A sociological perspective on public participation in health care

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Abstract

This paper presents conclusions drawn from a comparative analysis of three qualitative case studies of participation processes at the regional level in Quebec's healthcare system in Canada. Our objective is twofold: primarily, to draw on our observations to elaborate and discuss a sociological framework for the analysis of public participation; and secondarily, to use our data to criticise many pervasive but questionable preconceptions in the scientific literature on public participation. The framework used applies the social theory of P. Bourdieu in conjunction with the representation framework of H.F. Pitkin to demonstrate how any form of participation will imply some implicit or explicit delegation. The significance of the analysis is its focus on the social operations implied in these acts of delegation and in the use of the concept of symbolic struggles to understand the conflicts arising when the intrinsic legitimacy of the public is appropriated.
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Introduction

Our work is based on a comparative analysis of three qualitative case studies of public participation experiences at the health and social services Regional Board level in Quebec, Canada. Our primary objective is to draw on the comparative analysis of these cases to develop an inductively based and sociologically realistic framework for the analysis of participation processes. However, the ongoing analysis of our data led us to seriously question many of the tenets in the literature on public participation. A complementary objective, then, is to challenge some pervasive but questionable preconceptions, in common understanding as well as in the scientific literature, concerning the delimitation and definition of public participation.

The interest of this analysis stems from the fact that our perspective is different from what we call the "classical" literature on public participation. This literature is mainly the product of the academic analysis

of the American government's efforts to democratise its social programs in the 1970s. Though this literature encompasses some excellent papers (for examples, see Berry, 1981; Marmor & Morone, 1980; Steckler & Herzog, 1979; Tauxe, 1995), it is generally characterised by three weaknesses. First, it is very normative in its definition of what public participation is (or should be), this trait creating a bias towards pessimistic or negative conclusions (for examples of this trait, see Arnstein, 1969, 1972; Aronson, 1994; Bens, 1994; Checkoway, 1981, 1982; Cole & Caputo, 1984; Frisby & Bowman, 1996; King, Feltey, & Susel, 1998; O'Neill, 1992). Secondly, this literature is often somewhat naïve and idealistic or, as Berry puts it, "*Realistic assumptions about administrative behaviours are not among the strengths of the literature on citizen participation*" (Berry, 1981, p. 467). Finally, it clearly takes an implicit standpoint regarding the intrinsic desirability of public participation (see, for example, Aronson, 1994; Bens, 1994; Bracht & Tsouros, 1990; Checkoway, 1981, 1995; Cole & Caputo, 1984; King et al., 1998; Macfarlane, 1996; Nagel, 1980; Zimmerman & Rappaport, 1988). This last trait was probably influenced by the historical

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context of the United States in the 1970s and, more recently, reinforced by the empowerment perspective of health promotion.

From our view, these characteristics of the classical literature on public participation cause two main problems. First, on a scientific level, they often obscure important dimensions of the phenomenon under investigation. Secondly, at a policy-making level, this literature does not help in the elaboration of productive and realistic participation policies. The approach we favour, in contrast, is highly inductive regarding the definition of public participation, very sociological in regards to its analytic framework, and agnostic as to its desirability. While we do conceive democracy as a desirable ideal, we see public participation as just one possible route toward this ideal. The question of knowing whether this route shall take us in the wrong direction, down a dead end, or whether it happens to be a useful shortcut, depends upon the way in which it is socially and institutionally implemented and experienced. In this regard, the framework we suggest in the following pages could be seen as a sort of roadmap for analysing and understanding the functioning of public participation conceived as a route toward democracy. As we will argue, two concepts are central in the elaboration of such a framework—namely, representation and objectification. In a first section, we will delve into more detail on these concepts, as we present the theoretical basis of our analysis as well as our data and methods. In a second section, we will briefly present an analytic description of each of our three cases. Finally, in the discussion section we will propose a sociologically coherent framework for the analysis of what is commonly called public participation.

Framework, data and methods

Analytic framework

A great deal of our analytic framework has been inductively drawn during our data collection and analysis, for this reason reaching its final form as we started a comparative analysis of our cases. Nevertheless, even from its very beginning, this work rested on some broad theoretical and analytical preconceptions that we would like to briefly present. First, our analytical framework is deeply influenced by the social theory of Bourdieu (mainly Bourdieu, 1980, 1981, 1982, 1984a-c). Central to this perspective are the concepts of symbolic struggle and objectification. A symbolic struggle is a struggle for the imposition of specific meanings or perspectives. In other words, it is the process by which agents or institutions—consciously or not—try to impose their vision of the world, as well as the categories they use to understand it, upon other agents. The power relations implicit in those operations are generally hidden from the participants, which contributes in turn to the social efficacy of these perspectives.

The related concept of objectification describes the transformation of these subjective perspectives into a perceived normality so that they appear as something obvious (interested readers should refer to Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970, especially pp. 18–70, Bourdieu, 1980, especially pp. 87–109, & 209–244, and, for more applied uses, to Bourdieu, 1984a,c). The idea behind this model is that social relations, and more specifically, in our case, political relations, do not rest upon objective bases, but rather upon a perpetual symbolic struggle between agents to influence each other's perceptions of their respective positions and, more generally, their perceptions of the reality as a whole.

Bourdieu's theory was particularly useful here for two reasons. First, as we will see, it allows unveiling the construction and appropriation of legitimacy through implicit and explicit claims of representation—a legitimacy which is at the core of public participation's political efficacy. In our opinion, the main contribution of this paper can be found at this level. Secondly, this theory permits an analysis of public participation without reference to a normative definition since it presupposes that the definition of participation will be the product of symbolic struggle and social structuring.

The core of our perspective on public participation, or, should we say, on the social context in which participation takes place, is then somewhat subjectivist and deeply sociological. In addition, we also rely heavily on Pitkin's (1967) framework for the analysis of representation. This work splits the concept of representation into three dimensions: formal representation, descriptive representation and symbolic representation. To simplify, we could say that formal representation refers to the formal devices used to designate representatives (election, designation, random selection). Descriptive representation refers to the degree to which representatives are similar to the "average" represented. Symbolic representation refers to subjective perceptions from the participant's viewpoint at the origins of consent and legitimacy. Next, these three aspects are combined into substantive representation, which refers to the empirical "quality" of representation.

The choice of this two-level framework derives equally from the author's training and from the nature of the phenomena studied. Ontologically, we do not think that public participation should be conceived as a phenomenon distinct from the rest of organisational and political behaviours. Rather, public participation takes place in a specific organisational and social context from which it cannot be extracted.

Data and methods

In line with the above-mentioned theoretical position, our work rests on the comparative analysis of three in-depth qualitative case studies of public participation in Quebec's healthcare system. Cases were defined and selected according to a logic of maximum variation sampling (Patton, 2002). As previously stated, if we accept considering public participation as an autonomous social phenomenon, we should at the very least admit it is an ill-defined phenomenon. Our criteria for case selection were designed in order to maximise the differences between the cases insofar as they could be described as public participation. The first case describes a classic example of grassroots mobilisation prompted by dissatisfaction with services, and thus deals with public participation seen as a bottom-up practice or a process. In contrast, the second case describes a formal participation structure—the regional boards of administrators—thus dealing with a top-down participation mechanism. The third case describes a classic top-down consultation exercise, thus distinguishing itself from the first two by dealing with consultation rather than participation. Cases were individually investigated in the form of three lengthy analytic descriptions and then analysed from a comparative perspective. This design has two main strengths. First, it allows maximising the number of different dimensions of the phenomenon under observation while maintaining a sufficiently small number of cases to permit in-depth analysis. Secondly, one of the goals of our analysis was to establish a valid framework for the analysis of participation seen as an autonomous social phenomenon. In our opinion, the possibility of maximising the inter-case variation in many dimensions while maintaining a coherent analytic framework between cases is a powerful validation of the framework itself. As Patton (2002, p. 235) puts it, "*Any common patterns that emerge from great variation are of particular interest and value in capturing the core experience and central, shared dimensions of a setting or phenomenon*".

We used three kinds of data. First, 67 semi-directed interviews took place with key actors in the participation processes. Secondly, 34 sets of observation notes were produced during quasi-ethnographic observation of participation processes or their institutional planning. Finally, we examined a huge quantity of official, semi-official, and semi-confidential documents produced by each of the organisations and institutions concerned with the participation processes under study. Data was mainly collected in two regions (poetically nicknamed regions 1 and 2), but supporting evidence was also collected in two other regions. Broadly speaking, our approach could be described as a critical analysis of informants' and institutions' production of discourse (Blommaert & Bulcaen, 2000; Hardy & Phillips, 1999; Hardy, Palmer, & Philips, 2000; Kirsch & Bernier, 1988; Moch & Fields, 1985). Internal consistency was controlled by the triangulation of informants' viewpoints and opinions as well as by the comparison of these and the observation of empirical practices (Denzin, 1978).

Three cases: a short analysis

Context

In Quebec, as in other Canadian provinces, medically necessary services are mainly publicly financed. The administration of Quebec's public health and social services system was progressively "regionalised" between the 1970s and 1990s. At present, 18 regional boards receive a fixed budget from the provincial government to fund all medical and social services in their region. According to law, the first of the Regional Board's duties is to ensure public participation. This objective is congruent with the ideology of regionalisation in healthcare, which emphasises the link between public participation and regionalisation (Canadian Medical Association, 1993; Dorland & Davis, 1996). However, official documents and laws remain admirably silent on the form that the empirical functioning of this participation should or could take. Our analysis stems from this observation, its starting point being to study "if" and "how" public participation was taking place at the regional board level.

Case one: bottom-up grass-root participation

For historical reasons, the rehabilitation services in region 1 are severely under-financed compared to other regions. Since needs are not less than elsewhere, this situation translates in practice into the unavailability of some services, explicit access restrictions for some treatments, and, more generally, very long waiting lists. The vast majority of these rehabilitation services are under the responsibility of one institution that we will call the Centre. The Centre's general director, as well as its board, are extremely dynamic, effective, and determined. They all share the conviction that this under-financing is socially and morally unacceptable since it produces avoidable suffering and permanent after-effects for some patients, especially young children. The Centre is at the core of a network of individual and collective actors who share the objective of correcting this situation. This network encompasses parents of handicapped children, handicapped adults, many different regional and local community organisations who work to help these individuals, provincial branches of these organisations, the administrator of this sector at the Regional Board, and some local provincial deputies, as well as many other community or public organisa-

tions. More than 40 individual and collective actors have been identified. All these actors would benefit, either at the individual, professional or moral level, from an allocation or reallocation of more resources to the rehabilitation sector. They also all interact more or less closely with each other, and more directly with the Centre. The ultimate target of this implicit coalition is the provincial Ministry of Health, which holds the power to allocate the budget, although, as we will see, many proxy targets are used. We studied retrospectively and prospectively each actor's goals, interests and strategies in a 4-year period during which this network appeared, evolved and succeeded in obtaining substantial gains (though severe problems persist).

What happened in this case is that, probably in order to protect itself, the administration of the Centre organised meetings with parents whose children were on waiting lists, where they explained that they were unable to provide services without money, and urged parents to lodge complaints at the Regional Board and at their deputy's office. These meetings contributed to a high increase in the number of complaints but, more interestingly, to the incorporation of new actors in the network. Deputies, especially the ones in the opposition, happily joined the coalition to put pressure on the Minister of Health. The Regional Board also judiciously decided not to interfere with the Centre's strategy, but ensured that pressure was shifted directly to the Ministry.

Public participation as we have observed it here is a political struggle where actors with more or less converging interests entered in more or less permanent interrelations to constitute an implicit coalition oriented towards an external actor (Lemieux, 1998), namely the Ministry of Health. Predictably, the analysis of this political struggle shows that the most efficient actors were those able to strategically use existing power relations to their advantage, who did not follow established administrative practices and rules, and who were able to incorporate other actors into their strategies. What we have seen was an administrative and organisational guerrilla action efficiently fought by lay individuals and small organisations.

Case two: top-down participation structure

Our second case focuses not on a participation process, as did the first one, but on a formal decision-making structure, namely the regional boards of administrators. Every one of Quebec's 18 regional boards is legally under the authority of a board of administrators, which is in charge of hiring the general director and voting on all decisions and budgets. At the time we finished our fieldwork, these boards consisted of 22–24 members, most of them "lay" citizens elected through general suffrage to other duties (such as

hospital board members, as well as other public institutions' board members, city councillors, chamber of commerce representatives) and nominated to the Regional Board via a complicated quota system.

In the 1990s membership of regional boards of administration was restricted to exclude anyone employed by or remunerated through the public healthcare system (Quebec, 2001, chap. S-4.2, art. 398.1), turning boards into unquestionably "lay" decision-making structures. An interesting aspect of the model implemented at this time is that it was much more the product of incremental experience and political pragmatism than the product of any political representation or governance theory. These boards of administrators were granted very consequential formal powers (for example, the responsibility to allocate some 30% of the provincial government's total expenditures), but were neither directly elected nor directly under the authority of the Minister or of the government.

The decision to study this structure proceeds from questions about the relationship between the existence and composition of regional boards and their link with public participation. The fact that membership in the board is restricted to lay citizens unquestionably has something to do with the democratic ideal of public participation. However, this structure is neither very "participative" (no general election of board members and no clear public accountability), nor very descriptively representative (Pitkin, 1967), since board members obviously belong to an elite compared to the average citizen. Nevertheless, even in the absence of formal links, board members seem to feel accountable to and representative of the general public, or at least clearly express such feelings in interviews. In our view, the most convincing way to explain this situation is to draw a parallel to the principle of juries in the justice system as well as with some formal public participation devices derived from them (Renn, Webler, Rakel, Dienel, & Johnson, 1993). In justice courts, jury members are designated rather than elected; they are required to be external to the case and to establish their opinion with as much fairness as they can; finally, they are lay citizens, unfamiliar with the law or procedures' technicalities, though they are expected to exercise their judgement in an intensely technical context characterised by important stakes (at least from the defendant's standpoint!). Similarly, Quebec's regional board members are not directly elected, are expected to be neutral and to defend the public rather than special interests, and are lay citizens granted huge responsibilities in an acutely technical environment. What is crucial here is that, in both cases, the only possible justification for giving these responsibilities to lay citizens, notwithstanding their lack of technical expertise, is that they represent the public will. They are socially and institutionally objectified as representatives of the society as a whole.

Before proceeding to the third case, we would like to make a final point regarding this second case, using Pitkin's (1967) framework for distinguishing between formal, descriptive, and symbolic aspects of representation. Expressed in these terms we could say that Quebec regional boards' "representativeness" is weak, in terms of both formal and descriptive representation. However, the analysis of our data has convinced us that this does not mean that in practice substantive representation is bad. Moreover, as the parallel with the jury exemplifies, the composition of the board rests heavily on symbolic representation. Board members are not only expected to decide in the interests of the whole population—something which both board members and exterior observers implicitly agree upon—they are also symbolically objectified as representative of the entire population. As with jury members, board members are a symbolic expression of the public. In both cases, this symbolic operation is partly institutionalised (or formalised) by the official appointing system.

Case three: top-down formal consultation

In spring 2001, Quebec's provincial government launched a commission on the future of the provincial healthcare system with the mandate "*to solicit national and international experts, consult with interest groups, hold public hearings, and hold extensive public consultations*" (CESSS, 2000, p. iv). The Commission decided to delegate the organisation of public consultation to regional boards. Since consultations were held quasi-simultaneously in all regions, we again restricted our focus to regions 1 and 2. These two regional boards implemented public hearings, opinion polls, and focus groups, as well as public meetings and forums as formal consultation devices. The core of our analysis will focus on the first three devices.

To begin with, let us state that this third and last case leaves aside participation and focuses on the narrower concept of public consultation. Whereas participation encompasses all possible ways in which the public can influence a decision, consultation usually describes a situation in which the public can voice its opinion without any direct possibility of decision in the end. We will not go into the details of the consultation process here but rather give some highlights on the particularities of each consultation device, expressed as opposition between opinions' validity and neutrality, as well as statistically or politically based representation.

Predictably, few lay citizens got involved in the public hearings and not much could be learned from what was said by the ones who did. Hearings were mostly used by all sorts of organised groups. The question of determining whether some of these groups actually represented the public's opinion or the public's interest remains unanswered (and probably also unanswerable). Almost all claimed to represent not only their interests but also those of the public, and some (mainly unions) also claimed to represent public opinion. Notwithstanding these claims, most positions appeared rather corporatist. On the other hand, these positions constituted what we call valid opinions in the sense that they were often very well argued and documented positions. The main tensions resulting from this way of using public hearings could then be summarised as follows. Lay citizens' participation being negligible, hearings could only be considered as public consultation devices if one accepted the idea that organised groups, or at least some of them, represented the public's opinion or interest. This means of representing the public rests on a vision of political representativeness—political, since it is expressed via organised groups such as unions, professional associations and so on—as opposed to a statistical representation. The political nature of this representation strongly limits the neutrality of the opinions expressed, since those groups are somewhat corporatist by nature. On the other hand, this kind of representation generally produced well-argued (highly valid) opinions.

Besides holding public hearings, regional boards also used opinion polls and stratified focus groups as a consultation device. Our analysis of these devices has been greatly influenced by Bourdieu's (1984b) and Champagne's (1988, 1990) works on the concept of public opinion. What we would like to point out is that consultation devices that use statistical sampling to overcome the problems of political representativeness in fact also grapple with similar problems.

Since these devices leave little or no possibility for participants to contest the diagnosis of the problem, the list of solutions or, more fundamentally, the appropriateness of the theme of the consultation itself, they implicitly grant the consultation's organisers the capacity to frame the whole issue. Given that neither problems nor solutions are objective social objects, the capacity of an actor to arrange for an opinion poll and to diffuse its results grants him the power to transform his own (subjective) perception of problems and solutions into unquestionable (objective) social issues. In our view, this constitutes an implicit delegation, since respondents accept the structuring of their responses according to organisers' perceptions.

Furthermore, polls, as a consultation device, have the ability to place respondents in a situation where they will produce an answer notwithstanding the fact they have never really thought about it in any detail. The opinions produced by such polls are thus often not really "opinions" conceived as the product of rational thinking but rather very laconic answers to pre-established categories arising from infra-conscious preconceptions. The data collected in this case allowed us to empirically observe these effects.

For example, when the same question was asked both via a poll and during focus groups, results were compatible. However, when the same question was being discussed in a plenary session with the focus group respondents, results began to differ. People in the plenary soon demanded that a new "none of the above" category be created and raised several points about established proposals. At the end of the debate, 62% of respondents had changed their minds, as compared to their votes at the beginning of the debate.

This example, along with many others, appears as strong evidence in favour of the hypothesis that opinions produced through polling are often artefacts produced by the device itself. Wording this in the same vocabulary as for the previous consultation device, we could say that polls generally produce neutral (not directly influenced by interest groups) and statistically representative opinions, though the validity of these opinions remains highly debatable.

Discussion

This discussion is twofold. Firstly, in light of our case analysis, we would like to return to some of the criticisms of the "classical" literature we made in our introduction. Specifically, we will discuss the desirability of participation and the normative categories used to analyse it, leaving for the conclusion the question of administrative realism. Secondly, on a more fundamental level, we will use our data to propose an integrated sociological framework for the analysis of public participation, one that addresses some of the weaknesses in the classical literature.

As for the desirability of participation, most of the actors we observed in our first case would have preferred not to get involved in this participation process. Many of them are families with handicapped children, who have enough to do without getting involved with participation and politics. The democratic ideal of government for and by the people, implicit in the principle of public participation, is indisputably desirable. However, our data led us to seriously question the practical desirability of participation. The literature, using Hirschman's (1970) exit, voice and loyalty framework (Papadakis & Taylor-Gooby, 1987; Sharp, 1984), was swift to note that dissatisfaction is the most obvious motivation for participation. Unequivocally, it is what we have observed here. A first remark would then be that to observe a high level of public participation should in no way be interpreted as intrinsically positive. Conversely, the total absence of local mobilisation on a given topic could very well be an encouraging sign of the proper functioning of the relevant administration. More generally, the data of our three cases is consistent with the hypothesis that the more efficient a representation

system gets, the less grassroots participation there will be. If this holds true, the debate over the desirability of more public participation should at least pose the following dilemma: Do we want more participation regardless of the circumstances, or do we want to increase the level of satisfaction with services? In our opinion, by only focusing on the democratic ideal of participation, the classical literature fails to take this dilemma into account.

Our second remark is that the categories generally used in the scientific literature on public participation appear inadequate for describing our observations. Generally, this literature distinguishes between the "public" and the "others"—either administrators, experts, politicians, or interest groups (for example, see Charles & DeMaio, 1993; Chesney, 1984; Pinto & Fiester, 1979; Renn et al., 1993; Windle & Cibulka, 1981; Zimmerman & Rappaport, 1988). Often this opposition is shaped into a triadic vision differentiating the public, the administrator or expert, and the elected (for example, Crompton, Lamb, & Schul, 1981; King et al., 1998; Susskind & Elliott, 1981; Wagner, 1996; Wray & Hauer, 1997). Based on our observations, we believe that this ideal-type division is not only sociologically weak, but also too simplistic to describe empirical practices. In practice, public participation involves, as a first step, delegation from the public to base-line administrators and the elected, and often also a second and even a third delegation from base-line administrations to central administration, and so on. No doubt, when individual users and parents lodge complaints and write letters to the Centre, the Regional Board and its deputy, as well as when a grassroots community organisation helps them to do so, this is public participation in its most classical form. But when the Centre's administration co-ordinates actions, collects information, and diffuses it, relays complaints and so on, when local deputies' staff write to the ministry to ask for funding and when the Regional Board relays pressure at the provincial political level, they all directly contribute to grassroots actions' efficacy. Are these actions also public participation? In our view, this process cannot be meaningfully split between what is public participation and what belongs to the political struggle it has helped to create. We would suggest, rather, that it is theoretically debatable and analytically counterproductive to use clear-cut categories to distinguish between the "public" and the "others".

However, these two criticisms of the "classical" literature can—and must—lead to more fundamental questioning of the nature and functioning of public participation. As we have said, the methodological design of this study, as well as its sampling strategy, were oriented toward the maximisation of inter-case variation in many dimensions. The principle is that the capacity to incorporate very different cases into a single

integrative framework is a form of confirmation of the framework's validity (Patton, 2002). Two concepts are central in the elaboration of such an integrative framework. These are representation, and the related creation of legitimacy through symbolic struggles.

Let us begin with representation. We saw in the first case that, even in the case of grassroots action, public participation should not be seen as a way to escape the problems of representation that characterise ordinary politics. As any other form of collective action, the effectiveness of participation rests on explicit and implicit delegation in the form of mandate giving. Besides, public participation conceived as one particular form of political action distinguishes itself by its very limited recourse to formal representation. As we will argue, this in turn leads to a greater dependence upon symbolic representation and the related symbolic struggles.

The second case showed that the legitimacy granted by public representativeness can probably make do without a strong formal representation system. Instead, should "representativeness" not be conceived as an objectified status more than as the objective result of an administrative process? For example, almost no one in the system accepts the deputies' claims of representativeness, even though, on a formal political representational theory basis, they are unquestionably representative. This brings to light another central aspect of public participation conceived as a particular social phenomenon—namely, the symbolic construction of representation. As the first case showed, collective political action necessarily implies some delegation and representation. What the second case adds is that, from a sociological viewpoint, the production and efficacy of representation rests on symbolic operations that grant the representative its legitimacy. In other words, legitimacy is not so much granted directly by formal or descriptive representation as by the (subjective) perception of "representativeness".

Finally the analysis of our third case showed that even consultation is not a straightforward process. Consultation either relies on a statistically representative perspective with the risk of producing neutral opinions of dubious validity, or it relies on a politically representative perspective producing generally valid opinions with precarious neutrality. More fundamentally, it shows that, in both cases, what consultation produces is not an objective social reality called "public opinion" but rather a sophisticated social product, which some actors try to objectify as such. The actor can be an organised group trying to legitimise its viewpoint by asserting it is representative of the public's opinion, or it can be an institution using polls' results to state that the public holds this view; in both cases, there is an implicit delegation from the "public" to these self-designated spokespersons. As we have already stated earlier, at a

logical and sociological level, collective action implies some representation. What this case shows is that, even when these collective actions proceed from a top-down consultation process, they cannot escape the dilemmas of representation.

Once again, the invariant nature of public participation as a sociological process is its link with representation and symbolic structuring. Simply stated, what we want to show is that public participation cannot be meaningfully conceived of as a way to escape from the political dilemmas of representation. Though the small scale of what is usually called public participation can obscure the importance of implicit and explicit representation, its empirical influence is paramount.

All democratic political systems logically rest upon the idea that the citizenry is the ultimate source of legitimacy. Yet besides this principle, the real functioning of large democracies rests on more-or-less sophisticated representation systems (Bourdieu, 1984c, 2001; Dahl, 1956, 1982; Pitkin, 1967). For the sake of our argument, what these representation systems have in common is that—notwithstanding the formal procedures used or their substantive efficacy (Pitkin, 1967)—they are objectified as legitimate (symbolic) representation systems. Thus, formally designated representatives are objectified as agents legitimately empowered to "stand for" or to "act for" the represented. The characteristic of what is usually called public participation in this global framework is that this term designates small-scale political action by individuals who claim to "speak as", "stand for", or "act for" the "public".

Our first conclusion is that public participation differs from usual forms of political action in its very limited use of formal representation. Participants directly involved in these actions are either self-designated, or appointed through very weak formal representation procedures. Therefore, they cannot claim the symbolic representation legitimacy that is associated with these formal procedures, in contrast to other agents involved in political struggles (such as deputies, ministers, mayors). For this reason, they are forced to become more visibly and directly involved in symbolic struggles for the objectification of their representatives' status. For example, participants in our cases frequently deny any substantive representation to formally designated representatives (especially deputies), thus treating them as mere tokens. By doing so, they implicitly enhance the relative value of their own substantive representation.

What is interesting here is that the social and political efficacy of all of the different kinds of participation we have studied is directly related to the ability of the participants to objectify their representative's status and thus their inherent legitimacy. For example, in the first case, parents, users, the Centre's board and administration, community organisations, and so on were politically efficient because they were able to bring into being

and objectify a social object we could call "strong regional discontent with rehabilitation services", and objectify themselves as its representative. In saying this, we do not mean to negate in any way the regional lack of resources, nor the suffering it produces. What we wish to say is that objective scarcity of resources and suffering are never socially nor politically sufficient on their own. They are objective contextual factors that can be brought into the political arena by political agents and used as resources in political struggles. In our view, what is analytically important for research is to take into account the symbolic and political work needed in order to produce these operations of objectification.

We can suggest a comparable analysis for our second case. Regional board members in Quebec are responsible for the allocation of almost a third of provincial government expenditures. Board members are lay citizens, nominated to the board via weak and complicated procedures, without particular competence in the health and social services field. The only way by which this situation can be explained is by a parallel with the jury. In both cases, these lay citizens are objectified as representative of the whole citizenry. Here, the work of objectification is partly institutionalised (board members are part of a larger, state-related institution with its own legitimacy), and partly dependent on regional and individual discourses and practices.

Finally, the consultation analysed in our third case can highlight another facet of the same phenomenon. At public hearings, almost all groups claimed to "stand for" or to "act for" the whole "public", rather than represent the narrow interests of their group. By doing so, they, probably unconsciously, contribute to the objectification of the idea that, somewhere out there, there is such a thing as a "whole public" and, in a second step, try to objectify themselves as legitimate representatives of this public. Interestingly, polls and focus groups, which are presented as neutral devices to overcome representation deficiencies in hearings, proceed from the same logic. As we have briefly showed, these devices do not measure "public opinion" so much as contribute to objectifying a specific social object named as such, which is often nothing more than an artefact produced by the device itself. As in the first case, this objectified social object is then used as a resource by some agents to gain legitimacy in symbolic and political struggles.

Our second conclusion could then be summarised as follows. The efficacy of public participation, a particular type of political action, characterised by its reliance on weak and informal representation mechanisms, will depend upon the ability of the—often self-designated—public's representative to appear as a legitimate spokesperson for this public. As we tried to show in the last section of our discussion, in practice, this phenomenon often takes the form of an enlisting of specific social objects on its side in the political arena. In other words, the political efficacy of public participation ultimately rests upon symbolic struggles to appropriate the intrinsic legitimacy of the public.

Conclusion

Public participation being intrinsically a matter of power relations, appeals for more participation should be understood as pleas for the transformation of existing power relations. On this aspect, the classical literature is unquestionably well intentioned. It has generally favoured, implicitly or explicitly, a redistribution of power to less powerful groups in society. However, as the saying goes, the road to hell is paved with good intentions. It is not by promoting naïve and "bleeding-heart" visions—where a good, well-intentioned public anxiously, eager to participate, is turned down by ill-intentioned administrators and politicians—that social and institutional changes can be attained. Public participation is a very complex and sophisticated social and political phenomenon. As such, its scientific understanding would require socially and administratively coherent and sophisticated frameworks. The contribution of our analysis in this regard should probably be found in its emphasis on the social and symbolic constructions at the core of the political efficacy of public participation.

First, as most other political phenomena, public participation should not be viewed as a precise and pre-defined social object whose existence and definition can be taken for granted. The proposed framework suggests that, from the beginning, one should accept the fact that to consider public participation as an autonomous social phenomenon is nothing more than a methodological starting point. In other words, public participation is only that indistinct and undefined part of normal political and administrative behaviours we are used to calling that way. As such, it ontologically eludes any clear-cut normative definition that the "classical" literature is so fond of. In turn, this viewpoint obliges the researcher to distinguish between his personal political positions vis-à-vis the desirability of participation as well as its role and importance, and a more rigorous descriptive and analytic perspective regarding the empirical functioning of institutional and social systems. Indubitably, this position is also epistemological—in the sense that it views the researcher's role more as describing the game than playing it—and certainly can be challenged as such.

Secondly, our perspective applies the sociological concept of symbolic struggle to explain how the objectification of agents' legitimacy in "standing for" or "acting for" the public is linked to the social and political efficacy of this agent. The participating agent

will be politically effective if and because he is able to create the perception that he does not act or talk in his own name but in the name of a larger public—implicitly linked to the abstract but intrinsically legitimate ''general public''. This creation of a perception is precisely the definition of the concept of objectification. Moreover, since many agents are simultaneously involved in participation processes, and since they propose competing perceptions, they become involved in symbolic struggles for their objectification. In the end, what is significant in Bourdieu's theory is that it does not presuppose a cynical agent deceiving others in these operations, but rather someone who believes in the legitimacy of his own viewpoint.

Finally, as we have tried to show, symbolic aspects of public participation are absolutely central in any serious scientific analysis of this phenomenon. Regardless of the specific form of institutional arrangements, political action will rest upon symbolic struggles and the quest for legitimacy. Yet this should in no way be interpreted as a fatalistic statement implying that we should not care about institutional arrangements. To draw a parallel, it is not because modern atomic physics has show that matter is mostly vacuum that one should be less worried about the impact of a brick falling on one's head. In the same way, it is not because, at a scientific level, we observe that social and political action are structured by symbolic factors, that, at a policy-making level, we should not care about institutional arrangements. Any form of participation will be mediated through institutions and institutional regulations. It is thus obvious that policy-making regarding public participation should be concerned with institutional arrangements. But one of our central arguments here is that, by opposition, the scientific approach of participation practices should never limit itself to an analysis of formal participation devices.

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