

A Realistic View of the Participatory Utopia. Reflections on Participation*

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Participation has become a buzz word in many an economic and social context. This however hides the fact that there is a great variety of different participative practices, both on micro and macro levels, practiced for very different purposes. Sometimes speaking of participation is just juggling with names.

In many enterprises market driven work organisations offer “participation” to employees, which is in fact a device to misuse employees’ interest in “authentic participation” (Fals Borda, 2013/2007) for increasing the efficiency of work by dependent autonomy. In modern forms of so called interactive value creation via the internet we find another practice: so called participation of consumers or online communities of co-producers in designing, creating or improving (new) products. Even in trade unions the use and practice of participation is sometimes ambivalent.

In order to distinguish authentic participation in the interest of participants from the misuse of participation for different interests (increase in efficiency; exploitation of participants’ creative capacities) this author coins the term of democratic participation, characterised by, among others, democratic dialogue between subjects (no othering business); collective reflection; giving a voice to all participants. Finally it is argued that the practice of democratic participation may open horizons of utopia.

Key words: authentic participation, democratic participation, participation on micro and macro levels, trade unions’ participative practices, inflationary use of the term participation

* The expression “Participatory Utopia” was first used by my colleague Danilo Streck (2013).