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ISSN 1396-3503
2000:7**

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Fibigerstraede 1
9220 Aalborg - Denmark*

*print: UNI.PRINT
Aalborg 2000*

The Concept of 'Spectator Democracy'

Meaning and Measurement

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Paper presented at the research seminar

'Democracy in Scotland and Scandinavia:
Towards Spectator Democracy?'

28-29 Oct. 2000
Lysebu, Oslo

Draft

0. Introduction

In much research about political participation, discussions about the relevance of concepts such as 'spectator democracy' would hardly emerge at all. When analysing political participation, the logic of survey analysis tends to direct the attention of researchers towards much more narrow questions about what explains variations in the level and perhaps the forms of individual political behaviour. Broad, macro-level scenarios such as 'spectator democracy' usually do not by themselves enter such analyses. And being preoccupied with the sources of individual variations, the researcher often tends to become unable to see the wood for the trees. If they at all enter research, broad, macro level generalisations or models may be added at the end of the analysis as a more speculative amendment. Of course, broader models have better chances to enter comparative research which naturally directs attention to macro-level institutional variables, but even here they often remain, so to speak, 'external' to the analysis. And as a concept summarizing information about the dependent variable rather than as a concept referring to the independent variables, the chances of a concept like 'spectator democracy' to enter even comparative research are not very good. Of course, that will depend on the overall purpose and perspective of the analysis. Therefore we begin by a brief presentation of some of the major approaches in this field of research.

1. Alternative Approaches to the Study of Political Participation: Variations in Individual Political Behaviour or State of Democracy

There are many approaches to studying political participation (vanDeth, 1997) but two main lines are discernible: One that is preoccupied with explaining individual political behaviour, and another that is preoccupied with democracy.

The first one has dominated until now. Explicitly or implicitly, most research on political participation has been preoccupied with identifying which factors, in a statistical sense, contribute to *explaining variations in individual political participation* (Milbrath and Goel, 1977). Even if such research may take its point of departure in macro-level questions, such problems are soon operationalised as questions of explained variance at the individual level (e.g. Parry, Moyser and Day, 1992). This is in accordance with the fundamental logic of survey analysis which is to examine how different independent variables contribute to explaining variance in a dependent variable. Within this overriding perspective, one finds a number of competing theoretical frameworks which point out different types of independent variables:

A *rational choice* approach which is concerned with the interests of actors underlying their participation (e.g. Whiteley and Seyd, 1997);

A *resource approach* which is concerned with the socioeconomic (or network) resources for political participation, and their unequal distribution (e.g. Verba and Nijc, 1972;

Verba, Nie and Kim,1978; Verba, Schlozman and Brady, 1995; also the class mobilization theory of Korpi 1981 belongs basically to this direction); and

A *value approach* which relates new forms of political participation to postmaterial or anti-authoritarian values (van Deth & Scarbrough, eds., 1995).

Alternatively, political participation may be studied not as an object in itself but rather with the purpose of *evaluating the state of democracy*. This may include elements from the approaches above but focus is basically on the quality of democracy rather than explained variance: Are citizens engaged in politics? Do they feel they can exert any influence? Is there a democratic dialogue? Again, we encounter competing approaches:

A *participatory democracy approach* which is normative but also enters empirical research, with analytical focus on the level of participation, and on “spill over-effects” from various sorts of local participation to politics at higher levels. Such research overlaps with the resource approach but puts more emphasis on the *integrative* rather than *instrumental* aspects of political participation such as the articulation of (group) interests. This holds in particular for a *deliberative democracy* variant which underlines political dialogue and the shaping of democratic identities.

A *political culture approach* (Almond & Verba 1963) which is concerned with democratic identities, in particular with the orientations of citizens to the political system as active participants or as subjects.

A *social capital approach* which is particularly concerned with the integrative aspects of political participation for the development of social trust and ability to cooperate.¹

A *citizenship approach* (Pettersson, Westholm and Blomberg 1989; Andersen et al. 1993; Goul Andersen and Hoff 2000; Goul Andersen, Torpe & Andersen 2000) which is the most comprehensive in scope. It is concerned with three dimensions of citizenship: Rights (in a sociological sense)², participation, and identities. Normative points of departure are especially Marshall’s (1950) notion of “full citizenship”³ as the fulfilment

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- 1) Having their intellectual roots in rational choice theory, the “founding fathers” of the social capital approach have been preoccupied not least with problems that basically translates to the possibility of overcoming dilemmas of collective action (which requires experience with cooperation and the building of social trust).
 - 2) The point of departure is the legal conception of citizenship but even the rights dimension should be understood in a sociological, not just in a legal sense. Alternatively, one may speak of “empowerment” (or of “opportunity structure” which, however, is a bit more narrow as this does not include strengthening of the individual’s general resources).
 - 3) Taking as a point of departure the equality of formal citizenship, this tradition has focussed on the ability of the welfare state to ensure, by means of generous social protection, political socialisation, and provision of opportunities to participate, full participation in social and political life for all citizens, in spite of the inequalities that tend to follow from differences in individuals’ market positions, see Marshall (1950); Esping-Andersen (1990). This is a point of departure for a large Scandinavian research project (1998-2001) on “Unemployment, retirement and citizenship” (<http://www.socsci.auc.dk/ccws>) and for a large COST research network (1998-2003) on “Changing Labour Markets, Welfare Policies and Citizenship” (<http://socsci.auc.dk/cost>)

of rights, and republican ideals of civiness as the fulfilment of duties.⁴ It combines concerns of a resource approach, a participatory democracy approach and a political culture approach and as such focuses both on the instrumental and on the integrative aspects of political participation.

The discussion about "spectator democracy" is of course related to the approaches to political participation that is concerned with the nature and changes of democracy rather than with political participation as such.

2. Participatory Democracy or Spectator Democracy?

Usually, even research which is mainly concerned with variations in individual political behaviour at least pay lip service to some normative ideals of democracy. Often, one finds a well-known juxtaposition of two different ideals: A conception of participatory democracy vis-a-vis a 'realist' Schumpeterian conception of democracy as elite competition. In empirical studies, the ideal of participatory democracy has often served as a critical scale of measurement for actual democracy, as in Martinussen's (1973) classical book about the "distant democracy" in Norway.

This juxtaposition, however, has lost relevance as both ideals has lost adherents. On the one hand, the ideal of maximum possible participation is somewhat naive and perhaps not even desirable if carried that far. On the other hand, as far as the evaluation of political participation is concerned, the elitist conception has simply lost the battle. In Denmark, for instance, it has for decades been included in the purpose paragraph of the basic school that it should provide the pupils with the necessary competence for being active and critical citizens. Further, a survey of democracy from below from 1998 showed that almost nobody could identify with the Schumpeterian ideals of democracy. To the question

"Some people think that democracy, first and foremost, means the right to vote, and that citizens should largely remain silent between elections and leave it to politicians to govern. Others think that democracy is also the possibility to affect decisions between the elections",

respondents were asked to indicate their attitude on a scale from 1 to 5, and the average was as high as 4.4, that is, a strong support for the principle of participation. This is not surprising at all but it indicates that the two ideals have become somewhat outdated. Some alternative would be helpful, both for normative and analytical purposes.

4) The concept of "civiness" is not linked to any particular theoretical tradition. "Democratic identities", however, tend to reach beyond the classical concept of political culture which has been defined as "attitudes toward the political system and its various parts, and attitudes toward the role of the self in the system" (Almond & Verba 1965: 12). This is a more narrow concept, and it stems from the fact that Almond & Verba's definition of political culture is rooted in a conception of politics as interest conflict which does not leave much room for a conception of politics as common problem-solving. Similarly, it is rooted in a conception of democracy that focusses on the relationship between citizens and their government ("vertical citizenship"), not between citizens and citizens ("horizontal citizenship") (for this distinction, see Andersen et al, 1993, chapter 1). Both aspects are central from the point of view of deliberative democracy.

As far as the normative discussion is concerned, a more relevant juxtaposition today is between a conception of deliberative democracy and a conception of instrumental, aggregative democracy. The last one is based on a conception of politics as conflict between interests. The critical question is to what extent all interests have the possibility of being articulated. Deliberative democracy does not rule out conflicting interests but stresses the importance of political dialogue and a willingness to strive for common solutions. In practice, ideals of deliberation often tends to coincide with the ideals of participatory democracy. But maximum possible participation is not as such an ideal for deliberative democracy. And classical socialist ideals include the ideal of high participation but do not contain any space for deliberation. Socialism is traditionally based on a highly instrumentalist conception of democracy which in its classical Marxist version even refuses to discuss citizenship as something that could reach beyond class.

Analytically, there also seems to be need of new scales of measurement. One of the concepts that has been suggested, is "spectator democracy". It is a metaphor and as such is has some persuasive power. Like many other metaphors, however, it is not a very precise concept. And it is not clear what should be its counterpart. Obviously, it should be some sort of participatory democracy but as will emerge below, this concept will also need to be reformulated if we shall use the concept of spectator democracy and contrast it with something else. Besides, we need to distinguish between levels: Local, national and European. Citizens may be participants on one level but spectator on another.

The expression "spectator democracy" seems to have been suggested for the first time (as a tentative and not very precise concept) by Barnes and Kaase (1979). For a long time, the concept does not seem to have been used much. In a Danish context, the concept of spectator democracy appeared in relation to the 1990 Citizenship survey where it was quite extensively used (Andersen et al., 1993). With increasing importance of the media and the decline in party membership as well as in other forms of binding political affiliations, the linkages between political elites and ordinary people have become weakened. Thus, the concept of spectator democracy has become more plausible. The question only is what it should mean. There are a multiplicity of meanings.

Holmberg (1998) who fiercely criticise the idea of "spectator democracy" use the term "spectators" about citizens who are neither interested nor active in politics, that is, he refers to "spectator democracy" as the opposite of "participatory democracy" in the traditional sense. Roughly the same meaning of the concept is found in Togeby's (1994) description of women's changed political roles from "from spectators to participants". We fully agree that citizens do not look much like "spectators" in this sense. But there are more plausible definitions.

Jan van Deth (1998,2000) has recently used the phrase "spectator democracy" in a quite different meaning, i.e. about a society in which citizens are superficially *interested* in politics - as citizens they want to know what happens - but not by any means *engaged* in politics. It has no saliency to them, politics is perceived to play a role *for* their lives but it does not play much of a role *in* their lives.

In the books from the Danish 1990 citizenship survey, the concept was used in a rather ambivalent manner (Andersen et al. 1993). In fact two different meanings can be identified. Common to these meanings was is contention, contrary to van Deth, that citizens are not only interested but also to some extent engaged; further, they are relatively active as users in public service institutions, to some extent in local politics but not very active when it comes to politics at the national level. Also, they were perceived to have potentials for mobilisation, at least at the local level. The ambivalence relates to the question of motivation. Thus spectator democracy was referred to as a democracy "with few active players but many interested spectators who enter the field only when somebody threaten their narrow personal interests or when something temporarily catches their attention and interest. And they very soon leave the field again" (Andersen et al. 1993:230). Elsewhere in the same book, spectator democracy is defined as a democracy where citizens are actively seeking information and form their attitudes in a competent way but where opportunities for a dialogue with those who govern are not very good (1993: 73). The first definition underlines the non-binding orientation and see the high local participation and low national participation as indication that people can only be mobilized when their own interests are threatened. The second definition sees the priority for local political participation as an effect of the political opportunity structure, insufficient institutional possibilities for participation in "big politics" at the national level. This compares to the "low politics" at the local level where people have the opportunities to participate. In short, whereas the first definition focuses on the limitations among citizens, the second definition focuses on institutions, i.e. the structure of political opportunities.

Such ambiguities illustrate, of course, the problems encountered when one uses metaphorically loaded concepts. With such concepts often follows the temptation to use implicit or otherwise very imprecise definitions. On the other hand, the various conceptions of spectator democracy referred to above become quite clear as soon as they are spelled out. A relatively clear list of possible meanings and a relatively clear list of possible criteria can easily be elaborated. The possible core meanings of spectator democracy can be summarized as follows:

Passivity: Many passive and few active citizens (the classical contrast with participatory democracy, as in Holmberg 1998 and Tøgeby 1994).

Indifference: Superficially interested but not engaged (as in van Deth 2000).

Narrow-mindedness: Citizens basically oriented towards personal rather than genuinely political questions (the term spectator democracy has not been applied so far but this could be a 'Habermasian' definition).

Individualism: Overwhelmingly passive citizens who become active only when their personal interests are affected (first meaning in Andersen et al. 1993).

Broken linkage: Citizens are engaged but the political opportunity structure leaves them with few opportunities for two-way communication with decision-makers at a national (or supranational) level (second meaning in Andersen et al. 1993).

Dominance: Citizens are engaged but deliberately excluded from opportunities to influence: conflict between spectators and the elite.

We basically adhere to the *broken linkage* conception of “spectator democracy” but at any rate, the list above provides us with a list of central analytical questions:

- How interested and engaged are citizens in politics at different levels?
- How active are citizens in politics at different levels?
- What are their concerns - personal interests or broad problems for society?
- What are the potentials for mobilization?
- Are they able to understand politics and take a qualified position?
- Do they feel able to make a difference? - and if not, is it because of perceived lack of competence, perceived lack of opportunities, or perceived lack of responsiveness
- How much trust do people have in their political leaders and in the political system?

The purpose of introducing a concept of “spectator democracy” is, that it could, in a constructive manner, fill old wine in new bottles. We find in the list above all the traditional themes of political trust, political efficacy, political participation, political engagement, and ‘sociotropic’ versus ‘egoistic’ orientations to politics but arranged in a new way. For each possible definition except the first mentioned we will probably also need a new definition of a counterpoint. For instance, if we stick to e.g. the “broken linkage” conception of spectator democracy, we will need a new definition of participatory democracy as a contrast. In this case, it would be a definition that comes close to deliberative democracy.

3. Empirical findings

In a recent Danish study conducted in 1998⁵ as part of a larger “Democracy project” (Goul Andersen, Torpe and Andersen 2000), the concept of “spectator democracy” was applied as one scenario among others to describe the relationship between democracy and institutional change.⁶

In relation to this scenario, some of the core findings may be summarized as follows:

- Political interest is relatively high; it is increasing rather than declining but does not by any means follow the curve previously predicted by cognitive mobilisation theories
- Political participation is much higher at the institutional level and to some extent at the local level than at the national level - not to speak of the European level

5) See also for a comparative analysis of the Nordic Citizenship surveys 1987-1990 which make use of the concept of “spectator democracy” Goul Andersen & Hoff (2000).

6) It will be carried further in a new Citizenship study conducted in 2000 as part of a large “Democracy and Political Power” project (1998-2003) carried out on request from the Danish Parliament (see <http://www.ps.au.dk/magtudredningen>); this study also forms part of a comparative project on “Citizenship, Involvement, Democracy” which is financed by national research councils and others but as a Scientific network (see <http://www.mzes.uni-mannheim.de/projekte.cid>) supported also by the European Science Foundation.

Political interest is highest at the national level; this is also reflected in the propensity to vote in elections

Internal political efficacy (competence) is just as high in relation to national politics as in relation to local politics; the dividing line is between national and European politics

External political efficacy (responsiveness) is high in relation to local politics and very high at institutional level but low at national and European level.

This provides a likely explanation of the propensity of citizens to participate more at the institutional level than at the municipality level; and more at the municipality level than at the national level. Thus the priorities of participation should not be conflated with priorities of interest. Quite a few people who are active in institutions indicate that they are really not very much interested. And even on a European level, we find a substantial strengthening of European solidarity, European identities, and support for the European Union and its institutions. But not increasing support for joint decision-making (Goul Andersen & Hoff 2000, chapter 11).

From election studies (Andersen et al., 1999) we know that people have a quite clear picture of various issues, of the position of the political parties on such issues, and of the own position, and that they tend to vote very much in accordance with their preferences on such issues, not from personal concerns or from politically "irrelevant" matters.

From these studies we also know that parties tend, on most issues, to modify their issue positions in accordance with voters' preferences (Goul Andersen 1999). The only exception 1994-1998 was the issue of European integration where the gap widened even more. The Danish referendum result in 2000 confirms the validity of this measurement.

4. Discussion: Is the Concept of Spectator Democracy Useful?

There are three well-known problems with metaphors such as "Spectator Democracy". One is that metaphors may easily become a substitute for precise definitions and lead to storytelling rather than careful empirical testing of hypotheses. Secondly, such metaphors often tend to have normative connotations that increases the risk of value biases in interpretations. And thirdly, metaphors may sometimes involve a biased image of the past as some "golden age".

The advantages are that they help to interpret a totality that is sometimes more than the sum of its constituent parts, and that it may stimulate bridges between different fields of research. The inability of seeing the forest for the trees is a well-known phenomenon in the political participation literature which can sometimes deteriorate into an endless presentation of details which is of little interest to anybody outside this particular research tradition, and sometimes also very boring even to its practitioners. As a minimum, the discussion about such scenarios tend to stimulate formulation of new and more relevant hypotheses. And it may also catalyse broader

discussions about the future of democracy that can stimulate exchange between research in e.g., political institutions, political participation and elections which all too often live a life of their own. But one should be aware of the dangers.

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