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# CITIZEN PARTICIPATION: PRACTICE IN SEARCH OF A THEORY\*

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“If there is a political revolution going on throughout the world, it is what might be called the participation explosion.”<sup>1</sup>

Although the participation phenomenon may be worldwide, its meaning, role, function, and importance vary from culture to culture and political system to political system. It also seems evident that the drive or reasons for seeking more participation vary, depending on the perspectives from which the subject is approached, the institutional, political, economic context, and the personal interests and points of view of those opposing as well as of those supporting participation. Similarly, the phrases “public participation” and “citizen involvement” have many meanings and connotations, depending on the situation to which applied and the ideology, motivations, and practical orientations of the users.

The terms are used in the context of fundamental political decisions with respect to government structure and the content of public programs, referring to the importance of “consent of the governed” as a prerequisite of the social compact. But the terms are also applied to routine processes of political activity, such as political parties and elections, administrative program planning, and day-to-day management of public agencies. Demands for more public participation may be motivated by a desire to alter the power structure and thus weaken “the establishment,” or they may simply seek better information inputs and more responsive public service.

Given this variation in usage and the many meanings and connotations of the terms citizen involvement and participation, it is probably not surprising that neither normative nor empirical theories applicable to the topic have been formulated. Little research on the subject has been undertaken, and even as speculative philosophy the ideology of participation has not been systematically organized or neatly structured. Yet in the last decade the literature on citizen involvement and public participation has grown, so much that it has

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\*This article is based in part on a study prepared for the Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East of the United Nations.

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1. G. Almond & S. Verba, *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations 2*, as quoted in *Participatory Democracy 1* (T. Cook & P. Morgan eds. 1971).

been possible to prepare several useful bibliographies on the subject.<sup>2</sup> But much of the literature, especially that related to particular governmental programs,<sup>3</sup> has tended to be prescriptive and hortatory, abounding with rhetoric and polemics and resting on unanalyzed premises and assumptions. Much of the literature, too, has dealt with the subject of participation as though it had never before been the subject of intellectual attention and as though it bore little relationship to earlier streams of political thought and analysis, as well as to empirical social research.

Among the reasons why the recent emphasis on public participation in the United States has received minimal analytic or theoretical attention is that criticism of participation grates on the ears of many Americans. To suggest that the process, role, and function of public participation may require specification and may even be subject to limitations is regarded as a denial that all men are created equal and construed as a challenge to the very foundations of American democracy. Like secret caucuses, racism, or socialism, expression of doubts as to the general appropriateness and applicability of participatory systems are labeled unAmerican—even by intellectuals and academics.<sup>4</sup> Political leaders, bureaucrats, and others who must face the public and need its support are especially reluctant to criticize public participation or to examine its premises or applications for fear of being accused of undermining cherished traditions.<sup>5</sup>

It is the objective of this essay to review some of the conceptual

2. Three of these bibliographies are: J. May, *Citizen Participation: A Review of the Literature* (Council of Planning Librarians, Exchange Bibliography 1971); U.S. Dep't of Housing and Urban Affairs, *Citizen and Business Participation in Urban Affairs: A Bibliography* 3 (1970); Marshall, *Who Participates in What?*, 4 *Urban Affairs Q.* 206n.2 (1968).

3. Many titles related to particular programs might be listed (see bibliographies cited in note 2); the following are illustrative, as are those in other notes: R. Apter, *Environmental Planning and Citizen Participation in Colorado Water Resource Development* (1971); A. Bishop, *Socio-Economic and Community Factors in Planning Urban Freeways* (1969); T. Borton & K. Warner, *Techniques for Improving Communications and Public Participation in Water Resources Planning* (1971); Institute for Water Resources, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, *The Susquehanna Communication-Participation Study* (IWR Rep. 70-6, 1970); Institute for Water Resources, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, *Public Participation in Water Resources Planning* (IWR Rep. 70-7, 1970); J. Kintel, *Organization of Community Groups in Support of the Planning Process and Code Enforcement Administration* (1970); K. Warner, *Public Participation in Water Resources Planning* (Nat'l Water Comm'n, NWC-SBS-71-013, 1971); J. Zimmerman, *The Federated City: Community Control in Large Cities* (1972); Landstrom, *Citizen Participation in Public Land Decisions*, 9 *St. Louis U. Law J.* 372 (1965); Wengert, *Public Participation in Water Planning: A Critique*, 7 *Water Resources Bulletin* 26-32 (1971).

4. The author himself was criticized at a professional conference by a distinguished economist for suggesting the kinds of analysis proposed in this article.

5. A sensitivity to this kind of criticism is indicated by K. Prewitt & A. Stone in *The Ruling Elites* (1973), in which they suggest an elite theory of government which is clearly opposed to participatory conceptions.

problems, both implicit and explicit, in the current emphasis on public participation, to suggest some of the previous thought on the subject, and to indicate points at which both normative and empirical social theory may have something to contribute toward putting citizen involvement and public participation into a philosophic perspective. Perhaps this effort may suggest lines for subsequent philosophic inquiry and empirical research.

### PERCEPTIONS OF PARTICIPATION

As indicated, those urging citizen participation (as well as those resisting it) perceive it in different ways, depending on such factors as position and status, whether they are in power or out of power, their responsibilities, their constituencies, their overt and covert goals, and many others. In part, perceptions are tied to motivations—an impenetrable morass for policy analysis, for while types of motivations can be described, it is often impossible to know which motivation or combination of motivations determined particular behavior. This has been the dilemma faced by the legal realists<sup>6</sup> in seeking to explain judicial behavior, and it continues to plague attempts at explaining any social behavior, whether of individuals or groups. In most situations, the best explanations must rely on the weakest component of scientific method—inferences and circumstantial evidence. And to an unavoidable degree, this deficiency limits the following general exploration of perceptions of participation.

#### *Participation as Policy*

To some, increasing citizen participation is simply a matter of sound and desirable policy to be implemented in as many ways as possible. Like most policy choices, this is a normative conclusion—a goal to be sought. Thus a high official in the Department of Commerce can state, commenting on artificial rainmaking, that the person on whose land manmade rain falls has a right to be consulted. And the idea of a “right” to be involved in decisions affecting one is frequently voiced in the literature. What the nature of that involvement should be, how it relates to decisionmaking responsibility, and whether the normal representative system and the constitutional protection of individual rights are insufficient (topics to be considered below) are seldom discussed.

6. Jerome Frank, seeking to apply Freudian psychological concepts to the judicial process (J. Frank, *Law and the Modern Mind* (1936)), developed intriguing theories of behavior, but they were largely untestable short of psychoanalysis.

### *Participation as Strategy*

Some advocates of participation approach the subject as a matter of strategy—a maneuver to accomplish other unstated or stated objectives. How participation and the arguments for it are used depends on, among other things, whether one is working from within or from outside the system. For those outside the system “Power to the People” signals major changes in power relationships, if not revolution. For those within the system, such as government agencies and interest groups, participation may serve as a major technique for gaining legislative and political support and legitimation. It is not uncommon to try to interpret the support of large numbers of citizens as equal to the public interest. The use of survey research may serve similar strategic purposes. The agency head who can report that 53 percent of individuals surveyed in scientifically conducted interviews agreed with his position is generally regarded as more credible than his colleague who has conducted no survey. Where the public interest may lie and what should be done about the 47 percent who held other views are questions often overlooked. The situation is not unlike that of the French leader who viewed a mob passing under his window and exclaimed “Those are my people—I am their leader—I must follow them.” American politicians and bureaucrats similarly prefer to act from positions in which they feel they have public support. Thus planning for public participation to gain such support is a natural strategy.

### *Participation as Communication*

Some argue for more participation in order to improve information inputs into administrative decisions. Since government is designed to serve people, the views and preferences of people are necessary inputs to responsive decisions. Often, it is argued, the technician or bureaucratic specialist will make “bad” decisions when he decides *for* people instead of *with* them. In this view, questions of how to deal with dissent or with minority groups are usually minimized, and the importance of making choices and of determining how costs as well as benefits should be allocated is overlooked.

### *Participation as Conflict Resolution*

In some situations participation is urged as a way to reduce tensions and resolve conflicts. Underlying this emphasis are assumptions that sharing points of view increases understanding and tolerance and that the very process of involvement weakens a tendency toward dogmatic assertions and reduces personal biases and mistrust. Insofar

as conflicts rest upon misinformation, participation and involvement in town meeting situations provides opportunities for exchange of information and may induce modifications of values and opinions and increase confidence and trust. While intimacy may breed contempt, group discussions and exchanges of ideas are said to minimize hostility and may permit constructive collaboration. Certainly experiences in the field of labor-management relations would seem to support this proposition. At the same time, the proposition that participation leads to consensus would in most situations be of dubious validity. There is reason to believe that in a nonhomogeneous community increased participation will highlight differences and increase conflict. Probably the proper question is whether a condition for consensus already exists—in which case participation may further its realization. But where a condition of diversity exists, participation can contribute little to conflict resolution and may even increase conflict by creating confrontations and inducing polarization. Where a diversity of interests is clearly established, participation can contribute to conflict resolution only in highly structured situations with institutionalized procedures and a willingness to accept unacceptable decisions (as in litigation).

### *Participation as Therapy*

In recent years the emphasis on participation as social therapy has been frequently articulated in connection with the so-called War on Poverty.<sup>7</sup> On the premise that particularly the urban poor are alienated from society, opportunities for them to be involved in decisions with respect to programs which affected them were provided to cure this “social disease.” Variants of this approach have appeared on college campuses, leading to varieties of student involvement in academic decisions. Proposals for increased participation have also been directed to overcoming the adverse effects of racial prejudice and other forms of discrimination.

## STIMULI FOR INCREASING PARTICIPATION

One of the major stimuli to current interest in participation is rapid change in the patterns of life which pose a threat to traditional existence and require a host of adjustments in ways of solving prob-

7. The “War on Poverty” has generated a tremendous literature. Numerous publications deal with the concept in the statute urging that “maximum feasible participation” be secured from the poor. How this concept got into the law without much deliberation is detailed in D. Moynihan, *Maximum Feasible Misunderstanding* (1970). See also Advisory Comm’n on Intergovernmental Relations, *Intergovernmental Relations in the Poverty Program* (1966).

lems. A prime factor in this change situation has been the increase in technology and the scientific basis for decisions, so that the individual has less and less been able to do as he chooses but has instead had to follow the advice of scientists and technicians remote from him psychologically, if not geographically.

To illustrate, 100 years ago the location of streets and roads was largely a matter for local community decision in the framework of local political processes, reflecting the interaction of community interests and local interpersonal relationships. Decision processes and the inputs to them were generally known and understood by the people in the community, even when they did not participate in or were not happy about them. Today, in contrast, the location of roads is generally the result of economic and technical studies and engineering surveys far removed from the ken of ordinary people, with the decision process only dimly perceived and understood by even the most highly educated. As a result, citizens feel excluded from the process as decisions are made *for* rather than *with* them. And where the location of roads and highways is used to accomplish hidden objectives and realize ulterior motives, confidence in the process is truly shaken.

Scientific and technological developments with respect to communications and transportation have contributed to obscuring community boundaries, making it possible to substitute centralized decisions for what once were local decisions. The expansion of government in the past 75 years has probably intensified the feeling of alienation with respect to what government is doing and how it affects particular people. While some technological and scientific developments may contribute to strengthening community ties, on balance it seems reasonable to generalize that today's citizen, no matter where he lives, has lost control of many aspects of his life. In addition, whatever the specific facts, many people *feel* that they have lost such control, even though the actions of government agencies, scientists, and bureaucrats are justified as being for the public good. Whatever program objectives may be, it is often uncomfortable and disconcerting to have others make decisions which the individual only barely understands and which he may prefer to make for himself.

The concept of worker alienation was an important element in class-struggle doctrines formulated by Karl Marx to characterize the psychological state of workers who, he argued, were being exploited by capitalist managers. It was clear to him that workers were not emotionally involved in the productive process and gained inadequately and disproportionately from their inputs. Communist theory

has obviously not been against industrial production; its dominant concern has been with control of that production.

The Communist Manifesto sought to rally workers by the slogan "Workers of the world unite; you have nothing to lose but your chains." For Marx and his followers these chains were not only lack of economic benefits from labor inputs, but also psychological alienation resulting from not having a role in the productive process. It was consistent with these views for Lenin to emphasize in 1917 worker participation in the organization of factories, using the slogan, "All power to the Soviets," the Soviet being the local council of workers. But Communist practice has not dealt any more effectively with the problems of alienation stemming from size and depersonalization of the productive process and patterns of modern life in a scientific and technological era than has the capitalist world. That the present clamor for participation has roots in this situation seems evident.

#### HISTORICAL INTERPRETATIONS

It would be a mistake to suggest that citizen alienation alone is the cause of the present interest in participation. Although the conditions which induce modern alienation probably did not exist in the New England town—the classic image of true American democracy—other social forces undoubtedly affected individual behavior so as to prevent full and free expression of opinions and unfettered participation in community life. We know, for example, that theocratic dominance was an important constraint in New England governing processes. But in any case, the town meeting ideal admired by Jefferson and other democrats was incorporated into the American local political structure by converting the survey townships into governmental and school district units, even though the six mile square pieces of geography did not always coincide with sociologically defined communities. Thus town and school district meetings did provide opportunities for extensive citizen participation in local government. At the same time, reflecting both population numbers and spatial distance, a complex representative system at state and federal levels, reinforced by political and electoral systems, provided for the form of popular control, if not always the substance. Implicitly, the present emphasis on community involvement and citizen participation raises doubts as to the validity and adequacy of the American representative system, which has substantially taken the place of an earlier system which provided for citizen inputs at the township base of the governmental pyramid. At issue is the question of where participation fits in a nation of 220 million people.



For Jean Jacques Rousseau<sup>8</sup> the answer was simple: democracy could only exist on a face-to-face basis, such as he found in the Swiss Cantons and as existed in New England towns. Representative government to him was not democracy. And this view is implicit in the position of those arguing for increased community control—of schools, of police, of planning. But such advocates, like Rousseau, usually neglect the issues of intercommunity coordination and of resolving policy conflicts in the larger communities—cities, counties, states, regions, and the nation.

Professor Herbert Kaufman, reviewing American political and administrative history,<sup>9</sup> has suggested that the current concern for greater participation illustrates a theory he advanced some years ago that the nation oscillates from one to another of three dominating concepts with respect to public service: 1) a search for representativeness; 2) attempts to secure politically neutral competence; and 3) desire for executive leadership. In Kaufman's analysis, the current period is not unlike the Jacksonian era (1828-36) when the search was for greater representativeness. Not unlike today, the idea of career service was challenged, and a dominant view was that every man could handle the tasks of government administration. Frequent rotation in office was considered desirable, with the result that a wide list of officials was required to stand for election. Some 80 years later a similar search for representativeness and popular participation led to the initiative and referendum, the recall, local home rule, and women's suffrage. Kaufman's structuring of history does not take into account social forces which may have caused or contributed to the oscillation from one set of attitudes and demands to another. This is not the place to analyze the validity of his analysis nor to expand on it to suggest some elements of social causation. But one might note that the times in which the demand has been for greater representativeness in the governing process would appear to have been periods of substantial social change with accompanying turmoil. Times in which the demand has been for executive leadership has been characterized by acute social problems, e.g., war, depression. And times where the clamor has been for neutral competence have been periods of consolidation.

#### PARTICIPATION AND SOCIAL THEORY

Recent decades have seen the flowering of empirical social theory.

8. Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, in *Political Writings* 102-106 (F. Watkins ed. & transl. 1953).

9. Kaufman, *Administrative Decentralization and Political Power*, *Public Administration Review* (1969).

At the same time, normative theory as well as pragmatic experience continue to influence how Americans regard government and the governmental process. In the following paragraphs reference is made to a wide spectrum of theory, with suggestions that ideas on citizen involvement and public participation might benefit from specific attempts to relate them to these theories. Implicit is the belief that, rhetoric aside, public participation as a theory of governance has not been effectively dealt with and that its formulation and critical analysis is badly needed.<sup>10</sup>

American government rests on pragmatic experience, rather than on grand formulations of political theory. Our great documents enunciating political principles, such as the Declaration of Independence and the Federalist Papers, are polemical rationalizations of political action. Americans, in politics as in other aspects of their culture, are not philosophers or great theoreticians. Pragmatic responses to particular problems have dominated political action—and the major characteristic of pragmatic philosophy is that it is no philosophy. Thus it is not surprising that such political theory as we have been able to articulate has been retrospective, inferred from action, behavior, and political statements and writings rich in normative content.

It has frequently been pointed out that the Founding Fathers held to no fully articulated philosophy of government. We are left to infer their values and perceptions from the polemical Federalist Papers, written to persuade New Yorkers to vote for the proposed Constitution. Although the Federalist Papers are conceded to be great works of advocacy and reflective of the pragmatic mood which still dominates American political thought, they hardly provide a coherent and integrated statement of political doctrine. Being dominantly instrumental in character, they express concern over rule by the masses and the influence of interest groups (factions—including political parties). At the same time, they voice support for a checks and balances system which reflects fear of a too powerful government.

From the beginning of the U.S. government conceptions of the

10. Perhaps the lack of attempts to deal with participation is overstated. The criticism is really directed at the more ardent advocates of participatory systems, many of them Federal bureaucrats, who have not faced up to the conceptual problems with which this article deals. The following works, largely by political scientists, indicate some efforts in the analysis of participation: G. Amond & S. Verba, *supra* note 1; R. Dahl, A Preface to Democratic Theory (1956); T. Dye & H. Zeigler, *The Irony of Democracy* (2d ed. 1972); T. Lowi, *The End of Liberalism* (1969); A. McFarland, *Power and Leadership in Pluralist Systems* (1969); D. Thompson, *The Democratic Citizen* (1970); S. Verba & N. Nie, *Participation in America* (1972); H. Zeigler & T. Dye, *Elite-Mass Behavior and Interaction*, 13 *Am. Behavioral Scientist* (1969).

political process have oscillated from a view regarding the government as “they” to the alternate view of regarding the government as “we.” The Declaration of Independence, at least insofar as government of the Colonies was concerned, moved in the direction of “we” —suggesting the linkage between free and independent men and self governance. The Bill of Rights in the first ten constitutional amendments was premised on a “they” concept of government—one that had to be controlled by laws, one that could not be completely trusted to guard individual liberties.

This ambivalence continues to be an important aspect of American political behavior, just as the absence of a fully developed theory of American government continues to be unavailable. The best that has been done has been done to analyze processes of politics, administration, and government as a basis for formulating from such observation political theories that attempt to characterize actual political behavior.

At the same time, as the scientific method has come to dominate the study of politics (and of society), a different kind of theory seeking to order and explain processes and phenomena has begun to develop. In some areas such theory has also been subjected to empirical tests. But it is clear that we are far from any general theory of politics. And even at the middle range level a great variety of unintegrated political theory is available for scholarly application.

This brief characterization of American political theory has been introduced to provide a backdrop for a review of the status and development of political theories relevant to citizen involvement and public participation in governmental processes.

### THEORIES OF REPRESENTATION

Problems of the relationships of government to the governed are not new to political philosophy. Two aspects of these relationships were well-developed over the preceding two centuries: one concerns systems of representation, the other questions of control. Both were recognized in the Declaration of Independence; both were important issues at the Constitutional Convention. One of the most thorough examinations of the subject was John Stuart Mill’s essay *Representative Government*.<sup>11</sup> Early in the present century, Guild Socialists in England and Syndicalists in France, searching for an alternative to geographic representation, concluded that functional representation would more adequately reflect popular interests. A few attempts at functional assemblies were made in Italy and France but were clearly

11. J. Mill, *Representative Government* (1949).

not tremendously successful. Others sought to experiment with proportional representation, seeking to correlate representation to voting strength. This remains a characteristic of the German Parliament. In any case, those who urge greater public participation, and certainly those who seek to formulate a political theory on participative democracy, must confront the question of how participation is to be related to representation. Whatever system may be proposed, representation is a stark necessity which must reflect population size and geographic area. And while one may join Rousseau in concluding that a representative system is not democracy, one must nevertheless confront the question of designing a system in which there is a degree of responsiveness and citizen control. The alternative is to opt for dictatorship.

### THEORIES OF POWER

Through the ages political philosophers have been fascinated by issues of social and political power—the influence by some over the behavior of others. Concepts of public participation could benefit from efforts to relate them to theories of political and social power. Three aspects of power theory would seem of particular relevance: the *first* is the revolutionary concept of the *seizure of power*; the *second* are the concepts of *community power*, as developed in a variety of social research in recent decades; and the *third* are *elite theories*, ranging from rather modest research in leadership to Hobbesian criticisms of democracy to C. Wright Mills' analysis of the Power Elite.<sup>1 2</sup>

#### *Seizure of Power*

Seizure of power, at least since the French Revolution of 1789, is the other side of the coin on which is engraved "Power to the People." It serves to remind those concerned about formulating a political theory of participation that citizen involvement, especially when not structured, can become a revolutionary force seeking the redistribution of power. It raises the question of whether, and to what extent, an existing system ("The Establishment") can accommodate change.

#### *Community Power*

Community studies became well-established, if not popular, during the 1920's and 1930's, e.g., *Middletown* by Robert S. and Helen M.

12. C. Mills, *The Power Elite* (1956).

Lynd. But the emphasis in these early studies was less on political power than on a portrayal of a cross-section of local culture.<sup>13</sup>

Following publication of Floyd Hunter's *Community Power Structure*<sup>14</sup> after World War II, attention was directed to decisionmaking processes within a community and to the role of those who were designated "The Influentials." From the point of view of citizen participation, the importance of Hunter's study is perhaps that those who ruled "Regional City" were not politically accountable. The power structure described by Hunter was hierarchical with the social, economic, and political life of the community being dominated by a relatively small and homogeneous group of influentials.

In the early 1960's a number of political science studies of community power challenged the Hunter thesis and suggested that power in American communities was shared by a variety of elites with varying interests and that their power was effective only in certain areas of community policy. This pluralistic view of community processes was formulated in Robert Dahl's *Who Governs*.<sup>15</sup> From the debate between class-oriented sociologists and pluralist political scientists arose efforts to synthesize results of many studies and to develop a comprehensive theory of community power. But these efforts have not been entirely successful, and some significant gaps in the theories of community power remain. One of these, particularly relevant to this essay, is the failure generally to deal explicitly with the question of citizen participation as it relates to community power structure. This remains a challenge to anyone seeking to formulate a theory of participation.

### *The Governing Elite*

As indicated in the discussion of community power, elite control may be inferred from certain formulations of how community decisions are made. But in addition, the annals of political thought contain a wide range of material dealing more directly and explicitly with the role of governing elites. Thus, an issue of the *American Behavioral Scientist* devoted to the topic of "Elite-Mass Behavior and Interaction" began with the editors' axiomatic declaration:

In all societies, and under all forms of government, the few govern the many. This is true in democracies as well as in dictatorships. . . .

Because the symbols and concepts of American politics are drawn from democratic political thought, we seldom confront the ele-

13. For a review of the community power studies see W. Hawley & J. Svara, *The Study of Community Power: A Bibliographic Review* (1972).

14. F. Hunter, *Community Power Structure* (1953).

15. R. Dahl, *Who Governs? Democracy and Power in an American City* (1961).

mental fact that a few citizens are always called upon to govern the remainder.<sup>16</sup>

This statement must be dealt with in a viable theory of participation. In more moderate terms, the problem is one of authority and responsibility, of leadership and capacity, in the context of which the nature and scope of participation are to be spelled out.

The issue of the importance of a controlled and responsible elite is more sharply drawn by Professors Thomas R. Dye and L. Harmon Zeigler in their *The Irony of Democracy*. In a trenchant and challenging *Postscript* to the Second Edition, Professor Dye asserts:<sup>17</sup>

Mass governance is neither feasible nor desirable. Widespread popular participation in national political decisions is not only impossible to achieve in a modern industrial society, it is incompatible with the liberal values of individual dignity, personal liberty, and social justice. Efforts to encourage mass participation in American politics are completely misdirected. To believe that making American government more accessible to mass influence will make it any more humane is to go directly against the historical and social science evidence. It is the irony of democracy that masses, not elites, pose the greatest threat to the survival of democratic values. More than anything else, America needs an enlightened elite capable of acting decisively to preserve individual freedom, human dignity, and the values of life, liberty, and property. Our efforts must be directed toward ensuring that the established order is humane, decent, tolerant, and benign.

Elitism is a necessary characteristic of all societies. The elitism we have ascribed to American society is not a unique corruption of democratic ideas attributable to capitalism, war, the “military-industrial complex,” or any other events or people in this nation. There is no “solution” to elitism, for it is not the problem in a democracy. There have been many mass movements, both “left” and “right” in their political ideology, which have promised to bring power to the people. Indeed, the world has witnessed many “successful” mass movements which have overthrown social and political systems, often at great cost to human life, promising to empower the masses. But invariably they have created new elite systems which are at least as “evil,” and certainly no more democratic, than the older systems which they replaced. Revolutions come and go—but the masses remain powerless. The question, then, is not how to combat elitism or empower the masses or achieve revolution, but rather how to build an orderly, humane, and just society.

16. H. Zeigler & T. Dye, *supra* note 10.

17. T. Dye & H. Zeigler, *supra* note 10.

Participation theory must confront the challenges formulated by Professor Dye.

### GROUP THEORIES OF POLITICS

Any theory of politics is a theory of power, its management and use. In separately discussing the three subsets of power theory in the preceding paragraphs it was intended simply to suggest the explicitness with which the concepts of power were dealt with. Group theories also concern power, but, as dealt with by many political scientists, power is the result, rather than the purpose of group behavior; it is the object, rather than the subject.

American political science is pluralist in orientation, and this fits in nicely with group theories of politics and political behavior. Essentially, group theory states that for a variety of reasons, including the desire to be effective, political man in America organizes himself into groups. Political activity therefore involves conflict, bargaining, and negotiations among groups. It is through alliances and alignments of groups that political action occurs. Groups, in turn, are kept from overreaching themselves by overlapping memberships and because new groups can always be organized. Thus, a system of countervailing power serves to check excesses.<sup>18</sup>

Critics of group theory have pointed to the fact that there is a silent majority not represented by the myriads of groups interacting in the political process—and potential groups do not necessarily emerge to balance the situation. Others have pointed to the establishment bias of group theory, suggesting its failure to accommodate change. Still others have challenged the motivational logic of group behavior.<sup>19</sup> Yet the effect of these criticisms has not been to depreciate the descriptive validity of group analysis, but to suggest that group theory is not the “general theory of political behavior” which some had hoped it would be. In any case, theories of citizen involvement and public participation cannot ignore group theory and the research on which it rests because the latter explains a great deal about how the American political system functions.

### RESIDUAL PROBLEMS

This section identifies a number of conceptual problems which impinge upon citizen involvement and public participation. The

18. The classic explication of group theory remains D. Truman, *The Governmental Process* (1958).

19. A frequently overlooked criticism of group theory, using the concepts of economic utility analysis is M. Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action* (1965).

brevity of treatment does not reflect their lack of importance, but rather space limitations and the competence of the author.

### *Behavioral Analysis*

Discussions of participation tend to reveal an egalitarian one man-one vote bias. As normative policy this is consistent with dominant American values. As psychological reality it falls considerably short. Theories of public participation have not yet begun to utilize the results of social, psychological, and behavioral research. Theories of public participation need to take such findings into account. Only in this way, for example, can what is known about the "silent majority" be dealt with adequately. To concepts of alienation need be added concepts of span of attention, so that the limitations of hortatory admonitions to "get involved" are qualified by hard reality.

### *The Boundary Problem*

Recommending participation on the lowest level or on a face-to-face basis does not automatically identify the geographic unit which provides the focus for attention. In fact, one of the most difficult and complex decisions is determining appropriate boundaries. Simple geography, i.e., where people live or work, is not enough. Problem boundaries must be related to reflect interest boundaries—and depending on the problem these could be the entire nation. Who, for instance, has an interest in a National Forest? Clearly, those living close to it, but not they alone. Those in the watershed of the forest, those using timber and timber products, those seeking recreation in the forest and many more have an interest. Who has an interest in the public domain, in atomic energy research and production, in coal and oil production, in the development of a river? Paraphrasing the Supreme Court in a 19th century case, "We are, after all, one nation." The locale is important, but it is not the sole dimension. The gerrymander must be recognized as a factor in drawing social and economic boundaries as well as political boundaries. Boundaries determine problems and participation. If one's goal is to raise average income levels in Appalachia, one can achieve this goal by redefining Appalachia to include Philadelphia and St. Louis.

### *Functional Approaches*

Structural-functional analysis continues to be a valid and useful social science technique. A traditional and still important approach to American government has been separation of functions into legis-



lative, executive, and judicial, functional distinctions coinciding with allocation of authority to the three branches of government established in the U.S. and state constitutions. To these three functions Almond and Powell have added three more: "interest orientation, interest aggregation, and communication."<sup>20</sup> This sixfold classification of functions becomes the basis for analyzing the conversion processes of the political system which transform the inputs of demands and supports into program and policy outputs representing extraction from the system, distribution and redistribution within the system, negotiation and the like. Such a systems model is far from simple, but it may be useful in deciding the nature and role of participation and in distinguishing types of participation needed and desirable at different process stages. It seems clear, for example, that participation in the formation of new government structures, new programs, and new policies will vary from participation in the execution of generally established programs and policies. Although the distinction between "policy" and "administration" has been discredited in the literature of public administration, since administrators make policy through exercise of delegated authority and by accretion through day-to-day administration, in a polar sense the functional distinction would seem to be useful. One can identify different types of participation in relation to different functions—ranging from mass meetings, political assemblies, strikes and demonstrations (and even revolutionary mobs) to community meetings and formal hearings, where seeking information is a primary objective.

#### RELATIONSHIPS TO THE EXISTING SYSTEM

It has already been pointed out that public participation, depending on where and how it occurs, implies change and often is a deliberate threat to existing decisional (power) arrangements. No theory or procedure for participation can be adequate if it does not deal explicitly with how participatory processes relate to the formal structures of government, including the regular representative system, political parties, etc. Essential to this problem is the question of majority rule and minority rights. In fact, except in the election of officials (and not always then), it is usually impossible to find majority support for most governmental decisions. Not only is the silent majority a reality—barriers of understanding and interest in this age of specialization are equally limiting. In the absence of general referendum procedures which would be of doubtful utility and with political parties that are not issue-oriented or programmatic, the

20. G. Almond & G. Powell, *Comparative Politics* (1966).

concept of majority support for any program or policy is difficult to prove. Even in a town meeting situation majority views of the community and certainly majority interests are difficult to identify. On a few limited issues polling may give a static picture of attitudes, but it cannot capture the dynamics of change, particularly in highly volatile situations.

## CONCLUSION

A classic statement of elite theory is the “iron rule of oligarchy” formulated by the French sociologist Robert Michels. As theory, his conclusions would clearly be opposed to most concepts of participation—even though, as this article has suggested, there is not yet a coherent body of ideas which might be labeled participation theory. But if Michel’s conclusions approximate reality, the role of participation is narrowly constrained and must be approached on a much more limited basis. Perhaps the issues are, as they have been from 1789 on, issues of controlling government, assuring sound and wise decisions, providing for due process, protecting minority views, establishing responsibility and responsiveness, seeking equity, and striving for the public interest. It is a sobering thought that, in the context of one man-one vote—the simple statement of majoritarian decisionmaking—most of those shouting loudest for participation have generally been minorities. The poor, the Blacks, the environmentalists—all are clearly and obviously minority groups. Only a sense of equity and public responsibility (contrary to the economic model resting largely on greed and self-seeking), together with a good portion of concern and even fear, make a war on poverty possible. Social reform, environmental protection or other new thrusts in public policy have not been and cannot be majoritarian, participation rhetoric to the contrary notwithstanding. There is no substitute for a policy which seeks the public interest.

For some time after World War II it was fashionable among social scientists to assert that the public interest was a myth—like religion, an opiate of the masses. What was confused in this view were the difficulties in defining the public interest and the ease of equating personal aggrandizement as the simple definition of that interest, with the much more important fact that it was the *search* for the public interest, the *requirement* to *rationalize* decisions as being in the public interest, that was the significant aspect of the concept. The preacher says “Seek ye first the kingdom of God;” the responsible democrat says “Seek ye first the public interest.” Neither

is easy; with respect to both it is the *seeking* that makes the difference, even when it is recognized that we often fall short.

Citizen involvement and public participation must also meet the test of public interest. This is why this article has stressed the need for a theory of participation which can be related both to normative and empirical conceptions of our democratic system and integrated with American pragmatic experience.