

Norms and storms in cultural participation: a conversation between Leila Jancovich and Alice Borchi

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AB: Thank you so much for agreeing to have this conversation with me, Leila. The first thing I'd like to discuss with you is around the norms of participation – what we might consider the implicit rules of participation in the context of culture.

LJ: There are so many different meanings of participation, in so many different contexts, that it's quite hard to say whose norms or rules we are talking about. In my research I have argued that the word risks becoming meaningless because of its ubiquitous use (Jancovich, 2015). But in terms of political science theories, which is what I draw from, participation is about having the power to influence change (Bevir and Rhodes 2010). So participation should be about breaking norms, not reinforcing them.

But of course that's not the definition that's commonly used in the cultural sector, where "participation" often means "taking part" in something that's being created for you, rather than shaping it (DCMS 2023). So in the cultural sector it is often about "fitting in" to social norms. This of course varies across the sector: cultural participation can also be about, as Nora Sternfeld (2013) said, "having the ability to change the rules of the game." So even that question – "What are the norms?" – it depends for whom.

For participatory artists, their norm might be to direct the experience and retain authorship, and the participants might be their props, whereas for the socially engaged or community artist, the norm might be about the participants having agency and some control over the content itself. But in both cases, the norm is to start with artists, who then reach out to find participants to engage with. What if the new norm was to fund communities to decide what kind of cultural offer they want?

AB: I think that this resonates quite a lot with some of the things I have been thinking about – that participation in culture is not just about participation in cultural activities, but rather in cultural governance and decisions around culture. To me this sounds like one of the key challenges when we think about participation. Of course, there is a wealth of history of participatory practices in the arts and culture (Matarasso, 2019), but as you were saying, the issue of agency in this context is quite problematic, because in my opinion, without building spaces and capacities for agency, very often we also have issues around the sustainability of participation.

LJ: The shift from participation in activity to the shift in decision-making that you have introduced is literally what all my research is about. I have a lecture with that title in my module on participation, because rhetorically, at least, that is the shift that we've seen in cultural policy discourse and in cultural practice, to some extent, internationally over the last twenty years.

I started doing research on this topic in 2010 when the New Labour government in the UK had just introduced a duty to involve citizens in decision-making, which local authorities and non-government organizations in England had to respond to. I was on the Council Committee for Arts

Council England at the time they discussed their response. This response included the Arts Council commissioning an internal paper called “A wider range of voices” (Hatzihrysidis and Bunting, 2009), which was looking at the options for how to involve people in decision-making, and also an external report on the implications of participatory budgeting in culture (Involve 2009). But this is by no means just a UK, or in fact English policy shift, as the other nations have devolved responsibility for culture. Indeed, participatory budgeting started in Brazil (Community Pride, 2003) and it was then adopted and adapted globally.

So that shift from participation in activity to participation in decision-making – in theory, or rhetorically – has definitely been the big shift of the last twenty years. But I emphasize the “in theory,” because I’m not sure that it’s as widespread as you might think from the amount that is now written about it, including in journals like this. Because if we think of the storms of participation, there is also resistance to that shift.

In my research, I have spoken to local politicians who have questioned how representative participatory decision-making is, and argued that the appropriate place for the public to participate is via the ballot box. Many artists and arts organizations I have spoken to have said participatory decision making undermines the expertise of professionals and the autonomy of the artist (Jancovich and Stevenson, 2022).

Research on deliberative democracy challenges these views and argues that hearing from alternative perspectives helps us find better and more creative ideas (Bevir and Rhodes, 2010). But I think the challenge – and potentially a storm in participation – is how do you balance the desire for equity through mass participation with giving people agency, which works best in small deliberative groups? Who then is accountable for the decisions formed by those groups, and what do we do about the people who don’t get to be involved?

The other storm is that the principle of giving people agency is that they actually have the resources to act. And in the context of the austerity that much of the West has been under since the global crash of 2008, this isn’t the case.

When New Labour created the “duty to involve” in England which I mentioned above, it was based not just on building the capacity for people to make decisions about things that affected their lives, but on resourcing them so that they could deliver on what their communities needed. With the financial crash, these ideas then got used as a mechanism for thinking: “How can we make efficiency gains? How can we save money?”

I’ve written about this in relation to community asset transfers, where infrastructure that was once run by the local council is handed over to volunteers (Jancovich 2016). Now there are many benefits of this approach – more local ownership, new ideas, and of course, as in the case of the local cinema in Hebden Bridge where I live, it prevented it being closed down when the council ran out of funds to subsidize it. But such an approach relies on people who have the time, capacity, and confidence to not only be involved in deliberation, but actually take on responsibility for delivery and for finding the resources to keep it going.

AB: That assumption of participation as a tool to save money is something that I’ve seen in the data on the Italian context, where local governments are implementing participatory policies as a way to promote volunteering (Bianchi, 2018). Rather than bringing in a diversity of voices, very often this approach relies on a very specific group of people who are able to volunteer their time and are not time-poor, but have the cultural capital and the resources to participate. As a result, participation gets limited rather than fostered.

LJ: Exactly. In the article I referred to just now I compare two case studies: Castleford, which is a working-class community near Wakefield, and Hebden Bridge, which is a middle-class commuter town between Leeds and Manchester. I looked at how the implications of participation are different in those different contexts, even though both had initiatives giving local people more control

over the local cultural offer. In Hebden Bridge, a group of high-capacity individuals took over the town hall and turned it into a creative industries quarter, and took over the cinema and made it an independent art house cinema, and raised about £250,000 to make that happen.

Now this is 100 percent the use-it-or-lose-it approach: if they hadn't done that, the local authority didn't have the money to continue running and subsidizing the cinema, and the town hall probably would have been taken over by a property developer. So I'm not saying it's not great it happened. But it relied on them having the capacity and the ability to fundraise, etc; and that was just to keep things going that were going anyway in a very artsy town, it was just protecting what was there.

In the Castleford context, the District council worked with the Channel 4 TV channel, and residents to think about how to regenerate the town through participatory decision-making. Because of the influence of Channel 4, they were able to bring in about £11 million in inward investment and create some really iconic pieces of public art, which were commissioned by the community and really pushed thinking about what culture might mean in Castleford, and demonstrated all the knowledge and expertise necessary for this. Actually, when I was interviewing them, their ideas were much more exciting and radical in how they talked about culture than either the good folk of Hebden Bridge or many of the professionals I have spoken to for my research.

But when Channel 4 left town, the local authority cut support, without which the new community activities struggled. On one of my visits they were literally looking for money for food to go on the bird table at the open air classroom they had created, and to pay the bills to keep open the community center where they had started doing art classes. The local authority said there was no money left to go on funding these activities, but at the same time were opening a new multi-million-pound gallery in the center of town, the Hepworth Gallery. I'm not commenting on the value or otherwise of this space, but it represented a real break of trust between the council, who had said they were committed to participatory decision-making, and the community, who felt ignored. This highlights the risk of raising expectations through participatory processes if you aren't there for the long term. Participation doesn't work if you engage people and then drop them again.

AB: Participation is something that requires consistent investment in resources and in building rapport and creating a sense of community, which, as is well demonstrated, takes a long time.

Why does it get such time-limited funding, that's very often connected to the delivery of a specific project, or specific output, specific commission? Why do you think it is almost impossible for policy imaginaries to extend beyond the short-termism of the immediate delivery of an output?

LJ: Part of it is, I think, just practical – that, you know, most politics is short term and so most funding is too. Nobody wants to commit past the life of a government that might change. If you take Arts Council England, for example, they get a spending review every three years. So even their regular-funded organizations only get three-year contracts. There are plenty of them who in practice get their funding automatically renewed, but they do have to apply for funding.

But that's also an excuse, in England at least. The reality is that cultural policy decisions are often made by a very narrow range of voices, and often by those with a vested interest in maintaining the status quo. This is the opposite of the idea of involving a wider range of voices through participatory decision-making, and so participatory processes are also short term, because those who currently have the power don't want to give up their power.

But it's also a problem in the way creativity is conceptualized, at least in the West. Creativity and the shock of the new are all about innovation, and in my research many artists I've spoken to have said they don't want to spend time reflecting or learning, they just want to move on to the next project. They don't value slow deliberation and critical reflection, which are essential to participatory processes.

So the short-termism you refer to is absolutely a problem of funding, but it is also a problem of a project mentality that is built into how the professional cultural sector operates.

AB: You mentioned how some artists just wish to move on to the next project without taking that time for reflection or learning. That made me think about how we evaluate cultural policy and cultural initiatives.

LJ: We don't evaluate to learn. We make the case for more funding. In the research I have been doing on learning from failure (Jancovich and Stevenson 2022), it's interesting in the context of what we are talking about – participation and agency– that professionals we interviewed demonstrated a remarkable lack of agency themselves. Local authorities feel under pressure to demonstrate that money is well spent to politicians, to make the case for more funding. The Arts Council are scared of DCMS,¹ and organizations are scared of the Arts Council and the local authorities. The only area where we found any real reflective evaluation is in trusts and foundations, because they're more removed from the political process and because they have very clear goals, which are not by and large about arts and culture, but the trust's contribution to society. Interestingly, many trusts and foundations are pulling away from support for arts and culture. Some of those we interviewed said that is because the sector is so bad at demonstrating its effectiveness, or showing itself to be willing to learn.

The research on failure came partly in response to the fact that in both my and my collaborator David Stevenson's other research we had never come across an evaluation of a cultural participation project that didn't say it was a success. And yet there is no evidence of real change in either the cultural landscape or rates of participation.

When we started our research, we asked people to think about what success and failure meant to them, so that it wasn't us imposing a definition. What was really clear was that if you asked people what success would look like at the beginning of the project, most professionals do want to change the world, they do want to change people's lives for the better, they do want to reduce inequality, and they have very grand claims about how they are going to do this in a six-week workshop program. If you ask them what success and failure felt like at the end, however, it was invariably related to whether they got employed or funded to do it all again, regardless of the outcomes. Of course, that's partly to do with the precariousness for many who work in the arts; but it means the norm is that evaluation is not evaluation, it's justification.

In fact, the only reason most people said they do evaluation at all is because our audit culture requires measuring value for money. But this has become a performative act that is about accounting for the money, not demonstrating effectiveness – let alone trying to improve the service delivery. Our book therefore examines whether a focus on failure, not success, can redirect us toward learning that can lead to improvement and change, rather than just the justification that leads to repeating the same mistakes.

AB: The space and time for longitudinal evaluation – for the long-term reflection for the assessment of the long period of time in the cultural context – is extremely rare. The rhetoric of cost-justification is the dominating one, and the tools that we have to measure the actual impact of cultural participation are not always adequate.

LJ: I would go further than not always adequate. I would say they are woefully inadequate.

But I also think the idea of "measuring" is problematic in itself, because you then measure what is measurable, rather than what is important.

Participatory processes take time; you need small groups of people to work in depth. Yet most applications for participatory work make grand claims about reaching large numbers of people. The kind of "cult of the spectacle of participation" which Bradby and Stewart (2020) have written about is because numbers are something you can measure.

¹ The UK government Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport.

When I was doing research on Creative People and Places (Jancovich 2019), which was an Arts Council England experiment with place-based funding, every single person I spoke to, from the funded areas to the Arts Council as the funder, bemoaned the focus on numbers. Despite this, the narrative that Creative People and Places has reached a million people still persists – to the detriment of learning and a change in approach.

AB: We can argue about what that figure actually means, if it means anything at all. Is that new people, or just the same people attending multiple events? Are they new participants, or people who already engage in the arts?

LJ: Exactly – the figure doesn't tell us anything useful even if we believe it. Many participatory projects also measure impact on individuals, how it has affected their wellbeing – has it created career pathways, or access to further education? That's an impact you can measure at an individual level without getting held hostage by large numbers. Again, we can question some of the claims in these evaluations. Did they engage because they wanted a career already, or did the engagement facilitate the career? Do they have better wellbeing because they participated, or did they participate because they were healthy and confident? There are attempts to prove these causal links to demonstrate that participation in culture is a valuable experience, and I'm not undermining the value of that. But does that address wider issues of inequality, or just provide opportunities for the few? So the challenge for participatory policy is to first identify whether its purpose is to increase participation by the many – or create opportunities for the few.

The problem of measurement is really shown up in the Creative People and Places model. The criteria for places that could apply for funding was that they were measured to be in the bottom 20 percent of the Arts Council's definition of "not engaged" or "non-participants." So it's a fair assumption that success would be that they lifted themselves out of the bottom 20 percent and that more people were participating. But if a place was successful on that criterion, then they would lose their funding next time round, as they would no longer be eligible to apply. Success wouldn't lead to recognition that investment works and that therefore we should go on investing; the opposite – if you were successful, you'd fail in the funding. Conversely, if no areas lifted out of the bottom 20 percent, you could define the whole program as failing to address the problem the measurement had identified. But how do you decide from the numbers whether that is a failure of policy design or policy implementation?

That's what our book on failure is all about: you fail in different dimensions in different ways. Creative People and Places as an example might have succeeded massively for some individuals, or it might have raised the profile of the arts, but it has not increased equality in the arts in those areas. It's only by acknowledging this that we can start to ask why. It may be that aspiration was the wrong aspiration, and personally I think it was. If the Arts Council believed there was a problem with areas of non-participation, they should have resourced every selected area, rather than setting up a competition with a small number of winners and a larger number of losers.

AB: This says something about why the deficit model is not working – as you say in your research. The deficit model assumes the existence of cultural deserts, and that there is one way to understand cultural participation, rather than engaging with what people are doing in their own context and understanding what matters to them and why. I think that this signals that there is still lot attention being paid to the democratization of culture in your examples from England, rather than a sincere approach to cultural democracy.

LJ: Yes, a common cultural policy approach to participation, not just in England, is still using the deficit model that says that it is the participant who needs fixing. But if you put a map of Britain on the table and shaded it according to the rates of participation found in government surveys (DCMS 2023), and then you any laid that alongside where the Arts Council invests its money, and you put it next to it a third map of levels of social deprivation, you wouldn't be able to tell which was which,

because they're all the same. This demonstrates what is known as the Matthew effect (Rigney, 2010), in which those who have more get more; in this case, the richer areas also get more money from Arts Council investment, so it's not really surprising that there are higher rates in participation – it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

One of Creative People and Places' successes was in demonstrating that none of those so-called cultural deserts *were* cultural deserts: there were all sorts of activities going on in them, but as with the example I gave of Wakefield, they weren't properly resourced. But as I have already said they didn't adjust the funding model to support every area that was underinvested in. Compare that with the approach with the Big Local – Local Trust where instead of choosing areas that were deemed low-participation, they chose areas that were underfunded. If you do that, then you take the deficit on yourself, you recognize that you failed those areas rather than saying that those are failing areas. That, for me, is a really important distinction in how policy responds to this question.

Another key thing we need to talk about is who we're calling participants. In our research on failure, we started with classic definitions: policymakers are those people who fund the arts, practitioners are those who make art, and the participants are those who receive it, even if we're talking about decision-making. We already knew this was overly simplistic, as there are practitioners who wield a lot of influence over policy. What I hadn't thought about enough before was that, as many of the participants said to us, why don't professionals see themselves as participants in these processes, why do they always *other* the participant? This takes us back to the norm at the start – and whether we define participation as something you are invited to engage in, that somebody has already created for you, or whether we're all participating together to make decisions in the world.

AB: That is why I'm interested in the commons model in my own research (Borchi, 2018, 2020), because I think that's an interesting framework to trouble that rigid division between the people who take decisions, the people who manage, the people who create, and the people who receive the creation. We all participate in culture; but too often we dismiss examples of everyday creativity, everyday cultural participation that people engage in not just as passive consumers, but as active producers. The constant generation of creative content that we see on social media is an example of this. I think that insisting on these divisions really limits what we imagine and perceive as cultural participation – and as democratic engagement in cultural policy.

LJ: I agree with you, and of course many policymakers are waking up to the idea of everyday creativity. It's long been there in UNESCO reports. In England, the Arts Council's strategy called "Let's Create" (2020) is now using the language of cultural democracy, so it's clearly becoming a norm in discourse. But I do not see that enacted in changing either who or how they fund, I only see it rhetorically – and this is a potential storm for me, because instead of the language of cultural democracy helping resource these everyday cultural activities, that shift is taking some people away from participation. Some people I have interviewed argue that if everyday culture is happening anyway, we don't need to worry so much about participation and we can continue with business as usual. That's why for me, the problem that cultural policy should be addressing is about inequity of resource, not about rates of participation. That's also why my more recent research doesn't just look at participation but also looks at place, the inequalities between places and within places, and the way that policy is enacted in different local contexts (Durrer et al., 2022).

As you say, everybody has a culture that they're part of; everybody is doing cultural and creative activities all the time, but some people's cultural activities are resourced more than others, some people's activities are valued more than others and some people's non-participation is seen as a problem while others is not. David Stevenson (2019) wrote a really good article about this problem where he asked senior managers and executives in cultural organizations about their cultural habits. He identified the same attitudes of resistance or prejudices to some art forms among these professionals as the so-called non-participant, but argues that policy assumes that if you are

middle-class, it's all right to say something is not for you, but if you're working-class, then you need to be educated to appreciate it.

AB: Going back to the research you and David Stevenson did on failure: to what extent do you think that work created a storm in the field of cultural policy studies?

LJ: Oh, I wish it had. I think it has created a discourse. There are more people now who are happy to say "I am open to talking about failure." I could be running workshops on failure all the time, if I wanted to – I don't! I want people in the sector to take that work on. So there is an energy, but for it to be a storm we would have to see evidence that it was changing practice, and I don't see that, not yet at least. Some of our industry champions say it just takes time and it's a trickle, not a storm. But I am concerned the discourse could also become a way of patting ourselves on the back because we're being more honest about failure without learning or making any changes.

AB: From what you were saying earlier, in the norms of how we think about cultural participation, there is an ingrained idea of an unequal distribution of the responsibility for failure. Cultural organizations are tasked with creating massive societal change, with resolving inequality within a six-week time frame, with improving peoples' lives dramatically over a very short amount of time.

LJ: I think I would suggest a slight difference in wording. You're saying they're *tasked*, which suggests someone does it to them; I would say they also *task themselves*.

One of the problems in the sector is that they have gone into such a defensive mode – it is what Eleonora Belfiore refers to as "defensive instrumentalism" (2012). It isn't necessarily the Arts Council or the local authorities who are tasking them with changing the world, but practitioners have bought into that rhetoric so much that they don't even know how to think back to what they really want to do themselves. It's just a subtle difference: they may also be tasked with it sometimes, but it is also important to take agency for the choices you make. I was at a conference recently where an artist who had got lots of money from the health service was outraged that the evaluation form had nothing about their artistic practice and was all about the health benefits of the work they did.

If the funding is from the health service, then of course they're interested in the health benefits; if you don't want to think about the health benefits, don't apply to that funder. I know it's not easy if you're in a precarious position – I understand why people chase that money, but you need to understand what you are doing by doing so. Owen Kelly (1984) said years ago that if we take money from the state we are already compromised, and I think we have to recognize the implications of this.

AB: That's an excellent point; artists are buying into that rhetoric of instrumentalism.

So from the perspective of a cultural organization, they need to respond to that and embed that in their own practice. In my opinion, what emerges from what you were saying earlier is that there's a "circle of fear" when it comes to addressing failure, but that is also because the consequences of failure very often fall on cultural organizations more than they fall on cultural policymakers.

LJ: True, but it is also true that everybody thinks that they're in a worse situation than everyone else. This was one finding from the failure research. Precarious freelance artists felt that they were in the worst position because they were precarious, while the organizations they worked in were secure; but the funded organizations thought they were in a much worse position because they had more to lose, whereas the freelancer could be more agile and move elsewhere. The funders felt that their case was the most difficult, because they had to report to government and had more media scrutiny on them, so it would be more noticeable if they talked about failure. I get your point, but we can overstate the precariousness: I think it is more complicated than that. What was interesting when we talked to participants was that they were less scared of talking about failure than the professionals. This is in part to do with the feeling of whether there will be consequences for people as individuals, so we must make sure that in talking about failure we aren't personalizing blame. But among our sample, the people who were most open to talking about failure were the people

who had experienced educational failure or social failure and who led the most precarious lives. Those that said they had failed when they were young and then done better later in life, including among the sample of professionals, were less scared to talk about failure than those who had always done well and had an image to protect. Others who recognized that funders perceived where they lived as a failing community tended to recognize that they were being failed more than recognizing responsible for that failure themselves. The people who expressed most discomfort talking about failure were the people who had always had successes: middle-class, done well at school, got a nice job. I'm not suggesting we all need to be precarious: but we do need to talk more about both our own failures and where policy is failing us.

AB: If I can point to the themes of this special issue, it feels like there needs to be much more attention paid to the storms and to an openness to those.

LJ: Storms are a natural part of life, and they wash things away – for good and bad. The irony in the cultural sector for me is on the one hand we have “the shock of the new” (Hughes, 1991), and innovation, and on the other hand we have complete fear of change. We can't imagine a different future, we're so path-dependent in terms of what we fund and how we fund, and even how we work. I would say that the creative sector is not actually very creative.

At the beginning we were talking about participation being about agency; we experienced a lack of agency talking to funders and cultural organizations and artists, the lack of belief that they could be the change.

In relation to the theme of this special issue, “Norms and Storms” – for me, the great tragedy of the cultural sector is that it's trying to fight off the storm rather than actually see what new growth can come up through a storm. It's constantly trying to weather the storms, to keep things the same. During Covid we talked about “the new normal,” and now we've gone back to the same old models. I think that's exactly the same for the cultural sector: every new buzzword, whether it's participation, failure, or impact, it just gets co-opted to keep doing things in the same way.

AB: I think that is something that we see in the context of higher education and research. Research on cultural policy has a cyclical nature, we go back to the same questions, perhaps with different concerns, sometimes with slightly different approaches. The fundamental issues are the same, and any attempt to come up with new answers and, most importantly, different questions gets ignored, waiting for the next cycle repeating the same questions.

LJ: Yes, and that's within a context where culture itself is always changing and always developing: if you just hide in your house while the storm's beating on the roof, sooner or later, the roof will cave in. It's the people who get out there and address the root causes of the flood that will weather the storm, not the people who just hide their heads and hope it goes away.

AB: Yeah, I think that's a really good metaphor. Perhaps it's about rethinking the best way to build a roof – perhaps whether the house even needs to be there, if it keeps being hit by the same kind of storm that destroys it. Thinking about your research on failure, do you think that the idea of norms and storms is a useful way to conceptualize it?

LJ: I'm not sure – storms aren't necessarily failures, they absolutely can be a force for good. They can regenerate the Earth. If we had good weather all the time, we'd all live in a desert. We also may deliberately try and whip up a storm, to bring about change. In contrast, while learning from failure can be a source of good, I don't think anyone is suggesting that failure itself is a good thing – although a couple of people have bizarrely contacted us or written about our work and said “We want to see more failure.” I don't want to see more failure! We are not encouraging people to fail. We're encouraging people to accept failure as a part of life and to learn from it and make sure it doesn't happen again. There is a danger that it has become such a buzzword that people are almost celebrating their failures. You celebrate your learning; you don't celebrate your failures.

AB: Perhaps what both storms and failure have in common is that you can think about them as a catalyst point. Inevitably you have to learn to do things differently.

LJ: You can also acknowledge both without learning from them and changing. For me it's all about the next step, you need to acknowledge, learn, and change.

AB: I'm going to move on to another topic that I wanted to discuss with you, that is, the storms that affect cultural participation and the ones that affect politics and the political world. I have an issue with thinking about arts and culture as something that is separated from politics, and about cultural participations as separate from political participation and politics. The idea that culture is a value-neutral, uncontroversial thing that can be given any shape and that can be used as a plaster to put on a plethora of social issues, that to me is problematic. I'm concerned with the separation between the storms of politics and those of culture: culture is not immune to what happens in politics. I was wondering what were your thoughts about this, and the perceived political neutrality of cultural participation?

LJ: I agree with you, it's nonsense! Culture is about meaning making, and meaning is political. Participation is about how we interact with each other and society, and that is literally what politics is about. The word policy has the same roots as politics of course (and also of policing), and you can absolutely make the case that when cultural policy becomes arts policy, it is about legitimization of the taste of the elite devaluing the everyday culture that everybody else does, so that is absolutely a political act. Bourdieu (1979) writes about how the role of culture is to distinguish between different classes; cultural capital is not something that can be shared equally like loaves and fishes from Jesus, it is what keeps one group feeling important and another group excluded. Just as with wealth, you might allow individuals to make it to the upper classes or to make it into the cultural capital, but that legitimizes the system, it doesn't change it. Let's not forget that the origins of cultural policy were to prevent "anarchy" of the masses, as Matthew Arnold (1869) wrote in the nineteenth century.

You just used the phrase about culture as a sticking plaster. I prefer the idea of wallpaper, when wallpaper is used to cover up the cracks rather than taking down the wall to rebuild it better. I think the fundamental project – of thinking that mass participation in culture makes for more equal society – is ill conceived. I think culture will only become more equal if we have a more equal society to begin with.

One of the things we haven't talked about in relation to participation, which has become a norm, is an assumption that participation is fluffy and comfortable and consensual and that we'll all get on better if we just participate. But the idea behind participatory decision-making is that we need to test and explore different alternatives, and hear different points of view. It's ignoring other points of view that is the real storm brewing. That's what the culture wars we have at the moment are about. Fighting for who decides what, and whose culture is valued.

AB: This speaks to the idea of the exceptionality of culture, in a certain sense. There is an underlying norm when we talk about cultural participation: culture is what citizens are allowed to participate in, especially when we see a crackdown on spontaneous political organizations, demonstrations, and the democratic discourse.

Culture is that safe area people are supposed to engage in; something that is narrated, as you say, as something fluffy – in Italian, we would say "Volemosse bene," let's love each other. Cultural participation has come to be about the place where you are supposed to participate, and if you're not participating in it, you're doing something wrong. As a result, you're pushed into this specific idea of participating in culture. I think that this reinforces the idea of culture's exceptionality, and separates it from other forms of civic or political participation that are not currently being encouraged or seen as legitimate in a wide range of different governmental contexts.

LJ: I have a problem with the idea that culture is exceptional; I have a problem with people who expect cultural policy to be radical in a failing state. Culture is not neutral nor exceptional, it is part

of the political project, and it is part of society. It can't solve the problems, it is implicated in them.

AB: You mentioned that participation can be perceived as something devoid of conflict. Do you think that conflict should be one of the expected norms of participation, instead?

LJ: Absolutely. For me, participation is about creating the space to hear from people we wouldn't normally hear from, people you might disagree with.

That should be a norm, or even a prerequisite, of participation; the storm is, how do you actually manage it? If we are thinking about participatory decision-making rather than participating in an activity, how do you actually get to a decision through those processes in a way that doesn't then just replicate the same problems? You may come to better solutions through discussion, but it's not easy. So the storm is, what do you do if you can't reach decision?

For example, particularly in creative processes, the best solution might come from the one outsider in the room, but how do you make sure they are heard? If we seek consent, we can squeeze out minorities and alternative points of view; but if we don't have representation of difference there in the first place, how do we know we aren't replicating the same power imbalances? The greatest challenge for me is recognizing that participation is about hearing dissenting opinions and then having the guts to talk about them, not shut them down. That's probably the bit that people shy away from, because it's scary and it's difficult. That's probably what we need to get better at, for culture's sake and for the world's sake.

AB: To me, what is challenging is finding sites for conflict that is not just confrontation. One of the biggest challenges for politics at the moment is the lack of spaces for people to engage in conversation and deliberation, as you were describing: spaces for encounter between people from different backgrounds are made increasingly scarce. I think that lack of interaction for different groups and people in society is connected to the lack of a space where we can do things together, collaborate and find solutions together. We are less and less incentivized to do that. The more we are pushed into our bubbles and into our echo chambers, the less realistic we are when it comes to thinking about the future of democracy – the perspective of people who are different from us. The digital dimension has done completely the opposite of that, because exchanges on online platforms hardly ever go beyond confrontation, with no other aim than insulting and discrediting the position of your opponent. On the one hand there is an opportunity to see culture as space for people to come together...

LJ: And see the world from other people's eyes.

AB: But that's risky! That's a massive risk, because there is no impact that can be predicted or measured. It's just a big question mark.

LJ: What lot of the literature will say about participation, and this is a big challenge for me, is that to get people to participate meaningfully, to stop it just being shouting into the abyss, you need to have "resonance" (Burns 2007), there needs to be an interest in common. Activism comes from finding like-minded people to build a movement to make things happen. In this sense, the political project around participation is about generating people who are like-minded to make change happen. I recognize the importance of that, I believe in the power of social movements; I also think that this is a problem. This is what leads us to polarization and shouting in our echo chambers and thinking "How the hell did the world get this mad? Everyone I know thinks like me, so who are these other people?"

The citizens' assembly model potentially offers another way. One example that's often cited in the literature is Ireland's abortion debate, where they got pro-lifers and pro-choice people in a room to deliberate on how to address this divide to inform the law (Suiter et al., 2022). The research suggests that the participatory process allowed more nuanced understanding of the issues, so that at the end of the process, while not agreeing with each other, everyone understood each other's point of view better – and that allowed the law to be articulated better, to bring about change. It

would be naive to think that it was as straightforward as that, but to me, this is what participation is aiming for: not to change each other's minds, but to understand each other.

I think culture has that opportunity – to break that echo chamber, and to do it in a less threatening way. Culture can be a way of toning down that volume so you can have the conversation, or putting other points of view so that you can see it through somebody else's eyes.

AB: When it comes to those uncomfortable positions, the issue of platformization is a major one when it comes to politics. Perhaps it's not so much about giving people a platform or not, as about actually inviting them to join a conversation. Culture then is not the place where you look for the sameness, but the place where you look for something different from you.

LJ: Exactly. I used to believe in no-platforming, so you don't grant legitimacy to certain views, but fundamentally I don't think you stop the things you don't like by refusing to admit they exist, by locking them out. I think that finding mechanisms for having the conversation you describe is what, somehow, we have to do. But it is difficult. If someone with views you or the rest of your users find abhorrent is knocking on the door of a cultural institution and says they want to use your space, how do you create that conversation? It's difficult. I think that, at the moment, the norm for many cultural institutions is to invite in the people that we're comfortable with, and I think that has to change, and that, for me, is why cultural participation matters.

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