

Sami Adwan
Armin G. Wildfeuer (eds.)

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Participation and Reconciliation

Preconditions of Justice

Schriften der KathO NRW, Band 16

In order to make justice work, participation and reconciliation is needed within and between societies, peoples, and nations. In this compilation, authors—senior academics as well as students—from Bethlehem University, Palestine, and the Catholic University of Applied Sciences, Cologne, Germany, contribute to this important field. Thus, to some extent, the book in itself is an example of the subjects it deals with.



The editors:

Prof. Dr. Sami Adwan
Bethlehem University, Palestine, pedagogy



Prof. Dr. Armin G. Wildfeuer
KathO NRW, Dept. Köln, Germany, philosophy

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Armin G. Wildfeuer – Christina Wirth

The Ideas of ‘Active’ and ‘Passive’ Participation. Some Philosophical Remarks on the History and the Presence of the Notion ‘Participation’

The idea of participation seems to be a very modern one – an idea without a long tradition. In fact, the idea has played a very important role for about 30 to 40 years in politics, in social sciences, in education, even in the field of public administration, in economy and in social work. In these fields, the idea is very present, but defined differently.

- In *politics*, for example, participation means the active co-operation of citizens in dealing with common (political) affairs. The target of political participation is always to integrate all citizens into the political decision-making process.
- In *social sciences*, it means the integration of individuals and organizations into the shaping processes of a society. The main target is social inclusion and the avoidance of exclusion.
- In the field of *education*, participation means the integration of children and young people into the process of education and formation.
- In *economics* we speak about participation of employees by talking of shareholders value, corporate citizenship and participation in the market.
- There is the idea of participation in the field of *administration*, too – for example the integration of citizens in administrative decisions by hearings etc.
- Promoting the right to participation is one of the main principles of any professional code of *social work*. The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) declares in art. 4 (2) of its ethical code “Ethics in Social Work, Statement of Principles”: “Social workers should promote the full involvement and participation of people using their services in ways that empowers them in all aspects of decisions and actions affecting their lives.”

We see in all these fields that the main target or the result of participation is integration. And the way to be integrated is *active* participation. But if we take a closer look, one of the results or effects of integration again is participation, but in a *passive* form. Because the one who is really integrated, who is really associated with a certain society, will automatically and successfully

participate, but passively – we hope – in the goods of the society. In other words: *Passive participation is always the result of a form of integration.*

But the way to integration must always be active participation. We can say: Passive participation always presupposes active participation or: passive participation is the result of active participation. We all have the hope that there is really a strong relationship between both forms of participation. A participation-formula could state : *“Integration or passive participation presupposes active participation”*. This formula works – I think – as a very strong motivation to promote participation.

Nevertheless, there are many fields in which integration and participation are claimed today, the modern idea of participation seems to be a *paradox*:

- On the one hand, the main characteristic of mankind in modern ages seems to be a kind of *fundamental disintegration*. The human being seems to be homeless. He feels that he is disintegrated – disintegrated in society, disintegrated in politics, in economics, in administration, in nature, the environment and the world in which he lives in general. In this tragic situation, participation nowadays has become a notion or an *idea of hope* which serves to overcome the lost unity with society and all the above-mentioned fields.
- On the other hand, the formula “passive participation through active participation” doesn’t seem to be true in modern times. In modern societies, for example, one can participate actively in the affairs of society, but it does not necessarily mean as a consequence that one can enjoy integration or passive participation. One can do nothing and is nevertheless successful; and, on the contrary, one can do a lot of things and still fail in society. *There is no automatism between active and passive participation.* And we have – it seems – annulled the formula by ourselves: You must not participate actively; you must not have certain attitudes or abilities to get passive participation in the goods of a society. The complete social welfare system seems to work in this manner annulling the hopeful participation-formula.

At first glance there does not seem to be any interesting question or connection with philosophy or the history of philosophy. And indeed if we look for the idea in encyclopedias of philosophy or philosophical handbooks there are no articles about the notion ‘participation’, which would explain this paradoxical situation or which would explain at least the double meaning of the notion participation:

- As passive participation the notion participation means ‘access to something’ or ‘having a share in something’ as a passive process, when someone automatically participates in something as a result or effect of integration in a certain (for example social or economic) order.

- As active participation the notion means an active process when you do not automatically participate in a certain order, but rather have to do something first to be part of this order at all.

You have to keep in mind the difference between these two meanings of participation to understand my historical reconstruction in the history of philosophy of the above-mentioned paradox resulting from the modern understanding of participation.

In short: *The understanding of participation in philosophy has changed over the course of time from a primarily passive process which is founded in a strong and stabile metaphysical order of everything to a primarily active process in which the target is a self-given, and therefore not a stabile order.*

I will explain this change in some simple outlines.

If we look to *ancient philosophy* the idea of participation is firstly used by Plato in a metaphysical sense. With the Greek word 'metexis' (μέθεξις, translated in Latin with *participatio*) Plato reflects the participation of all things in absolute ideas. He believes that the material world, as it seems to us, is not the real world, but only a shadow of the real world. The pure ideas are archetypes, abstract or essential representations of the many types and properties of things we see all around us. The ideas are the models or prototypes of the individual things on earth which can only exist if they participate in the real being (the world of ideal forms or pure ideas). We can only recognize the essence of things by remembering these ideas which our soul has seen in a preexistent life. Knowledge is remembering.

Everything is integrated into a steady, given, natural order of the world and linked up at a place which is the special destination for it. The human being and all the other things of the material world are inferior to the absolute ideas. They should live according to and participate in the natural order, which is for the benefit of everyone.

Human beings can participate in the natural order of the world by using their mind. They can identify the natural order with their mind and because of this, they can live in it. Happiness in ancient times always meant living according to a given order which for human beings presupposes active participation. In contrast, things as well as animals participate automatically in the natural order on their own. This order exists forever. It has no beginning and no end. To follow this order and to be in this order is the main purpose of human life.

If human beings do not serve this purpose in an active way, they lose freedom, they lose happiness, they are *metaphysically disintegrated* and they lose all the benefits of the passive participation like personal, economic and social welfare.

In *medieval times*, this order of the world, which is the target of active participation and the origin of any passive participation, has an author, a creator. The order has its beginning in the ideas of the divine mind, in the

mind of God. The ideas in the mind of God – which are absolutely coherent, consistent, without any contradiction – are the origin of the order in the created world. The act of creation is understood as the process of transformation from the ideas in the mind of God into the real physical world. This order stands behind all things as a kind of matrix which can be explained in abstract notions. To live according to this order means to be free and to participate in the benefits of this coherent order: physically, spiritually, individually, socially, and economically. The one who does not live according to this order will lose personal, social, and material benefits of passive participation. At the very least he loses his freedom because the order regenerates itself by illness, unhappiness, and disasters. The one who does not actively participate will have to carry the burden and will lose all the benefits of passive participation. He is disintegrated in the natural order of the world.

Clearly, the participation-formula does not only work in the ancient world, but also in the Middle Ages under Christian preconditions: „for human beings passive participation always presupposes active participation”.

The idea of a metaphysical order of the world is the dominating thought behind the idea of participation. For Plato, this order is a natural given eternal order, and, for Thomas Aquinas and the thinkers of the Christian scholastic, a divine rational order.

The concept of participation changes radically at the *end of the Middle Ages*. The reason for this change is a theological problem: the question of the real omnipotence of God. According to Thomas Aquinas, the mind of God is dominated by the reason (*intellectus*) and not by the will (*voluntas*). If God is completely rational and dominated by his *intellectus*, the order created by him will be completely reasonable too – without contradictions and completely consistent with the thinking of an absolute order. But subsequently, what about his freedom? Is the impossibility of God to think inconsistently not a restriction on his omnipotence and absolute freedom? These were the questions which the theologians and philosophers of the 13th and 14th century asked themselves. In order to save the freedom and omnipotence of God, they set the will of God higher than his intellect. The will must be God’s most important ability. The will, however, goes onto the individual, not onto the general, not onto a general consistent order. The act of the creation of the world must therefore be understood in a new way, the so-called *nominalistic thought*: The act of creation is an act of creating individual things. Therefore, the world can only consist of individual things. God no longer creates a general consistent order, but only single things which could also contradict each other. In other words: There is no order in the world anymore. The world perhaps is full of contradictions and as a consequence the human being has not the possibility to find orientation in a natural or divine given order. And he cannot participate in such an order and its benefits.

The conclusion in *modern times* is that the social and political cohabitation has to be constructed, ordered, and created anew to give life a new orientation. The creator of the new orders – the orders of the social life, the economic market, the sciences, the state, and moral affairs – is the human being itself. It is the task of the human reason to create these orders in a self-given way because there is no other order.

The orders have to be redesigned completely. For the first time in philosophical history, the orders are temporary because they are within a permanent and continuing development. The new orders are products from human beings for human beings. As such they are contingent, transitory and completely under the responsibility of human beings. The concept of *autonomy* arises: Autonomy means to give oneself an order which is always a human product.

Under this new condition the idea of participation changes radically:

- Participation as *active participation means participation in creating new orders* – new political, social, economic orders and so on. This presupposes a lot of high-level intellectual, moral and social abilities. The idea of active participation is that if all human beings are supposed to live according to self-given orders they should also participate in creating them. On a political level, this problem was faced by the so-called social contract theories (from philosophers like John Lock, Thomas Hobbes and others). These theories think of a modern order of living together in a society. They deal with the topic of how it is possible to create a societal order if the basis is not the common insight in a given eternal order, but the equality and dignity of all human beings. Furthermore, they think about how individuals can participate actively in a new societal order and how they can take part in it. The predominant thought in this context is the thought of democracy. This form of governance allows every citizen of a democratic state to participate politically. – A reminder: The target of active participation in modern time is always integration – integration in a self-given order, which is not an absolute, but only a rational, and always renewable construction. Indeed such a construction is not able to fulfill the natural longing for stabile integration. The main characteristic of mankind in modern ages is really a kind of fundamental disintegration. There is not an absolute order, where the individual can be at home and in which the individual is located automatically. Therefore, the individual must feel that he is disintegrated. In this tragic situation, participation becomes really a notion or an *idea of hope*.
- But how has the idea of *passive participation changed in modern times?* Participation in the sense of passive participation – we can say – is no longer an automatic effect of a certain attitude in agreement with an objectively given order of the world. It depends rather upon a lot of accidental things: that the social, economic or political orders which are

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created by human beings, really work rationally, that means – there has to be a strong relation between the attitudes of someone and the social or economic consequences, which follow a certain attitude.

The result of this new situation is that the participation-formula („passive participation through active participation”) changes its meaning: In Ancient Times and in the Middle Ages, the formula worked very reliably: passive participation in the sense of receiving certain social or economic goods always consistently followed the kind of active participation someone exercised. *In modern times, the strong relation and the automatism between active and passive participation doesn't exist.*

I hope now you understand a little bit more fully that the idea of participation is a really complex idea. Its understanding depends on certain metaphysical assumptions. Nevertheless, participation is an important and indispensable notion of hope – a regulative idea: Knowing that we cannot fulfill it – we will have to simply adhere to it.

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