate Sherry Arnstein made this point amid the combative cultural politics of the 1960s when she called out the hypocrisy of the racially privileged and elites who praise "participation." She wrote,

> The idea of citizen participation is a little like eating spinach: no one is against it in principle because it is good for you. Participation of the governed in their government is, in theory, the cornerstone of democracy—a revered idea that is vigorously applauded by virtually everyone. The applause is reduced to polite handclaps, however, when this principle is advocated by the have-not blacks, Mexican-Americans, Puerto Ricans, Indians, Eskimos, and whites. And when the have-nots define participation as re-distribution of power, the American consensus on the fundamental principle explodes into many shades of outright racial, ethnic, ideological, and political op-position. (Arnstein 1969, 216)

After the defeat of PD movements in the early 1970s (Katsiaficas 1983), the situation became so bad that even the theorists who professed to be committed to the project of democracy did not believe that creating meaningful venues for popular participation in politics (much less the workplace) was doable *or* desirable. (See my Chapter 1.) Indeed, it could even be dangerous. They argued that "the people" are too lazy, too stupid, too aggressive, too passive, too selfish, too easily misled, too diverse, and/or that there are just too many of them! Far from being anomalous, these arguments became mainstream in political philosophy. Indeed, the project of philosophy begins with Plato and Aristotle *ruling out democracy as a viable political form* and continues into modern politics and philosophy (Dahl 1989, 2, 24–26, 52–55; Keane 2009, 82). But this critique ignores a more pressing difficulty. What about those people who do desire genuine popular power and self-government? What exactly does that look like? And is it doable in today's world of 7 billion people? How would it work in our multicultural cities, racially divided suburbs, and vast rural stretches? Unfortunately, as Macpherson wrote, "realistic works on participatory democracy are scarce" (MacPherson 1977, 117).

The Structure of *We Decide!*: Systematic, Pluralist, Comparative, Critical, and Strategic

There are many different examples of PD succeeding: a federation of worker co-ops in Spain, consumer co-ops in Japan, community gardens in Detroit, and community land trusts in Vermont, but each looks so small, none seems like a vision of the future world, at best a glimpse. What would a PD economy

look like? A PD government? To think at this systematic level, we need to stop treating these cases as isolated fragments, or as liberated islands in a sea of despotism, but rather as pieces of a larger puzzle aiming to be interconnected. *We Decide!* develops a framework that is critical and comparative; it seeks to understand the strengths and weaknesses of each model but also looks at the best practices of each model (the best PBs, the best co-ops, the best community-controlled but state-run agencies, etc.). But even the best practices can only solve a limited range of problems; they must be connected with other modes and efforts to complete the picture. *We Decide!* also does this; it is not just case focused but big picture, and it asks how we might work together strategically in order to get there (see Conclusion).

Participatory Democracy Is Maximal Democracy (or MaxD)

We Decide! takes on all of these challenges: first, it takes on the need for a "common language" and develops a conception of participatory democracy that identifies the core principles. Building on my earlier work, I call it "maximal democracy" or maxD. One of the major problems in the literature on PD, even among its advocates, is that there is no concise definition of its core principles, nor is it clear on how to determine whether or not an organization or view is PD. In other words, some organizations and theories seem democratic in some ways but authoritarian or exclusionary in others. How do we decide if they are in or out? MaxD provides a rubric to address such dilemmas by providing an operationalizable framework that can pick out or help inform PD efforts or views across sectors (political, economic, social), cultures, and historical periods. But crucially, maxD is minimal enough to still allow for a pluralism in organizational forms and normative perspectives.

Speaking generally, *participatory democracy* (PD) is that view of politics that calls for the creation and proliferation of practices and institutions that enable individuals and groups to better *determine* the conditions in which they act and relate to others.[4] PD as maximal democracy is defined by four features: (1) collective determination; (2) capacity development and delivery of economic, social, and/or political benefits to members or constituents; (3) the replacement of unequal power relations with relations of shared authority; and (4) the construction, cultivation, proliferation, and interconnection of movements and organizations with overlapping normative frameworks (i.e., those that mostly embody the first three tenets). (These are explained in detail in Chapter 1.)

Maximal democracy is about cooperative power: that is, the ability to act with others to enhance the capacities of and obtain benefits for individuals while reducing inequalities among all. With its focus on power and equality, PD can be contrasted with normative views that are centered upon happiness, rights, and/or freedom as well as political frameworks such as deliberative or

representative democracy. To be sure, deliberation and representation have a role to play, but the driving force behind participatory democracy is the creative, collaborative, and constructive power of collective determination.

PD Is Nonideal Philosophy

Another feature that distinguishes PD from so many other ethical and political views is that it operates in the real world. Unlike so many political and ethical views, PD does not presuppose an ideal space where we are all equal. In the uneven playing field of the real world, what use are such "ideal philosophies"? They are either utopian in the sense of being nonrealizable or sophisticated obfuscations that blind us from dealing with the injustices of our time. Because PD rejects the notion of the blank slate—whether the "state of nature" of social contract theory or the "ideal speech situation" of discourse ethics, it is what Charles Mills calls "non-ideal philosophy" (Mills and Pateman 2007, 112–118).

We Decide!'s response to the last challenge makes it not just unique but controversial relative to the field of political philosophy. It is my view that philosophy focuses too much on justification and not enough on illustration. As MacPherson bluntly told us, one of the biggest challenges facing PD advocates is *not to argue that it's just but to show that it's doable. We Decide!* does so in the political arena in the case of participatory budgeting and state agencies, in the economic realm with cooperatives, and in the ecological-social milieu with myriad forms and practices. It draws upon extensive empirical evidence from sociologists, anthropologists, historians, and political scientists both to show how these practices work and to evaluate them. Of the literature that pushes for PD, another weakness is that it often does so uncritically. While I certainly believe that there is far too much critique in political theory (do we really need another book explaining why capitalism is bad?), uncritical praise of PD backfires for two reasons: (1) It makes PD seem "too good to be true" and thus it ends up looking like a false promise. PD cannot solve all the world's problems. It's imperfect and limited. And (2) there are some venues where it will not work. But that's fine. Liberalism, too, has its limits, as do deliberative democracy and socialism. No view is perfect; no view works in all situations for all peoples in all sectors.

There Are No Universal Solutions and No Model Solves All Problems, but We Must Disarticulate the State!

In real life *every* ethical or political model is going to fail on certain counts. Some consumer co-ops may have bad gender dynamics. Worker co-ops in general may not offer enough benefits to address the whole range of needs of

those who are discriminated against. And PB in many cases may not adequately address the needs of the poorest of the poor. That does not mean that one gives up on any of them. Liberal states have performed poorly on race, privately owned businesses on gender, and state agencies on preventing too many from falling into poverty. The task is to figure out both the strengths and the weaknesses of each form and how to create an array of them to address the range of problems.[5] PD by itself cannot solve gender inequality. That will require a multidimensional feminist movement. But PD has something to contribute to the effort of remaking the relations between men and women when it comes to care work in the household. The same goes for structural racism. PD in general and PB in particular are not substitutes for critical race theory and the efforts of the Movement for Black Lives (M4BL), but PD has much to offer to those pursuing community power in the environmental justice movement and M4BL has identified PB as a crucial tool for building the capacities of individuals and groups in communities that have suffered long-term structural disadvantages (see Chapter 1).

What we need are comparative and critical examinations of these efforts in order to identify best practices and help improve the weak ones and protect the strong ones, so that, in this moment of global chaos and system change, creating a more democratic, sustainable, and inclusive system is not a speculative fantasy but an engaged and multisector strategy (see Conclusion).

All of the preceding means that PD practitioners and theorists must face up to one of the biggest challenges facing all political theorists in this moment: the role of the state. Too many PD advocates accept the either/or binary not of "smash or seize" but of "ignore or seize" the state and then opt for "ignore." While I accept that "exodus" is an option to be considered (see Chapter 1), it receives too much press and other options should be given more detailed attention (see Chapters 2 and 6). One view I develop is the strategy of fracturing and then reclaiming part of the state, what I have called "disarticulation" (Menser 2009). I call the resulting political form "social-public" to contrast it with the much more common understanding of corporate state as public-private. *We Decide!* raises the issue of the state in every chapter and then builds a more general theory of the social-public governance in Chapter 6.

Description of the Chapters

Chapter 1: Participation and Democracy in History, Theory, and Practice is by far the longest. Why? Because there is no comprehensive treatment of PD in a single volume from any perspective, much less a philosophical one. In this chapter, I lay out the key concepts and principles, construct a PD canon, take a trip through the three waves of participatory democracy theory, and

survey the literature of participatory democracy as it operates within the subfields of democratic theory and political philosophy. And I outline my own view of PD as maximal democracy (maxD) that will be utilized throughout the rest of the book. But perhaps the biggest challenge for PD advocates is not so much to explain why it is desirable but to show that it is doable. And this requires revisiting practices in history and the present. I do this in detail with ancient Athens and, with what I argue is an even better and more relevant model, the Haudenosaunee or Iroquois Federation. This first chapter pushes for a political theory that is much more attentive to the mechanics of political practices and shows the importance not only of justification but of illustration. It also aims to show that even though PD has been treated as a minor view with very few examples of it ever occurring much less working, this is false. PD is profusely distributed, in time and space, culture and sector. The history of PD, as more recent histories of democracy show, is incredibly diverse culturally and geographically, and also ideologically and philosophically. Indeed, I argue that there are six different traditions/frameworks that are amenable to and utilize PD: communitarianism, liberalism, associationism, anarchism-autonomism, ecologically oriented feminism, and environmental justice. All of these views endorse PD values and praise PD organizations and practices but for diverse, and sometimes even conflicting, reasons. Debates among these views are played out across the different sectors from the political and economic to the social and ecological.

Chapter 2: Participatory Budgeting, Democratic Theory, and the Disarticulation of the State stays within the confines of the political and focuses in on the case of PB. PB is a process in which some part of a public budget is controlled by those most impacted by that budget. PB is examined in detail with respect to who participates, how they participate, and the impacts on both governance and public service delivery. Detailed case studies are presented on the PB processes in Porto Alegre (Brazil) and NYC and its spread worldwide is also discussed and critically evaluated. Competing normative justifications for PB are analyzed. Difficulties among civil society, the state, and society are noted, "top down" and "bottom up" views of social change are argued against, and PB's impact on the state form is explored, as is the argument that PB articulates a new form of "social-public" governance. Key debates play out between PD and deliberative democracy, and liberal PD and autonomous-anarchist PD (A-PD). An important conclusion is that while there are some very robust models of PB, many PBs are actually not PD, but may still be worth doing because of other benefits. Also, even the best versions are limited.

In Chapter 3: From Corporate Social Responsibility to Economic Democracy: Stakeholder Theory, Civil Society, and Worker Ownership, I bring my empirically oriented pluralist maxD approach to the economic sphere. We begin by discussing just what is the economy and talk about confusions

and limitations that result from the either/or binary of capitalism and social-ism. Drawing upon the work of Gibson-Graham and a range of economic democracy theorists, we construct an alternative model of economic diversity. However, if the goal is to democratize the economy, this means that we have to transform actual workplaces. And for this we need to engage with business ethics, as both a literature and an audience, not to mention current owners, workers, and customers. In this chapter we do so by engaging with stakeholder theory (ST) and the rubric of corporate social responsibility (CSR). While some may think that ST brings democracy into the workplace, I argue that it does not. Still others argue that a civil society approach made up of independent nonprofit watchdogs engaged in deliberative democracy can do so, but I argue that even in the more successful models of Students against Sweatshops and the Forest Stewardship Council, benefits are too limited. A much more robust approach of the worker cooperative is argued for as exemplified by the Mondragon Corporation in northern Spain.

In Chapter 4: Democracy in the Workplace: Freedom, Equality, and the Sovereignty of Labor, we further explore the normative dimensions of worker cooperatives through three different philosophical views: Robert Dahl's classic *political* work that argues that businesses are not property but minigovernments, Richard Ellerman's contentious and technical *moral* take that argues that wage labor is a modern-day form of slavery, and David Schweickart's *system-level analysis* that makes reference to a pluralistic mix of economic and political arguments but nevertheless considers itself (democratic) market socialist. Critiques of worker co-ops from anti-PD and pro-PD views are then considered with a special focus on A-PD and subsistence perspective or social reproduction participatory democratic (S-PD) views. Even Mondragon gets critiqued, and other forms of cooperatives are explored that include nonworkers as members (e.g., multistakeholder cooperatives). The role of worker co-ops in system-wide change is discussed.

In Chapter 5: From the Culture of Consumption to Democratic Social Reproduction, the discussion of PD in the economy shifts from production to ecologically oriented social reproduction. The main case study is the Sei-katsu Club Consumer Cooperative Union founded and run by housewives in Japan. Differences with the worker co-op approach and Mondragon are debated and strategic implications considered.

Chapter 6 is entitled We Administer! From the Public-Private to the Social-Public. One of the most frequent and important critiques of PD is that it cannot be "scaled up." This chapter aims to address that challenge by outlining how PD can collaborate with the state by remaking elements of it (namely the machinery of its bureaucracy). Limits of state socialism and the welfare state are noted as are the failures of the neoliberal "public-private" model. An alternative model is developed, "the social-public," and explained with respect to service delivery and notions of PD and sustainability. Case

studies include the 1970s NYC fiscal crisis; water utilities in Brazil, Bolivia, and the United States; and social media and the Internet in terms of "platform cooperativism" and the P2P view of the "partner state." The affinity of the social-public with environmental justice concerns is noted as is the need to better operationalize the conception of the commons for urban areas.

Who will make this happen? In the Conclusion, building on the earlier chapters, I argue that political theory must break its obsession with critique and expand its empirical purview. Future research projects are called to more thoroughly investigate PD histories, key innovations, and best practices. I conclude by discussing four scenarios in which PD could proliferate: a "checkerboard" strategy that remakes local jurisdictions and then interconnects them; economic crisis and major state policy change; civil crisis and massive social movement action; and the ecological crisis and a cross sector multicultural climate justice movement.