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# Participatory democratization reconceived<sup>☆</sup>

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## Abstract

Since the 1970s participatory democracy has been a catchword for genuine, popular or progressive democratization. Since then the general climate has changed in several respects. How is participatory democracy now being conceived and reconceived? To contextualize this question I first consider ongoing discussions of democracy and democratization generally, and then zero in on participatory democracy and its various current meanings. Participatory democracy is now usually thought of, rather than as wholesale system change, in partial reforms, particularly decentralization and politics of empowerment. I conclude by offering dark and light scenarios of the future significance of participatory democratization. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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Democracy is now the predominant imaginary of politics. As they say, ‘Like *Coca Cola*, *democracy* needs no translation to be understood virtually everywhere’ [1:208]. Politics is now talked about in terms of qualifiers of democracy—such as elite democracy, facade democracy, free enterprise democracy, partial democracy, semi-democracy, low-intensity democracy, democracy for hire, democracy by default, radical democracy. From this circumstance two implications follow. As political discourse now largely consists of variations on the theme of democracy the variations have become as important as the theme. Attacking democracy wholesale is now of waning interest, or at any rate much less enabling than reinventing democracy.

This reflection does not hammer on the shortcomings of democracy but focuses on different ways in which participatory democracy is now being conceived and reconceived. First I consider general discussions of democracy and democratization,

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and then zero in on participatory democracy and what it means now. I conclude by offering dark and light scenarios of the future significance of participatory democratization.

## 1. Trends in democracy discussions

To contextualize the discussion of participatory democracy let us first consider ongoing discussions of democracy generally and as they are taking place with different emphases in various parts of the world [2–9] (momentarily using the sketchy shorthand of West, East and South).

The domains in which democracy and democratization unfold are the state (i.e. the constitution and structure of the state, such as a unitary or federal structure); government (executive, legislative, judiciary and civil service); politics (political processes and political culture); and society (social institutions from the workplace to the household). Obviously these spheres can be in friction with one another. A country can adopt a progressive constitution (such as the 1997 People's Constitution in Thailand) but have a conservative government or a government impaired by a conservative legacy (as in South Africa and Indonesia). The executive and the governing party may be progressive, but not the bureaucracy. A government may be progressive but not political processes and political culture; for example political parties may fail to practice internal democracy such as regular elections. Or, government and politics may be progressive while social relations in the workplace, in educational and cultural institutions, in the family and the household and in gender relations are conservative. While overt political processes matter, civic norms constitute the grammar of citizen conduct [10].<sup>1</sup>

General discussions of democracy nowadays concern democracy *beyond the nation state*, in relation to globalization and regionalization. Familiar themes in this context are global civil society and the reform of international institutions and regimes. A related discussion concerns the dynamics and the redefinition of sovereignty, in view of human rights as well as humanitarian action or intervention. Another general discussion concerns democracy *below the nation state* and decentralization in local and micro-regional settings.

The wider context of these discussions is the shift from government to *governance* and its emphasis on a facilitating and enabling role of public authority [12]. A further general reorientation concerns the shift from interest politics to identity politics or the politics of culture.<sup>2</sup>

In the West, decreasing voter turnouts and immigration and multiculturalism have prompted discussions on the renewal of democracy [14]. Here prominent notions are

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<sup>1</sup> Chandra Muzaffar [11:4] criticizes 'uncritical acceptance of state authority, a certain subservience to governmental power' as a 'carry-over from Malay feudal history' along with 'deep reverence for the ulama' as parts of Malay political culture.

<sup>2</sup> Jann Wenner: "Around the world and in our own country, the battles being waged have more to do with culture than with politics" [13:36].

active, reflexive and radical democracy. While citizens are expected to take a more active part in political decision making, interactive decision making often evokes tensions with the existing practices of representative democracy: a friction between the mandates of politicians, arising from elections, and those of citizen groups and forums, arising from consultation and participation. Civil society and social capital are now viewed as key assets in democracy [15]. Another discussion concerns democracy and difference, including cultural difference and ‘engendering democracy’ (cf. [16,17]). New practices under discussion include democratic audits and digital democracy or cyberdemocracy and e-government.

‘The West’ of course is only a poor shorthand. In the European Union a major concern is the democratic deficit arising from regional integration. In the United States, campaign funding and other issues prevail. Edmund G. Brown Jr, former Governor of California, speaks of ‘1–800 Democracy’: “A tight triangle of media, money and insider mindset insures the banality of our political choices” [18:28]. Here ‘money politics’ appears in the guise of the marketing of politics to the point of what William Greider calls ‘democracy for hire’, such as the manufacture of ‘grassroots campaigns’ that are made to look real by marketing agencies [19–21].

In the East, a double transition is taking place, toward democracy and toward market society, and these trends are in tension with one another. The shift to market forces widens economic inequality while democracy presumes equality [22].

The tension between market and democracy is also a major issue in countries in the South. State–society relations have long been a concern in postcolonial states that have inherited a colonial, imperial administrative and legislative structure that has been superimposed on society. This pattern of external imposition continues with the international financial and economic regimes such as structural adjustment, and their impact on democracy in the South (e.g. [23]). Another general question concerns the relationship between culture (in the sense of historical itinerary, religion and ethnicity) and democratization: to what extent is liberal democracy a culturally particularist form of democracy? This query suggests alternative forms of democracy, including the role of group rights (cf. [24–26]). But how to implement this when a key problem in emerging democracies is domination by small governing coalitions [27]? Structural conditions that affect many countries in the South are large peasantries and the small size of the organized working class [28]. Other concerns are cultural and regional differences, and conflict and the role of military spending.

A major debate in which these questions return concerns the issue of which comes first, development and then democracy, as was conventionally believed, or democracy and then development, as seems to be implied in current notions of good governance (see [29–31]). ‘Strengthening civil society’ and democracy by promoting NGOs, the new gospel actively promoted by international development agencies, has spawned a debate on the politics of civil society building and tensions between state and nonstate actors (discussed below). With regard to the state, a key issue is public sector reform to make state agencies more accountable and effective. With regard to nonstate actors, questions of popular empowerment and accountability are crucial.

## 2. Participatory democracy

Since the 1970s participatory democracy has been a catchword for genuine, popular or progressive democratization. Since then the general climate has changed in several respects. The Enlightenment confidence in large-scale social engineering is past and, in addition, wholesale ideology has lost appeal. Arguably, limitations of ‘participatory democracy’ as previously or conventionally conceived are the following.

- The emphasis is on overall system change. However, in most countries a ‘convergence of radicalisms’ or a single-minded collective mobilization is not on the horizon (among other reasons in view of the rise of identity politics). Besides, the channels of collective mobilization are not available (in view of the role of media and their corporate ownership or state control, etc.).
- The focus is on the state while the status of the state is changing. The eyes are on the prize but the state is no longer the central prize (at least as it had been in the time of Lenin and Mao) in view of the importance of civil society and processes of decentralization, regionalization and globalization.
- There is no actual case, example or model of participatory democracy on a major scale.
- Do people really want to participate fully or do they just want to have the choice to do so? Understandings of active citizenship have changed since the 1960s and are now less romantic. Ordinary people may want to participate in politics only to the extent that their participation makes a difference proportionate to their efforts and time, or if they can *own* the process and the outcomes, all of which are high thresholds. It is too easily assumed that people have nothing better to do with their time than political participation [32:18].
- What is the scope of participation? Is participation confined to humans, and thus anthropocentric, or does it include nature and the ecological setting? Does participatory politics include ecological politics? ‘Deep democracy’ adopts a holistic approach to democracy.

Participatory democracy is now only one among many ways of conceiving progressive democracy. An overview of key notions in current thinking on democracy and democratization is presented in Table 1, followed by brief comments.

*Direct democracy:* ‘More Democracy’ movements in Germany and Switzerland support referenda and direct polls. Direct democracy now also refers to cyberdemocracy and tele-democracy (cf. [33,34]).

*Social democracy:* The renewal of social democracy (as in Giddens [35]) runs into the familiar problems facing welfare capitalism in the twenty-first century. Mainly on account of market dynamics there is an overall gradual shift taking place from the stakeholder model of Rhineland capitalism to the Anglo-American model of shareholder capitalism, in relation to which trade unions, also in Europe, still have to position themselves [36].

*Associational democracy* follows the nineteenth-century lineage of Proudhon,

Table 1  
Variations on progressive democracy

Variations	In contrast to	Meaning	Limitations
Participatory democracy	Representative, liberal democracy	Genuine participation of mass of population	No model
Direct		Direct voting, polls, etc.	Proceduralism
Social		Third Way	Flexibilization, post-Fordism
Associational		Self-governing civil society	And economics?
Substantive	Formal democracy	Genuine; also in workplace, etc.	Implementation
Deliberative	Manufacture of consensus	Open uncoerced discussion	Reason based, favours experts
Reflexive		Critical, collective learning	Vague
Active, strong	Passive, alienation, apathy	Engagement	
Empowering		Deliberation tied to action	
Popular	Elite, partial	'People power'	Populism
Local	Central	Decentralization	Requires positive action
Radical	Mainstream	Pluralism plus difference	Pluralism plus
Deep		Pluralism plus nature	
Cosmopolitan	Nation state	National <i>and</i> international democratization	Long term

Owen and the syndicalists. While the emphasis is on self-governing associations in civil society and subsidiarity in the redistribution of power [37], it is not clear how this addresses the governance of market forces. A related approach is cooperativism (cf. [38]).

*Substantive democracy*: A crosscutting discussion concerns substantive democracy, which involves, for example, the extension of democracy to the economic sphere and the workplace, in contrast to merely formal democracy.

*Deliberative democracy* is a polity 'governed by the public deliberation of its members' [39,40]. The approach parallels Habermas' concern with communicative action and the public sphere. Accordingly, deliberative democracy is rationality-centred and Enlightenment-oriented. While deliberation may lead to the renegotiation and transformation of interests, would this be equally likely with regard to the transformation of identities? (A background consideration is the alleged shift from interest politics to identity politics and the circumstance that questions of identity or 'culture' are less amenable to rational debate and negotiation than interests.) The way deliberative democracy is institutionalized may be conservative and empower authorized elites, or deliberation by experts, rather than the ordinary public. Deliberation may become indoctrination as power agents make use of money or privileged information to persuade others [41]; or it may take the form of mere criticism or justification and discussions that are divorced from the exercise of real power.

*Reflexive democracy* parallels the notion of reflexive modernity [42,43]. The prem-

ise is that democracy is open-ended and unfinished and the process of democratization creates its own problems. This view includes and empowers nonstate forces as political actors but, apart from this ‘subpolitics’, as a formula it lacks a political edge.

*Active and strong democracy* and *deep citizenship* are other notions in the renewal of democracy [44,45].

*Popular democracy* is a stronger and more politically relevant terminology than ‘civil society building’ and relevant in relation to the experiences of ‘people power’ in the Philippines and elsewhere [46]. The obvious question is who defines what is popular and so the risk is populism (a case in point is Venezuela). In an older terminology popular or people’s democracy refers to the political system of socialist and socialist-oriented states; this is left out in this overview, along with Maoist *new democracy* of following the mass line, because the single-party framework makes it outdated as an approach.

*Radical democracy* extends the classic formulations of liberal pluralism and multiple interest groups to include cultural identity and difference.

*Deep democracy* parallels deep ecology and goes beyond the idea that participation should be confined to humans and human rights: it combines cultural pluralism with ecology [47]. Thus, the Living Democracy Movement in India is concerned with biodiversity, patent laws and genetic engineering; it issues a new call for *Swaraj* and advocates water sovereignty, seed sovereignty, food sovereignty, and land sovereignty.

*Cosmopolitan democracy*: The argument of cosmopolitan democracy is that to deepen democracy domestically it is necessary to extend democracy in the international domain. It involves an agenda of ‘double democratization’ within nation states and at transnational levels—from the regional to the international, including the formation of regional parties and reform of international institutions such as the United Nations [48,49].

The notion of participatory democracy, then, has changed on account of wider changes in the political landscape and is now only one among several ways of reinventing democracy. In light of these changes, the current trend is to break up participatory democracy in chunks. ‘Alternative’ democratic thinking now has its favourites, just as in social movement literature the Zapatistas’ use of the Internet has been a standard favourite. Currently, key favourites in relation to participatory democracy are:

- Decentralization and experiments in *local governance*, such as Participatory Budgeting in Porto Alegre, Brazil; Panchayat reforms particularly in Kerala, Karnataka and West Bengal; District Councils in Uganda; and the Law of Popular Participation in Bolivia;
- Politics of empowerment and politics of culture;
- Democratization beyond the nation state at regional, international and supra-national levels, and reforms of international institutions and regimes.

Thus, as an example of this changing profile, the ongoing ‘Real Utopias Project’ at Wisconsin University [50] features:

- Neighbourhood governance councils in Chicago;
- ‘The Wisconsin Regional Training Partnership brings together labour, large firm management and government to provide training and increase the transparency in employment transitions’;
- ‘Habitat Conservation Planning . . . convenes stakeholders and empowers them to develop ecosystem governance arrangements that will satisfy the double imperatives of human development and the protection of jeopardized species’;
- Participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre, Brazil;
- Panchayat Raj reforms in West Bengal, India.

The current favourites of participatory democracy raise some questions. Are they fads and the flavour of the year, or trends? One could also observe which experiments in local governance are *not* or are no longer mentioned, for example the People’s Defence Committees in Ghana. What actually happened to past favourites, such as worker self-management and the Mondragón cooperative?<sup>3</sup> Some local experiments have a short life-span or are in time found out to be merely alternative levers of power and control. Where do these favourites typically occur? They typically arise where a leftwing or progressive government is in power that meets social mobilization halfway. In Kerala and West Bengal communist governments have been in power and in Porto Alegre the Workers Party has been in government, which shows that these exercises in local governance are a function of a larger politics.

### 3. Decentralization

It pays to remember that decentralized governance, when carefully executed, is the most potent mechanism for social cohesion and peoples’ empowerment [53:53].

A key question is how current trends toward participatory politics, including the present favourites of participatory democratization, relate to general political changes. A case in point is the politics of decentralization. ‘Of the 75 developing countries with a population of more than 5 million, 63 are actively pursuing decentralisation policies that devolve functions and responsibilities to local governments’ [54:5]. While decentralization is crucial to participatory democracy, it usually means the empowerment of local elites unless special measures are taken.

In eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe, the *centralization* of government was viewed as a necessary condition for progressive change because the provinces were the strongholds of conservative aristocratic elites (cf. [55]). As times changed from absolute monarchy to the era of republicanism, the meaning of centralization

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<sup>3</sup> Mondragón, the cooperative enterprise in the Basque region, now ranks among Europe’s industrial heavyweights (see [51,52]).

changed accordingly. In the wake of the French Revolution centralization of government was a progressive politics, now in tandem with political rationalism and social engineering. Nowadays the reverse seems to be the case and decentralization is widely considered a necessary step towards progressive change. But what kind of progressive change? The general framework in which decentralization is now viewed is governance and in particular *government enablement* and more effective delivery of goods and services in a changing economic and political landscape. The current literature distinguishes market enablement (in which business and enterprise are to provide goods and services), political enablement (transfer of authority to local government and NGOs) and community enablement (participation and self-organization) [54:8]. In this picture, decentralization is primarily a device towards administrative efficacy and responsiveness; it is progressive in the sense of political modernization and not in the sense of popular empowerment. It may be viewed as a matter of *flexible governance* as a corollary to flexible accumulation and specialization. Indeed in many settings decentralization has a conservative meaning. In the United States, 'states' rights' was part of President Reagan's programme and refers to the neoliberal agenda of the rollback of federal government.

So decentralization is not necessarily socially progressive. Or else it would suggest changes at the regional level in many countries; but control by local elites still pertains, certainly in many of the predominantly agrarian societies in the South. This is reflected in the politics of decentralization.

In stratified societies with unequal distributions of land, wealth, income and access to human capital, devolving power from the centre may only pass it on to powerful local elites who are even less responsive to the needs of their people. Without fundamental land reforms and universal education, local governments become an instrument of oppression in the hands of influential elites [53:53].

It follows that decentralization only works towards democratization if it is combined with positive action in favour of underprivileged groups. Decentralization involves many dimensions: administrative, political, fiscal, public investment and economic policy [56,57]. Many inquiries confirm that decentralization pays off only in combination with both central and local measures: local reform needs to be accompanied by central reform. In West Bengal reform and decentralization have been implemented by a Communist state government whose leadership is composed of a caste elite who, according to Mallick [58], dilute agrarian reforms and empower the rural elite who are the actual beneficiaries of state magnanimity and funds. The situation is different in Kerala; here decentralization did not really take off until it was combined with financial redistribution from the centre to the state and the districts.

Participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre involves an intricate process of city-wide discussions of the budget by local district or neighbourhood assemblies, which is then referred back to central discussions together with local representatives. It has been in effect since the Workers Party (PT) gained successive electoral victories in Porto Alegre in 1992 and 1996. Its general conditions of operation include Brazil's



redistributive tax and revenue system. Participatory Budgeting is presently being assiduously studied in many parts of Latin America and also being adopted in other cities such as Montevideo. In some discussions the official PT party line is followed uncritically. At present, urban developers and real estate agencies in Porto Alegre can bypass difficult districts by engaging in ‘forum shopping’ (cf. [50]).<sup>4</sup>

The Law on Popular Participation that was adopted in Bolivia in 1994 along with the Law on Administrative Decentralization empowers existing local organizations and institutions: the territorial base organizations (OTBs) and Committees of Surveillance. By empowering existing popular organizations, rather than imposing new uniform institutional structures according to centrally defined requirements (as in earlier decentralizations in Mexico and Brazil, and decentralization exercises in African countries), the Bolivian approach pioneers a form of flexible decentralization. Nevertheless the decisive factor remains the local relations of power. The District Councils in Uganda form part of a ‘no party democracy’.<sup>5</sup>

#### **4. Conditions for participatory democratization**

From the above considerations three general orientations arise that could make participatory democratization work:

- Combining participatory democracy with mainstream efforts in renewing democracy;
- Critical consideration of the politics of civil society and empowerment;
- An inclusive approach to politics, combining political reform with economic, social and cultural reform.

In the 1960s and 1970s when participatory democracy was first widely discussed, mainstream political institutions seemed rigid, fixed, established. Popular expressions such as ‘the establishment’ and ‘the system’ signalled this rigidity. Nowadays, in contrast, mainstream politics seems much more dynamic and in flux than in those times, in some respects at least. There is intense dynamism in mainstream politics due to structural as well as cultural and mentality changes. Technological change [65,66], privatization, deregulation, informalization and dynamics of sovereignty [67], regionalization and globalization are all part of these changes, and so of course are the dynamics in the market place. Ecological changes and awareness are another new variable. Social movements such as feminism, community activism and NGOs have fundamentally changed the political landscape. All this means that the overall field and the relationship between citizen participation and mainstream institutions have changed. This creates opportunities to combine and correlate efforts towards alternative or participatory democracy with mainstream efforts towards renewing

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<sup>4</sup> For extensive discussion of participatory budgeting in Brazil see [59–61].

<sup>5</sup> On Bolivia see [62], and on Uganda see [63,64].

democracy. What would be needed then is to establish enabling relations and common ground between local governance and general government reform, and between alternative and mainstream approaches to democratization, so that the democratization of the state matches democratization from below. Mainstream preoccupations with regard to renewing democracy presently include the following:

- interactive decision making or active citizen participation in political decision making;
- multi-stakeholder negotiations;
- disclosure of public documents;
- democratic audits;
- public–private partnership or roundtables of local government, citizen associations and enterprises;
- changes in urban governance;
- civil society building and the politics of ‘NGO-ization’;
- public sector reform to improve accountability (good governance, combating corruption);
- concern with connectivity.

Each of these avenues of change may open opportunities for new combinations of efforts from below and above, and local and general reform.<sup>6</sup> At issue then are not just voluntaristic action in civil society or on the part of secondary associations, but also the transformation of state institutions. These new avenues of synergy and cooperation are now well past the honeymoon stage and their hazards and limitations are widely perceived. Interactive decision making, public–private partnership and multi-stakeholder negotiation raise the obvious question on what *terms* cooperation takes place [69]. They run the risk of obfuscating real conflicts of interest beneath the cosy banner of partnership. According to Tvedt, ‘Slogans like “partnership” and “equality in dialogue” cannot be fully realized within existing system structures and language’ [70:224–5]. Public–private partnership is more likely to be of advantage to the higher-income segments of demand since providing services to the poor is less profitable [54:11]. Informalization also reduces public accountability, limited as it was. One of the major obstacles in this context is precisely the fuzziness of language:

The core terms, state, civil society, market, democracy, human rights, are in general used vaguely, but as if they carry a clear and universal meaning. This seems to have contributed to a situation in which everybody shares the same rhetoric, but without really agreeing about how to act [70:170].

This problem also applies to the politics of empowerment.<sup>7</sup> Several studies exam-

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<sup>6</sup> An example of this kind of articulation is found in [68].

<sup>7</sup> Civil society politics is widely discussed in, for example, [71–73]. Empowerment is discussed in [74].

ine the new policy agenda in development cooperation of strengthening democracy by building civil society and supporting NGOs, and generally arrive at sobering conclusions. NGOs in the South are often part of a 'new dependency'. While NGOs are viewed as crucial to 'capacity building' in the South, 'the way in which financial resources are channelled to NGOs, and the nature of the relationships forged in the process, determine NGOs' capacity' [75:2]. The conclusion is that 'As long as southern NGOs are beholden to interests other than those of the community groups they claim to serve, they are not making a contribution to civil society' [75:5]. Contrary to the new policy agenda, several studies argue that strengthening NGOs may weaken civil society. 'There are many examples showing that strengthening NGOs has weakened civil society' [70:172]; disproportionate support for NGOs may have weakened popular organizations [75:13]. Also when it comes to trendy alternative approaches such as micro-credit, performance does not match claims and rhetoric. Besides, NGOs raise questions of organization and management (e.g. [76]).

Another consideration is the need to look beyond a merely formal approach to politics and to combine democratic reform in politics with substantive democratization in other spheres. This involves the articulation of political, social, cultural, economic and ecological reforms and alternatives. Thus, the human development approach of fostering human capital through policies with regard to education, health care and housing is a general precondition for genuine democratization. Another way of going beyond politics in a conventional sense is the translation of associative democracy (à la Paul Hirst) into a political economy approach of associative economics [77]. The current concern with social capital in economics, political science and sociology also points in this direction.

A wide-angle approach to politics includes cultural politics. Thus, in countries that are in the grip of polarization on ethnic or religious grounds, no degree of human development or local democratization may be sufficient to address the root problems. At the same time democratization is a prerequisite for changing the authoritarian politics that are at the heart of the problem of crosscultural gridlock. For example, the ongoing war in Sri Lanka places fundamental constraints on democratization whether local or general. Without addressing the underlying causes of conflict, democratization efforts may be fruitless and artificial. This means looking into the cultural blockages and cultural politics underlying the conflict, not only on the side of the Tamils but also of the Sinhalese majority (cf. [78]).

## **5. Scenarios**

What the chances are for these various avenues of renewing and deepening democracy obviously differ in each region and country. On the basis of the experience of past decades it would not be difficult to conceive of gloomy prospects for political change. For instance in South Asia, continuity of past trends can take the form of faulty federalism, weak and malfunctioning decentralization; political parties that remain centralized and autocratic; a recycling of elites, powerful families and dynastic politics, along with 'money politics' and the usual alliance of landlords, industrialists, bureaucrats and army officers; and a weak civil society [54].

A related scenario that is not essentially different is the development of ‘free enterprise democracy’, along with showcase low-intensity democracy and ‘demonstration elections’. Corporate-driven media and a culture industry that narrows and weakens the public sphere can accompany this. Free enterprise democracy can further the turn from interest politics to identity politics on communal and ethnic basis, both as a consequence of the patronage system and out of frustration. If these would be plausible scenarios, are there pointers in a different direction?

It may be argued that the wide-angle variations on the theme of participatory democratization sketched above are too broad and too cumbersome to serve as an agenda or direction. However, several of these processes are in motion already in institutional as well as mentality changes and practices and make up the undercurrents of contemporary dynamics.<sup>8</sup> Against this backdrop, political groups can undertake so-called *acupuncture politics*, that is seek out the nodal points in a particular situation, the pressure points that if touched move the overall political dynamics, and then seek to build coalitions around them.<sup>9</sup> The nodal points may be property rights in one context, family law in another, land reform, ecological questions, tax reforms, voting rights, or media politics in yet others.

Another concern is the question of agency and capability. According to a classic view, political action and reform generate the capabilities that are required: ‘Participation develops and fosters the very qualities necessary for it; the more individuals participate the better able they become to do so’ [81:42]. However, capable agency cannot be taken for granted and, according to Krishna [82], no reforms or institutions will make a significant difference unless they are utilized by capable agency.

The overall picture seems deeply contradictory. Everywhere politics, in the sense of *dirigiste* politics, seems to be in retreat and market forces are dominant. Meanwhile social inequality within societies and on a world scale has been steadily on the increase, as ample statistics demonstrate. In the face of growing social and economic inequality, what can be the real scope for politics of empowerment? Health, longevity and literacy have been improving everywhere, even in the least developed countries. But what does human capacitation add up to in the face of overwhelming market forces?

Market forces are in the lead but they themselves depend for their functioning on capable agency, on educated and skilled workers and sophisticated infrastructure. The know-how that is increasingly required in the workplace is, ultimately, the same that seeks expression in political empowerment. Arguably the marketplace itself cannot function without (some forms of) democratization. Within organizations the ‘culture of the boss’ is on the retreat [83]. Yet trade unions have difficulty catching up with the shareholder approach to enterprise. There are several specific meeting points between market dynamics and democratization. One is corporate responsibility: as the political space occupied by corporations grows so does their social and political

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Sunil Khilnani: ‘India’s experience reveals the ordinariness of democracy—untidy, massively complex, unsatisfying, but vital to the sense of a human life today’ [79:207].

<sup>9</sup> On nodal points, see [80].

responsibility. If this falls short of political accountability, it may be matched by consumer activism and ‘smart shopping’ [84].

According to James Rosenau, these are times of both fragmentation and integration (‘framegration’) and they give rise to a ‘*capacities revolution*’ [85]. On account of increased information processing due to microelectronics, the impact of education, the growing complexity of large urban communities and growing mobility,<sup>10</sup> a skills revolution is taking place. Dealing with greater environmental complexity increases intellectual functioning and also induces ‘a greater capacity to focus emotions’ and a freeing up of the imagination [85:1011]. In his view, ‘The skill revolution is worldwide in the sense that even as the analytically, emotionally, and imaginatively rich get richer, so do those who are poor in these respects get richer’ [85:1012]. These changes are related to an organizational explosion that is taking place: ‘the global stage has become ever more dense with actors’ [85:1014]. Even if there is a whiff of hyperbole in this argument, this is an interesting and enabling angle on contemporary circumstances that are often viewed from the point of view of alienation and cultural pessimism. It matches Mulgan’s take on the relationship between changing technologies and politics [65,66].

So is the glass half full or half empty? The road is long and more winding than several views suggest. On the other hand, changes are considerable and speeding up. The sprawling variety of new articulations of participatory democracy is a response to the growing pressures of ‘money politics’ in an era of widening social and economic inequality, or alternatively, it is a sign of its vitality. The actual experiments in radical democracy are few, yet mainstream politics is in much greater flux than before and decentralization efforts are under way in many countries. Although the obstacles of elite and money politics are formidable, decentralization goes together with and reflects growing popular capability and agency, on account of higher levels of education, communication, migration, and other dimensions of the ‘capacities revolution’. Structural changes in governance provide opportunities for democratization. If these opportunities are utilized by capable agency applying strategies of articulation and acupuncture politics, it may add up to enabling conditions for growing participatory democratization, South and North.

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<sup>10</sup> ‘Statistics for every form of travel depict sharp and continuous growth’ [85:1014].

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