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THE SOCIAL RELEVANCE OF PARTICIPATORY THEORY

1. INTRODUCTION

Theory is not always accepted as a relevant contribution to our social world. From a common sense perspective, theory becomes articulated as difficult to understand and grounded in esoteric knowledge which has nothing to say about "the real world". This status of disconnection implies that the relevance of theory is (seen as) restricted to a specific societal field, academia, and that the main role of theory is to narcissistically strengthen the societal position of this field. This positions theory as the servant of a power strategy, a sentinel to protect academia for the outside world and to allow academia to remain uncontested in its ability to speak about that world. Sometimes we can find these types of arguments in academia as well, where the governing (and thus restrictive) capacities of theory is problematised. For instance, in their article "Against theory", Knapp and Michaels[1] discuss a series of theoretical problems within literary studies, such as "the function of authorial intent, the status of literary language, the role of interpretative assumptions and so on". They then continue that: "the mistake on which all critical theory rests has been to imagine that these problems are real"[2].

Our article takes a different position, and sets out to argue in favour of the social relevance of theory, and more particular in favour of participatory theory. It will do so by reverting to an academic language, doing what we (hopefully) do best, in full awareness of the possibilities and limitations of this choice. The article starts with a more general reflection on the social relevance of theory, developing four arguments in support of theory's social relevance. In the second part of the article, we focus more on one specific theoretical area, participatory theory. Some of the inspiration – mainly for this second part – was gathered through an analysis of a series of short essays (labelled "Individual Reports"), written by colleagues within the framework of an academic network on audience studies, the Cost Action Transforming Audiences, Transforming Societies (TATS).

But let us first clarify the concept "theory". This concept emerges from a number of different discourses and has a number of usages; it is a term whose definition is often taken for granted, yet whose meaning may in fact vary among different traditions of research. Thus, in the natural sciences, "theory" is usually something to be tested, to be

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[1] S. Knapp, W.B. Michaels, "Against Theory", *Critical Inquiry*, 8, 4 (1982): 723-742 (723).
[2] *Ibid.*, 724.

verified or not, within the logic of the scientific approach. Popper's[3] notion of "falsifiability" looms large here. Theory is also at times used as a loose synonym for "philosophy" (also loosely understood…). This usage is mostly situated in the common sense contexts of everyday life – and has some significance for our presentation, as we will see shortly. Within the social sciences there are some currents that align themselves with a view of theory that derives from the natural sciences; however, other currents explicitly define their scientific logic as distinct from the natural sciences.

In these traditions, theory is seen as bodies of thought that can serve a number of related purposes, such as: help make sense of the social world; frame the analysis of phenomena; offer a guide action; or predict consequences of specific measures. Speaking about sociological theory, Ritzer[4] sees theory "as a set of interrelated ideas that allow for the systematization of knowledge of the social world. This knowledge is then used to explain the social world and make predictions about the future of the social world". In positioning ourselves with these currents, we would express it as follows: theory is that which basically furnishes the intellectual scaffolding for research; it orients us, integrating assumptions, evidence and normative dispositions. That is to say, most research in fact is predicated upon several elements of theoretical conceptualisation. And theory is usually plural in character, even when the term is used in its singular form, as is the case in this article.

2. THEORY IN SOCIAL RESEARCH: A CONCEPTUAL TOOLBOX

The first argument in support of the social relevance of theory is its capacity to generate concepts and frameworks by articulating concepts for tasks at hand, be it research or social practices. In fact, theory is sometimes defined precisely as a framework that defines and arranges concepts, and structures the relationship between those concepts, focusing on specific phenomena, actions, problems, with varying degrees of complexity. This underscores the importance of articulation, or connecting concepts with each other to form theories. Here we have to keep the specificity of Laclau and Mouffe's[5] definition of articulation in mind. They see articulation as "any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice". This definition implies that particular discursive arrangements also have an impact on how concepts are exactly defined, and what role they (can) play in specific theories.

It is important to emphasise that theory is discursive; there is no natural unity between itself and what it represents; in other words: we always face a representational gap. Theory unavoidably has particular claims towards reality. One key component here is that theory is embedded within paradigms and their three basic dimensions (ontology, epistemology and axiology[6]), which increases a paradigm's particularity (and normativity – see later). In Ritzer's words, "a paradigm is a fundamental image of the subject matter within a science"[7]. There are struggles between fields and disciplines, where "each of its paradigms is competing for hegemony within the discipline as a whole as

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[3] K. Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge*, London: Routledge, 1963.

[4] G. Ritzer, *Contemporary Sociological Theory and Its Classical Roots: The Basics* (2nd-3rd editions), St. Louis: McGraw-Hill, 2007-2010, 5.

[5] E. Laclau, C. Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, London: Verso, 1985, 105.

[6] Sometimes also methodology is mentioned as a component of paradigms.

[7] G. Ritzer, *Sociology: A Multiple Paradigm Science*, Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1980, 7.

well as within virtually every sub-area within sociology"[8]. Such contestation becomes part of the contingencies that shape any particular field of research.

As a discursive construction, theory must be challenged, and theorists must engage in self-reflection. Since all knowledge, including theory, is discursively constructed under specific contingencies, we can never position ourselves outside of our social circumstances. Thus, historicism and relativism are our inexorable fate. However, we can certainly reflect upon our contingencies – and try to illuminate how they impact on our knowledge and our theorising; not least, this can fruitfully be focused precisely on our concepts. We need to highlight the conditions that nudge our thought (and its vocabularies) in certain directions (as opposed to others). Even such reflection has its contingencies – there is no ultimate escape – but such efforts, an eternal cat-and-mouse game, helps to keep us alert and invites self-correction and re-interpretation, thus stimulating our knowledge development.

In sum, theory is socially relevant because it allows us to conceptually capture the social world. It provides us with a wide range of concepts – toolboxes – to narrate and to understand that world. Moreover, theory allows ordering these concepts into articulated narratives that claim consistency and plausibility, but at the same time theorists should remain vigilant towards the contingencies that influence these concepts.

3. THEORY: SPEAKING ABOUT THE SOCIAL WORLD FROM A SEMI-AUTONOMOUS POSITION

Theory is distinct from common sense and common practice; theory involves abstraction, versatility (time), hermeneutic effort and a sense of holism. At the same time, theory has a complex relationship with the concepts circulating in the social worlds that it seeks to describe. First of all, these theoretical concepts are not located outside the social. In outlining his notion of the ''double hermeneutic'', Giddens[9] explains that philosophers and social scientists have often considered the way "in which lay concepts obstinately intrude into the technical discourse of social science. Few have considered the matter the other way around". He asserts that "the concepts of the social sciences are not produced about an independently constituted subject-matter, which continues regardless of what these concepts are. The 'findings' of the social sciences very often enter constitutively into the world they describe"[10].

Yet theoretical concepts also need to (re)connect with these social worlds. Gramsci's analysis of common sense is grounded in the difference between common sense and theory, in combination with an emphasis on the need to connect them. As he puts it: "The active man-in-the-mass has a practical activity, but has no clear theoretical consciousness of his practical activity, which nonetheless involves understanding the world in so far as it transforms it"[11]. Theory thus needs to link up with everyday horizons, and not remain exclusively within the confines of an intellectual elite, alienating

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[8] *Ibid.*, 158.
[9] A. Giddens, *Social Theory and Modern Sociology*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987, 20.
[10] *Ibid*.
[11] A. Gramsci, A. (1999), ''Notes for an Introduction and an Approach to the Study of Philosophy and the History of Culture'', in A. Gramsci, D. Forgacs (eds.), *The Antonio Gramsci Reader. Selected Writings 1916-1935*, London: Lawrence and Wishart, 324-347 (333).

from practice life and the vast majority of the population. To quote Gramsci[12] at length on this point:

> …one could only have had cultural stability and an organic quality of thought if there had existed the same unity between the intellectuals and the simple as there should be between theory and practice. That is, if the intellectuals had been organically the intellectuals of these masses, and if they had worked out and made coherent the principles and the problems raised by the masses in their practical activity, thus constituting a cultural and social bloc. The questions posed here was the one we have already referred to, namely this: is a philosophical movement properly so called when it is devoted to creating a specialized culture among restricted intellectual groups, or rather when, and only when, in the process of elaborating a form of thought superior to "common sense" and coherent on a scientific plane, it never forgets to remain in contact with the "simple" and indeed finds in this contact the source of the problems it sets out to study and to resolve? Only by this contact does a philosophy become "historical", purify itself of intellectualistic elements of an individual character and become "life".

We can note that this has wide implications: academia as a centre for the production of knowledge and the generation of theory must expand its efforts to engage in joint knowledge production and dialogue, e.g. in civil society, to engender participatory knowledge construction. At the same time, the independence of academia, as one location where theory is generated, needs to be cherished. One way to capture this idea is to refer to academia as a semi-autonomous field, capable of thinking the social world from a mixture of an inside-oriented and outside-oriented position.

This argument brings us to the second reason why theory is socially relevant: It allows theorists to speak precisely from this inside/outside position, where theory – because of core characteristics such as abstraction – can distance itself from the (rest of the) social world, exercising a semi-autonomous position, and showing complexities, contingencies and absences. At the same time this distance is never a disconnection: Theory's speaking about the social world is never fully outside that social world; in contrast, theory is worldly, which also allows theory to intervene in it.

4. THE IMPORTANCE OF CRITICAL THEORY:
DEMOCRACY AS A NORMATIVE GROUNDING

"Critical" is another multivalent concept, emanating from philosophy, the humanities and politics. Our perspective here builds on the tradition from Hegel, through Marx, and various emancipatory projects where "critical" has come to denote a confrontation with unnecessary and illegitimate constraints on human equality, community and freedom. In other words, the adjective "critical" signals a concern with normatively problematic discrepancies in power relations. Theory that is critical incorporates this normative dimension into its toolbox, becoming thus, at a general level, *critical theory* (not to be confused with the Frankfurt School's specific programme of Critical Theory, though it may well have relevance at some point, depending on the project at hand)[13].

Critical theory claims no monopoly: other forms of theorising are also necessary.

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[12] *Ibid.*, 331.
[13] A fuller discussion of this is found in the final chapter of P. Dahlgren, *The Political Web*, London: Palgrave, 2013.

Critical reflection on power relations can be seen as a particular moment or phase of a research endeavour, or may well constitute its dominant character. There is also a role for theory to engage critically against prevailing intellectual status-quo (i.e. discursive resources and their hegemonic positions). Our position is that today, given several problematic trajectories of societal development at both the national and global level, there is a need for enhanced reflection on problematic power relations – not least because they can take increasingly subtle and efficacious forms, within institutions, organisations, and larger societal contexts. Power relations are mediated not least via modes of knowledge and societal position that they have[14]. This emphasis on power (crucial for participatory theory) is only one illustration how theory can produce normative anchorage points, and allows us to develop critical projects that strive for social change. In this sense, theory provides discursive structures which allow us to formulate, translate, and encapsulate normative positions.

We can readily situate these considerations within the framework of democracy, seen as an ongoing normative project where participation in decision-making is a central premise and where power arrangements are required to be transparent, accountable, and legitimate. The history of existing democracy is chequered yet encouraging, while today it generally finds itself in a situation where the gaps between reality and ideals seem to be growing. There is of course much national variation here, but in the past two decades there has emerged an international recognition that democracy has hit on hard times, and among the key problems are the declines in participation in the formal political processes, as well as – on many fronts – in civil society activities. There is a hegemonic discourse that underscores the theme of indifference and apathy among citizens, thereby defining the problem as emanating from the people rather than from the elites and the structures of power.

While there are certainly patterns of passivity at work, other researchers accentuate such things as various mechanisms of exclusion, the lack of responsiveness among political representatives, the dearth of opportunities for engaging with political life, the de-politicisation of inherently political questions via economistic rationality, and corruption among political and economic elites – all of which serve to deflect participation (and even engender apathy towards the formal political arena). From this perspective, research engagement with the life of democracy needs to adapt a critical stance, that is, one that challenges key developments in regard to power relations. Theory exactly allows producing these normative anchorage points and developing critical projects that strive for social change.

5. CRITICAL PARTICIPATORY THEORY: DE-DOXIFYING MYTHS AND FANTASIES

One way to move critical theory further is to shift gear and integrate (elements of) psychoanalytic theory. From the standpoint of psychoanalytic theory, our subjectivity is never fully unitary and centred, and we are never fully transparent to ourselves, since the unconscious always intervenes, as it were, behind our back. Thus, our actions are always to some extent shaped by factors within us but which lie beyond our awareness. That people are to a significant extent driven by unacknowledged desires and fears,

[14] Cfr. M. Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, London: Routledge, 2002.

unresolved guilt, emotional double binds, that the self is cloven between its conscious awareness and a murky, elusive unconscious, is all very unsettling, to say the least, if one's point of departure is the transparent self with an exclusively rational mindset. However, to acknowledge these dynamics within our subjectivity opens up the door to a more extensive and richer theoretical and research horizon within the human sciences.

There are a number of versions of the unconscious, but the Freudian model, with its various revisions and offshoots, has incontestably become the dominant one. One major offshoot is found in Lacan's reformulation, which, among other things, posits that the subject's selfhood is ultimately fictitious, being founded on a misrecognition of a unified, omnipotent self deriving from the "mirror stage" of infancy, where the small child sees him/herself in a mirror but does not understand that it is just a reflection. Elements of this pattern continue through life as an inexorable part of our subjectivity, what Lacan calls "the Imaginary order". A result is a deep-seated perennial lack, as Lacan terms it, within the psyche. This poststructuralist version of the Freudian self is thus seen as an imaginary projection, one that can lead the adult subject into problems such as narcissistic delusion, if it cannot come to terms with its earlier misconceptions.

In Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, fantasy is conceptualized as having (among other functions) a protective role[15]. In providing the subject with (imaginary) frames that attempt to conceal and finally to overcome the major internal psychic cleavage of the lack[16], fantasy functions as "the support that gives consistency to what we call 'reality'"[17]. Subjects "push away reality in fantasy"[18]; in order to make the reality (imaginary) consistent, social imaginaries are produced, accepted and then taken for granted. Nevertheless, this ultimate victory remains out of reach, and eventually all fantasies are again frustrated. Their limits become visible, showing the contingency of the social.

However important fantasies may be as psychological support, critical theory needs to flesh out how they work, illuminate their normalising strategies, and highlight their limits. Fantasies can become readily embedded as taken for granted, assuming positions of orthodoxy. These need on occasion to be challenged, to be rendered so to speak de-doxified, where "doxa" (a term we borrow from Bourdieu[19]), is understood as prevailing common-sensical and largely unconscious perceptions about the world and one's place in it, is critically confronted. Critical theory, armed with psychoanalytic tools, can help reveal that which is repressed – made invisible – by the psyche and rendered invisible, at least on the surface.

One example (developed earlier[20]) of the workings of fantasy within the field of the political-democratic deals with the fantasies of policy-making. Arguably, there are three distinct fantasies at work in policy-making: the post-political desire to attain political consensus in the face of social conflict, deploying, in a contradictory manner, strategic power to attain it; the fantasy of social makeability, where political agency via formal politics confronts the (ever-growing) domain of the non-institutional expression of the

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[15] J. Lacan, *The Seminar XI. The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis* (trans. A. Sheridan), London: Penguin, 1979, 41.

[16] J. Lacan, *Le Séminaire. Livre IV. La Relation d'Objet/The Seminar. Book IV. The Object Relation*, Paris: Seuil, 1994, 119-120.

[17] S. Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, London: Verso, 1989, 44.

[18] J. Lacan, *The Seminar. Book XX. Encore, On Feminine Sexuality, the Limits of Love and Knowledge* (trans. B. Fink with notes), New York: Norton, 1999, 107.

[19] P. Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977.

[20] N. Carpentier, "Policy's hubris. Power, Fantasy and the Limits of (Global) Media Policy Interventions", in R. Mansell, M. Raboy (eds.), *Handbook on Global Media and Communication Policy*, London: Blackwell, 2011, 113-128.

political; and the fantasy of universality, which envisions political and social-cultural unity among citizens but is confronted by manifestations of the non-incorporated particular, and by the Other. These fantasies can be seen as thematic patterns that imbue much contemporary policy discourse, which in turn often makes claim to a neutral and rationalistic logic. The three fantasies are summarised in the table below.

Figure 1 - *Three key fantasies of policy*[21]

	Post-political	Social makeability	Universality
A desire for	Political consensus	(Full) political agency and the primate of politics	Political and social-cultural unity
Frustrated by	Antagonism and conflict	The non-institutionalized component of the political	The particular and the Other

As a component of critical theory, the analysis of political fantasies illustrates that theory can render the invisible visible. Through such logics, theory has the capacity to uncover mythological and hegemonic projects that benefit from the cloak of taken-for-grantedness. Theory can not only offer a deconstruction of universality by showing its particularity, it can also show the very necessity of the social processes of universalisation and hegemonisation.

6. EMBEDDING PARTICIPATORY THEORY IN SOCIETY

Pulling together what we have said about theory, critical theory, and democracy, let us here offer a thumbnail sketch of participatory theory, in order to discuss its societal relevance. Participatory theory is seen as the body of discourses that aim to describe, explain and predict the decision-making practices of actors situated in imbalanced power relations and the attempts to redress these imbalances.

Democracies today do not assure full and authentic participation of their citizens, either in electoral or in extra-parliamentarian contexts. Democratic systems in fact provide structures of opportunity for participation that can vary considerably. Within the same society there can also be different obstacles for different groups. Participation certainly depends on the initiatives that citizens themselves take, but a fundamental point is that given prevailing power arrangements – often of an informal kind – such agency is always contingent on circumstances.

A particular structural problem for participation (and democracy generally) that has emerged in recent decades is the pattern whereby formal political power moves away from the accountable political system and into the private sector; while not a new phenomenon under capitalism, in the logics of recent neoliberal versions of societal development this trend has intensified dramatically. When market dynamics come to be seen as the most suitable path towards a better future, democracy and the opportunities for meaningful political participation become undermined. Normative frameworks that concern justice are subverted, as economistic values seep into and put price tags on just

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[21] Based on Carpenter, ''Policy's hubris. Power, Fantasy and the Limits of (Global) Media Policy Interventions'', 121.

about all areas of human life, derailing the foundations for democratic political discussion[22]. The upshot of such currents is often a process of depoliticisation.

If we then look at the field of alternative political participation, we see many citizens engaging politically, but outside the electoral system. Often propelled by frustrations that the established parties are insufficiently responsive or even by a sense that the mainstream political system marginalises or excludes, many citizens are finding new routes to engagement and participation. Some forms of engagement are leading to new kinds of political practices, new ways of being citizens, effectively altering the character of politics in some contexts.

Participation is fundamentally an expression of political agency, and as such takes on relevance in the context of the political. "The political" refers to collective antagonisms, conflicts of interest that can emerge in all social relations and settings[23]. This is a broader notion than that of politics, which most often refers to the formalised institutional contexts. Thus, we can say that participation implies involvement with the political, regardless of the character or scope of the context; it therefore always in some way involves struggle. Certainly some instances of the political will be a part of formalised politics and involve decision-making and/or elections, but it is imperative that we keep the broader vista of the political in view as the terrain of political agency and participation.

We can note that in today's society that there may at times be some ambiguity as to where to draw the boundaries between participation in the political and the non-political. While we can largely dismiss as a misuse of the term those formulations that invite us to "participate" in various commercial and promotional contexts, we need to be alert to possible dimensions in, for example, popular culture that may still have some significance for power issues.

Carpentier[24] makes a basic distinction between *minimalist* and *maximalist* versions of participation; we can see them as forming the poles of a continuum within various strands of democratic theory. The minimalist position tends to emphasise the dynamics of representation, where power is delegated, and leans towards elite models of democracy; the role of citizens is largely limited to the selection of their representatives through voting. Maximalist versions of democratic participation, on the other hand, underscore the importance of achieving a balance between representation and promoting other, more extensive forms of participation. In attending to politics, it also keeps the broader view of the political in focus.

In discussions about participation, media and democracy, another distinction is often made between participation *in* the media and participation *via* the media; these two strands have a long history of entwinement[25]. Participation in the media involves not only making use of the media, but can also imply being active in some way in the creation of content. In the era of mass media such opportunities were few and quite constricted. With the advent of the web and its affordances, participation in media has certainly been transformed. This is an important democratic step; still, we must bear in mind the distinctions in scale and impact between on the one side, small organisations,

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[22] M. Sandel, *What Money Can't Buy: The Moral Limits of Markets*, London: Allen Lane, 2012.

[23] See for example, C. Mouffe, *On the Political*, London: Routledge, 2005.

[24] N. Carpentier, *Media and Participation. A Site of Ideological-Democratic Struggle*, Bristol: Intellect, 2011, 17.

[25] See N. Carpentier, P. Dahlgren, F. Pasquali, "The Democratic (Media) Revolution: A Parallel History of Political and Media Participation", in N. Carpentier, K. Schrøder, L. Hallett (eds.), *Audience Transformations. Shifting Audience Positions in Late Modernity*, London: Routledge, 2014, 123-141.

groups, and individuals, and on the other side, major corporate actors. The corporate colonisation of communicative space online and the growing domination of market logic on the web of course has implications for power relations online.

Participation *via* the media takes us into social domains beyond the media. Participation in these domains is facilitated by the media, but the focus of engagement lies with the contexts and issues that media connect us to. Increasingly our relation to the social takes this route, hence the contemporary attention accorded to the concept of mediatisation. A crucial point concerning this concept is that the media never serve as neutral carriers that simply mirror something else, but always, through their various logics and contingencies, impact on the relationship between media user and that which is mediated.

7. LINKING THE COST TATS ACTION WITH PARTICIPATORY THEORY –
THE SOCIAL RELEVANCE OF PARTICIPATORY THEORY

Theory is always deployed in specific contexts. The latter part of this article analyses how participatory theory is deployed in the specific context of the COST TATS Action. More specifically, this part is inspired by 26 individual reports written by members of Working Group 2 of the COST TATS Action. The aim is to illustrate the above-mentioned social relevance of theory, and to apply this to the relevance of participatory theory. To recapitulate our previous discussion on the relevance of theory in general, theory matters because it:

1) provides ways to order/structure the social world and provides us with concepts (a toolbox) to narrate and understand that world;

2) allows us to speak about the social world from an inside/outside position, showing complexities, contingencies and absences, without disconnecting from the social world (and allowing interventions in it);

3) produces normative anchorage points, and allows us to develop critical projects that strive for social change;

4) allows to make visible the invisible, and show the particularity of universality.

1. *Concept of participation and related concepts*

Participation itself is obviously the nodal point of participatory theory, while at the same time it is not the only one. Together with a series of related concepts, such as interaction/interactivity, engagement, involvement, empowerment and (co-)creation, participation captures a specific set of social practices that deal with the decision-making practices of actors situated in imbalanced power relations and the attempts to redress these imbalances. Without this theoretical toolbox, it would remain impossible to capture these social practices.

At the same time, participatory theory validates participatory processes; the power struggles in society and the attempts of a diversity of actors to increase their power positions gain visibility and thus relevance. Here, the representational is performative; through the logics of discursification, a specific set of practices is grouped together, and through this process of grouping, that set of practices becomes signified as relevant.

As Sara Henriques' individual report[26] illustrates, this process of validation can also be exported to other fields (although not without problems):

> academic research can add value and significant to interpret in a deeper way stakeholder's data by considering more qualitative analysis or by using more than descriptive quantitative data, by focusing on users experience and by assessing other details that industry often fails to parse, which are more related to the social involvement allowed by technology and the impact of technology on social practices and relationships.

Moreover, participatory theory allows concentrating the attention on a specific type of process, but also to flesh out the interconnectedness with other social processes and phenomena. This implies that a wide range of theoretical concepts become articulated with/in participatory theory, allowing for its mobilisation for the analysis of the social world. To use one individual report as illustration: José Manuel Noguera Vivo writes in his essay: "I would argue that we need to focus in a deeper way on the systemic changes caused by the influence of participation in spheres and processes formerly related just to the professionals". This plea for a deepened focus on participatory processes requires the concept of participation, but also its connection to the concepts and models of journalistic theory to explain the workings of the participation of non-professionals in the journalistic field.

2. *Showing their complexity (and contingency)/paradoxes*

The abstract nature of participatory theory produces particular narrations that focus on the complexity and contextualised nature of social relations, driven by theoretical elegance and the confrontation with empirically accessed social realities. The concept of participation does not refer to a very straightforward and clear social process, but has many overlapping and contradictory layers. In his discussion of participatory (open) ethics, Ward[27] explains how judgements about participatory processes are always relative, and a matter of degree. Moreover, participation in a specific process might be intense in one component, but minimal in another. For instance, participatory (open) ethics could be open in the discussion of new ethical guidelines, but not in their formal adoption. Often, Ward[28] argues, we can "only reach a rough, comparative judgment", especially when "there are forces pulling in opposite directions".

Examples in the domain of media production are situations where slowly but surely forms of interaction turn into (minimalist) forms of participation. Is the first interactive film, the Czechoslovak *Kinoautomat. A Man and His House* (1967), where audience members could decide on which pre-prepared segments would be screened[29], interactive or participatory? That is not an easy discussion. Labelling this interaction or minimalist participation becomes an analytical decision that needs to be argued from the specificity of the case.

Participatory theory shows this complexity, but at the same time cannot stay outside this complexity. Also at the level of theory, the signification of participation is

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[26] The term ''individual report'' is used to refer to the individual reports written by members of Working Group 2 of the COST TATS Action. The list of individual reports that were referred to in this article is at the end.

[27] S. Ward, *Ethics and the Media: An Introduction*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

[28] *Ibid.*, 227.

[29] Carpentier, *Media and Participation. A Site of Ideological-Democratic Struggle*, chapter 5.

part of a "politics of definition"[30], since its specific articulation shifts depending on the ideological framework that makes use of it. Debates on participation are part of a political-ideological struggle for how our political realities are to be defined and organised. An illustration of the existence of this conceptual vagueness can be found in Birgit Stark's individual report, when she writes: "Notwithstanding this strong research interest, there is currently no consensus about the multi-faced and hard-to-grasp concept of interactivity". Of course, conceptual vagueness is omnipresent in academia and should not be over-problematised; but at the same time this conceptual vagueness is also indicative of the ideological political struggle over this concept. This struggle is not only located within the domain of theory development (often this is academia), but often involves many different fields of the social, that not always accepts academia's self-legitimating logics[31].

As a concept, participation remains a construction, which can be studied as such, but it also requires scholars – or broader: users of participatory theory – to apply a strong self-reflexive position, expressing permanent awareness of the constructed nature of the key concept(s) they use. An example of this awareness can be found in Mikko Villi's individual report, focussing on User-Distributed Content (UDC): "Thus, along with discussing the relevance and the implications of UDC for the media industry, my aim is to refine and elaborate on UDC *as a concept and a construct* in media management" (our emphasis).

In some cases theory supports a more explicitly interventionist strategy. This brings us to action research. Action research has been defined by Reason and Bradbury[32], in *The Handbook of Action Research* as seeking: "[...] to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people, and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities". Action research is a broad concept, but, as Dickens and Watkins[33] remark, it is characterised by "cycles of planning, acting, reflecting or evaluating, and then taking further action". Arguably, action research is one of the areas where participatory theory can be deployed to support interventionist strategies. In one of the author's individual report, the following illustration can be found:

> The example here is the Estonian National Museum (ENM) project in which I was involved, entitled "Developing museum communication in the 21st century information environment". This project was aimed at introducing a more maximalist participatory set of ideas (and practices) into the EN museum, in collaboration with the University of Tartu (especially Pille Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt), and staff members of the ENM (and the Estonian Literary Museum). Apart from more regular research components, this project also had a series of interventions, which for instance consisted in allowing (and stimulating) museum visitors to comment on the pictures displayed in the "1000 Steps" exhibition by adding post-its, or in the organisation of an open curatorship project, where non-museum staff members could propose ideas for museum exhibitions. Out of the proposed exhibitions, two were effectively realised. (Nico Carpentier's individual report)

[30] K. Fierlbeck, *Globalizing Democracy. Power, Legitimacy and the Interpretation of Democratic Ideas*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998, 177.
[31] See J.F. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition. A Report on Knowledge*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984.
[32] P. Reason, H. Bradbury, *Handbook of Action Research. Participative Inquiry & Practice*, London: Sage, 2001, 1.
[33] L. Dickens, K. Watkins, "Action Research: Rethinking Lewin", *Management Learning*, 30, 2 (1999): 127-140 (134).

3. *Critical dimension*

Especially the emphasis on struggle and power in participatory theory allows us to bring in the critical component of theory. The debates on participation in all other societal fields, including media participation, have a lot in common in that they all focus on the distribution of power within society at both the macro- and micro-level. The balance between people's inclusion in the implicit and explicit decision-making processes within these fields, and their exclusion through the delegation of power (again, implicit or explicit), is central to discussions on participation in all fields.

Through this focus on power, participatory theory takes on a critical character by confronting social relations of power that deflect, subvert, or even exclude forms of participation where they in principle are legitimate and valid. Power relations are not necessarily balanced; on the contrary, frequently we can find forms of minimalist participation. In these (very) minimalist forms of media participation, media professionals retain strong control over process and outcome, often restricting participation to mainly access and interaction, to the degree that one wonders whether the concept of participation is still appropriate. In this minimalist version, participation remains articulated as a contribution to *the* public sphere but often mainly serving the needs and interests of the mainstream media system itself, instrumentalising and incorporating the activities of participating non-professionals. As two of the WG2 members – Marie Dufrasne and Geoffroy Patriarche – write in their individual report: "On the one hand, citizens often do not feel as – and indeed do not have the status of – fully 'ratified' partners in the decision making process. On the other hand, relatively powerful interest groups and lobbies often monopolize participatory initiatives, which leaves few room for associations and individual citizens".

(Participatory) theoretical frameworks have the capacity to critique the tendencies to move towards these minimalist versions of participation, and to portray minimal participation as the only possible option. The risk of erasure of more maximalist forms of participation also occurs at the conceptual level: Obscuring the link with the main defining component of participation, namely power, also obscures the more radical (maximalist) versions of participation and hegemonises the more minimalist forms of participation. From this perspective, for instance, the conflation of access, interaction and participation is actually part of the struggle between the minimalist and maximalist articulations of participation.

The theme of participation, when set against the media landscape, readily turns our attention to the practices and skills that people have in their use of the media. In this regard, a sub-field of inquiry has emerged over the years, called media literacy[34]. While media literacy should engage with technical capacities among audiences/citizens in dealing with media, a critical mode must also facilitate normative reflection about media in regard to democracy, consumption, one's life-world, and so on. Media literacy that is critical cannot remain an individual pedagogic issue, but rather must be inexorably anchored in collective contexts. Basically, critical media literacy has less to do with formal education and more with democratic agency: empowerment in the political world is its ultimate goal. Thus, while media literacy addresses the media, it must also connect with people's life-worlds to larger societal contexts[35].

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[34] For an overview, see O. Erstad, S. Amdam, L. Müller, Ö. Gilje, *Meta-Analysis of Reviews on Media Literacy and Media Studies*, Strasbourg: ESF background working paper, 2012 (unpubl.).

[35] See also D. Buckingham, "The Future of Media Literacy in the Digital Age: Some Challenges for Policy and Practice", in P. Verniers (ed.), *Media Literacy in Europe: Controversies, Challenges and Perspectives*,

Nurçay Türkoglu[36] (see also her individual report) underscores the significance of critical media literacy for understanding and enhancing participation, and notes as well the importance that researchers and intellectuals who engage with it take what she calls a worldly disposition, that is, that they are engaged with society and its problems and conflicts. That means that concerted efforts to promote critical media literacy will always have an oblique, tension-ridden quality, as it confronts problematic power relations as well as well as what she refers to as "alienated audiences, industrialised academies and cynical media professionals"[37]. Aside from a general resistance to theory, especially in its critical versions, critical media literacy is confronted by audiences who are to a great extent embedded in and defined in terms of consumerist culture by media industries and the researchers who serve their commercial interests.

4. *Participatory fantasies*

Finally, deepening the critical project, we can turn to the role of fantasy-driven approaches towards participatory theory. This approach permits us to deconstruct some of the core hegemonic logics in contemporary Western societies. One fantasy is based on the idea that there is a centre of society and that this position is taken by the media (see Couldry[38] on his work in regard to the myth of the mediated centre). The expectation that participation in the media is a privileged channel to allow for participation in society is productive but also problematic as it ignores the complexity of the polis. This limitation does not mean that participation in the media and participation through the media are irrelevant, but care should be taken that an evolution to a more balanced society is not smothered by the disappointment over participation not living up to expectations that can never be met.

A second fantasy that is relevant in the debate on participatory theory is the democratic-populist fantasy of the disappearing media professional. This democratic-populist fantasy is based on the radicalization of a cultural-democratic discourse that articulates the media professional as superfluous and about-to-disappear. In contrast to the othering processes, which privilege the media professional, this democratic-populist discourse is based on the replacement of a hierarchical difference with total equality, manifested in the unhampered participation of citizens. It is considered to be a populist discourse, because (following Laclau's approach) it is based on an antagonist resistance of the people against an elite. As Laclau[39] puts it, "Populism starts at the point where popular-democratic elements are presented as an antagonistic option against the ideology of the dominant bloc".

This democratic-populist fantasy has two main variations. The celebrative-utopian variation defines the equalization of society and the disappearance of its elites, as the ultimate objective for the realisation of a "truly" democratic society. Media professionals in this perspective become problematised, and the symbolic power that is attributed

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Brussels: EuroMeduc, 2009, 13-24; S. Livingstone, "Media Literacy and the Challenge of New Information and Communication Technologies", *The Communication Review*, 7, 1 (2004): 3-14.

[36] N. Türkoglu, "Mediated Public Voices Need Theory To Be Heard", *CM: Communication Management Quarterly*, 21 (2011): 141-158.

[37] *Ibid.*, 142.

[38] N. Couldry, *Media Rituals. A Critical Approach*, London: Routledge, 2003.

[39] E. Laclau, *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Theory. Capitalism, Fascism, Populism*, London: New Left Books, 1977, 143.

to them is seen to be obstructing the process of democratisation. But there is also an anxietatic-dystopian variation, based on the fear that the democratic-populist discourse might actually be realized. One recent example is Keen's[40] *The Cult of the Amateur*, where the "amateurs" who produce user-generated content come to be seen as a threat to (expert) tastes, knowledge, and truths.

8. CONCLUSION

Our starting point was an emphasis on the fundamental importance of theory as a tool-box for helping us to understand the world; it is the intellectual scaffolding of research and serves to provide us with analytic prisms to focus on the social world and make it more understandable. Theory clarifies our premises, makes it possible to sharpen and link together our concepts, and allows us, from a semi-autonomous position, to make sense of our observations. Theory also specifies normative horizons, and critical theory prods us to reflect on problematic social relations of power, not least in relation to the normative dimensions of democracy, and the hidden corners of the social.

What applies in general to theory, also applies to a more specific field, participatory theory. Participatory theory in particular also comprises a reflexive dimension, where we as researchers must consider how and where we can and should participate beyond the academic setting, utilising our skills to help enhance participation in the social world and increasing the societal relevance of academia in general (and theorists in particular). At the same time the main thrust is to facilitate the participation of different societal groups – both civic and commercial – in societal processes. While we are profoundly troubled by the onslaught of neoliberalism in terms of the illegitimate and unaccountable shifts in power relations that it involves, we underscore the essential necessity for democratic society of functioning economic processes, commercial activity, and market processes. It is a question of framing such economic dynamics with the norms of democracy, not impeding them. Thus, from our horizons, participation theory extends to the commercial as well as the civic – while retaining a firm anchoring in the critical theory of power relations, which whether recognised as such or not, criss-crosses all sectors of society.

Participatory theory in its critical mode can thus help us gauge the normative democratic character of existing participation, as well as help us envision more enhanced forms. There should be no difficulty in filling research agendas with these concerns – and participating with them in the context of society beyond the university.

INDIVIDUAL TATS COST ACTION REPORTS

N. Carpentier, *The Significance of Participatory Research for Social Practice*, 2012.

M. Dufrasne, G. Patriarche, *The Significance of Our Research on Citizen Participation for Social Practice*, 2012.

S. Henriques, *The Significance of Our Research for Social Practice. A Perspective from Mobile Technology Research*, 2012.

[40] A. Keen, *The Cult of the Amateur. How Today's Internet is Killing Our Culture*, New York: Currency, 2007.

J.-M. Noguera Vivo, *The Radical Need of a Better Understanding about Participation*, 2012.

B. Stark, *Changing News Consumption*, 2012.

N. Türkoglu, *Scholarly Research and the Stakeholders in the Field*, 2012.

M. Villi, *Mobile Media and User-Distributed Content in Media Management*, 2012.

SUMMARY

The article starts with a general reflection on the social relevance of theory, and moves on to develop four arguments in this regard. We discuss theory's ability to produce conceptual frameworks and to provide semi-autonomous reflective moments. The text also conceptualises theory as an opportunity to reflect on illegitimate imbalances of power relations, set against the normative visions of democracy. We further discuss the role theory can play in deconstructing societal fantasies (understood in Lacanian terms), illuminating the deeper material and discursive structures in society (e.g. in relation to power) as well as their contingencies. In the second part of the article, we focus specifically on participatory theory, applying the four arguments in favour of the social relevance of theory to the field of participatory theory. Some of the inspiration for this second part was gathered through an analysis of a series of short essays (labelled "individual reports"), written by colleagues within the framework of an academic network on audience studies, the Cost Action Transforming Audiences, Transforming Societies (TATS). We link together some of these reports with our perspectives on participatory theory, highlighting key aspects of this theoretical horizon, and underscoring the importance of connecting such theory – of academic origins – with the social world beyond the university.