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Re-distributing Problems of Participation

Introduction

What makes a device-centred perspective so attractive on participation, I have argued, is that it allows us to reformulate problems of participation. We are now in a position do so. Material participation, we have seen, is often presented as a solution to problems of participation. Locating participation in material practice has been defined as a way of making tractable two important constraints on democracy in technological societies: the busyness of everyday life and the complexity of issues. By turning everyday practices into occasions for acting on public affairs, material participation promises to make engagement eminently doable. However, over the course of this book, we have encountered a range of problems associated with material participation itself, such as the relative amorphousness of materially engaged publics, or their perceived lack of agency. While I have been critical of these various definitions of the problems associated with material publics, I have also argued that it would be a mistake to opt for the ‘non-critical’ solution and argue that material participation does not constitute a problem at all. Instead, we should explore and develop alternative ways of problematizing material publics.

It is here that the American pragmatists Lippmann and Dewey have much to offer us, as they have proposed a more nuanced and constructive perspective on problems of material participation. In the pragmatist account, public involvement is marked by a distinctive problem of relevance, which says that publics are at once intimately and remotely involved in issues. This suggests that the problem with material publics is not just their inability to act effectively on complex issues, or their inability to distinguish themselves as a significant political force.
Instead, ‘the problem’ of material publics resides in the very modality of socio-material involvement that is distinctive of these publics: they are problematically entangled in issues. There may be mileage, Dewey and Lippmann’s work suggests, in defining material publics as inherently problematic formations. However, while the grounds for adopting such a definition of material publics are partly theoretical, I have suggested that it is only through practices of material participation that these problems become fully specified. For this reason, I have fleshed out the pragmatist proposition in this book through empirical analyses of contemporary enactments of material participation, focusing on everyday devices of environmental engagement, as one site among several others where these problems have recently come to a head.

In this concluding chapter, I would like to demonstrate that a pragmatistically informed, empirically oriented perspective offers a distinctive way of analysing problems of material participation, and I will do this in two ways. First, I will return to the pragmatist definition of the problem of material publics – the problem of relevance – and show how it differs from another influential definition of the problem of participation, what I call the ‘problem of extension.’ We have already encountered the latter problem in previous chapters, for example in my discussion of the concept of the ‘community of the affected’, in Chapter 2, and in my account of studies of public experiments in the sociology of science and technology, in Chapter 4. In summing up the differences among these two contending problem definitions, I want to clarify what we gain by focusing on problems of relevance. As I will argue below, it opens up a more symmetrical, dynamic and relational approach to problems of participation.

In focusing on problems of participation, I would also like to make a more general argument about the normative implications of adopting a device-centred approach to material participation. Distinctive about such an approach is that it allows for a re-distribution of problems of participation: if we consider how participation is performed in material practices, it becomes possible to treat as a question the issue of who – among the different actors caught up in participatory arrangements – must be assigned responsibility for these problems. To clarify this idea, I will consider different formulations of the problem of environmental publics, more particularly: I will compare the ways in which these different formulations attribute this problem to the different actors and entities involved. Finally, I want to discuss, however briefly, the question of the wider spaces of publicity in which participation is done. I will argue that if we are serious about developing an empirical approach