Participatory Governance: The Way Forward?

This book is at once conventional and unconventional. As the reader has doubtlessly noticed by now, it does not purport to offer any bold new conjectures or alternative definitions or novel theoretical perspectives. For readers who are familiar with the pluralist debate of the 1950s and the corporatist debate of the 1970s, the promises and pitfalls of the governance model examined here – that of participatory governance – are largely old news.

We would like to think, however, that this book’s lack of theoretical novelty is a testament to the familiarity of the participatory-governance model, rather than to any limited cognitive abilities on the part of its authors (although the latter possibility, of course, cannot be ruled out). Boldly put, it seems there is little new about the new mode of governance championed by the Commission and others. In our view, the type of governance arrangements currently discussed by EU scholars under the umbrella of participatory governance is instead best characterised either as a form of inclusive corporatism, or as a form of restrictive interest-group pluralism. In other words, the participatory-governance model, with its focus on stakeholder participation and deliberation, can be seen as an attempt to strike a balance between the principles of representation that underlie corporatism and pluralism, respectively.

Whereas the corporatist mode of interest mediation is based on the principle of representational monopoly, in which certain interest groups gain exclusive access to decision-making by being recognised or licensed by the state, pluralism is based on the notion of free competition among interest groups: that is, no interest group is granted...
any particular privileges by the state, and all are free to compete for power (e.g. Schmitter 1974). The participatory-governance model, with its emphasis on the role of stakeholders and concerned interests, can be seen as occupying a middle ground between the principles of representational monopoly and representational competitiveness. Admittedly, the interest groups in this model are less exclusive than the corresponding groups in a corporatist system. Nevertheless, the very use of these terms – “stakeholders” and “concerned interests” – signals that interest groups who do not hold a stake in a particular issue or are not closely concerned with a given policy are not to be granted access to the relevant arenas for participation and deliberation. Understood in this way, participatory governance – as currently conceived within the EU – may be described as a type of representational oligopoly.

As we see it, then, the difference between participatory governance and more traditional modes of interest intermediation – such as corporatism or pluralism – is a matter of degree rather than of kind. This is not to say, however, that we regard the ongoing attempts to strengthen the interest-based channel of representation within the EU as unimportant. Quite the contrary, we believe it is critical – in view of the rising public discontent with the Union in many of its member states – to try to ascertain whether a closer involvement of organised stakeholders in EU policy making will really “connect the EU more closely to its citizens and lead to more effective policies”, as the Commission claims (2001a: 8).

According to the Commission, introducing new arenas for interest-group participation and deliberation at the European level is a viable method for improving democratic representation and problem-solving capacity within the Union. In this book, we have subjected this claim to empirical examination. It is this empirical focus which makes this book unconventional (although not unique). As Mark Pollack notes, namely, “the analytical and normative elaboration of the governance approach has frequently outpaced the empirical work needed to assess the plausibility of its claims” (2005: 390). By examining the effects of the Commission’s new approach to governance during the chemicals policy overhaul, we have sought to narrow this gap between theoretical claims and empirical evidence.

In this concluding chapter, we bring together the findings of previous chapters in an effort to settle the balance sheet of the