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PARTICIPATION AS IF THINGS MATTERED

Review of Noortje Marres (2012) *Material participation. Technology, the environment and everyday publics*. Palgrave Macmillan, 206 pp.

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Materialism has come a long way. Marx borrowed it from the ancient Greeks and employed it against Hegel's idealism. Being determines consciousness, not the other way round. Or more precisely, the dialectics between these two, and any historical logic manifesting itself in this dialectics, should be understood in terms of material practices. This kind of materialism had a hard time resisting the rising tide of positivism, as the vicissitudes of the Frankfurt School have shown. Perhaps materialism survived best in the philosophical school of pragmatism – in a way, a form of naturalized Hegelianism. In the 1960s and 1970s, it revives in new Marxist theories of ideology, such as Althusser's, holding that ideology has 'materialized' in the institutional form of 'ideological state apparatuses'. Ideology is not transmitted discursively, but rather through institutional forms and practices. As Slavoj Žižek later puts it, these are 'ideology's external ritual'. Phenomenologically-inspired feminism is responsible for a further

resurgence of materialism, well summarized in Judith Butler's slogan that 'bodies matter'. To which Latour-inspired actor-network theory adds that it is a modernist fallacy to distinguish categorically between human and non-human bodies. Or in Donna Haraway's vocabulary, we are all cyborgs now.

Next in line, so to speak, is 'material participation' – the title of Noortje Marres' new book. Marres worked with Bruno Latour in Paris and was research fellow in Oxford affiliated with Steve Woolgar's research group. Presently she is senior lecturer in the sociology department of Goldsmith, University of London. She has been much involved with Latourian actor-network theory, especially with giving this approach a political 'twist' by connecting it to pragmatist political theory, as witnessed for instance in her 2005 dissertation *No issue, no public*.¹

The new 'hybrid' of material participation is located at the site where practical philosophy, philosophy of technology, and philosophical ecology overlap – as the subtitle of the book well indicates. Practical philosophy is represented primarily in the notion of the public. Publicity is one of the main pillars of enlightened, modern forms of political life, as this is based on reason-giving and public understanding. The more specific notion of 'the public' stands for the group or groups that interact and communicate on the basis of a shared interest in a particular social issue. Philosophy of technology, especially in its Latourian incarnation, deals with the way in which objects come to play a role in this topic of publicity and publics – especially of course man-made objects, or artefacts. Things have somehow become closely, and intricately, involved with what was traditionally conceived as the (exclusively) human sphere of action, speech and deliberation. Philosophical ecology, finally, joins the fray as it becomes clear that this close involvement is part of a still larger sense in which 'the environment' is becoming ever more significant not only for human politics, but for human life, or even survival, itself.

Like every hybrid, 'material participation' has the appearance of an oxymoron. Participation traditionally refers to some inter-human activity, to some human practice we can join in with. Although such practices certainly possess a material dimension, the material is not usually considered

determinative for our reasons to join. We may like the church building, or the paraphernalia, but we attend services because of their spiritual meaning. We may admire the medieval Oxford college buildings, but we want to graduate from Oxford because of its academic and intellectual standing. Material participation has the quiet revolutionary, but also disconcerting, quality of apparently reversing this priority. It envisages participation not as a way of relating with other people, out of conviction or interest, but as a common, everyday way of dealing with things.

All things considered, those things do serve as an intermediary in our relation with other people – which any true Hegelian or Marxist would indeed say is true for all things, or at least for all goods. But it is precisely Marres' point that we need not 'consider all things', or talk things through, to function as a 'material participant'. Material participation is a form of participation that frees us from the burden of conscious agreement and dutiful conformity. It makes participation 'doable'. It does this by translating participation into something in between prudence, fun, and pride. Or, in Rousseauian terms, by using technology to bridge the gap between *amour de soi* and *amour propre*, that is, by technologically transducing acts that flow from natural concern with oneself and one's close environment into acts of ecological value. Everyday material action thus 'turns into an index of public participation' (3); or in other words, this transduction conscripts us into an ecological public.

Thus perhaps the most central claim in the book is that *things organize publics* (9). Against those who feel that such organization is too important – too *human* – to bring things into the equation, Marres argues, La-tourian style, that things have always already been part of that equation. It's just that we didn't take notice. Or in Rancière's vocabulary: it's just the way we divided the sensible. This brings us to the question when and why publics constitute themselves. Here Marres draws inspiration from John Dewey, defining public as 'ontological trouble' (44). That is, publics form where and when some particular division of the sensible shows itself as problematic – when it doesn't seem to function right. The idea of material participation is to design objects, devices, or more generally material settings in such a way that publics can form, and act, without 'investing' – time, money, attention, or ideology – in the problem; 'they suggest a

range of simple actions, rather than requiring citizens to grasp the complexity of environmental issues' (80). Material publics are furthermore characterized by 'normative multivalence': they can simultaneously serve multiple agendas, such as politicization, innovation, and economization' (62-63).

The book contains extensive discussions of the practical life of such devices. Most easily grasped is the Tea Light, basically an electronic light bulb on your kitchen sink that indicates whether demand on the national power grid is high or low. If high, it glows red, suggesting you should delay your tea-making plan for a bit. If low, it glows green, saying 'go ahead, knock yourself out!' (63). This contributes to evening out the load on the grid, which helps produce energy more efficiently, thus making economical, technical and ecological sense while imposing only a minimal burden on the (tea-drinking) public. A more sophisticated example is provided by 'ecoshowhomes', where architecture as a whole, rather than (individual) things, becomes the mediator or enabler for participation (113-114). Such homes employ 'actor-network-architecture', which assembles and re-assembles material elements to (re-)compose materials, technologies, actors, sites, concepts and so on into a coherent architectural assemblage. It creates 'spaces for politics', experimental sites in which the elements mentioned can be (re)combined in new ways by their users (120).

Against more orthodox approaches to participation, such as Habermas's, Marres proposes that we should not merely attempt to extend the scope of participation, to include either more issues or more relevant actors. Rather we should look at 'the facilitation involved in the organisation of public engagement exercises' (135-136). That is to say, we should be more attentive to how publics are connected to, and facilitated by, institutional structures – in which ways are they conducive to participation, and how do they possibly obstruct it? It is perhaps enlightening here to see publics as 'challenged', in both the common, and the politically correct senses of the word. The challenge of participation then refers both to the question of how to overcome obstacles to participation, and to the way in which, or the perspective from which, 'obstacles' are defined and identified. One's perspective on the world and one's material position in the world determine what appears as obstacle, and what as facilitator. If we abstain from

establishing in advance which configurations of things is to count as ‘obstacle’, or as facilitator, we open the way for a more experimental determination of such characteristics. And also a more political and democratic one, as the determination of what is to count as the best setting is now an open issue that can be explored from all angles.

This is what Marres calls ‘redistributing problems of participation’, theoretically the most prominent topic of the book. In experimentally rearranging itself, the public engages in democratic participation. And the public, as we saw, here refers to any ontologically problematic calibration of relations between humans and non-humans. It seems crucial that it is the public itself that is able to sort this problem out. And, equally crucial, it is able to do so without resorting to some normative criterion or meta-standard. As Marres puts it, in quite abstract sociological language: ‘The adjustments that are required of different settings, languages, and actor groupings to secure their mutual relevance (...) are negotiated and contested as part of participatory processes’ (140).

Several questions pop up at this point that are not quite straightforwardly addressed in the book – partly on purpose, one suspects, because one of Marres’ goals is to direct our attention away from more traditional preoccupations and let us look at issues of participation from a different angle. This seems part of her experimental proclivity, and enjoyment: ‘let’s see what happens!’ This by the way is one of the ‘family resemblances’ that links this kind of research to the sociological tradition of ethnomethodology (‘to know the nature of the lion, pull its tail’ – in other words, breach conventional expectations and see what happens). One might perhaps call it an academical style of practical joking. Still, we may ask in what sense this approach can go beyond merely showing that there is a status quo, and that disturbing it can be revealing.

For instance, is it also empowering? This is one of the most important unanswered questions triggered by *Material participation*. The book contains a clear emancipatory subtext, but it is difficult to see how the main argument could be understood in this way. Raising awareness, or consciousness, is precisely not the point. Rather the point is how to engage in participation without really thinking about it. Indeed, the idea seems to be

that participation actually fares *better* this way. This however precludes learning processes from taking place, on either an individual or a collective level. Material participation might thus be a bit *too experimental*; it is difficult to see how it could educate and empower people to judge and speak for themselves.

Closely related to this: how could ‘negotiation’ and ‘contestation’ in these experimental settings lead to valid judgments? In other words, what is the criterion for validity here? There is no such thing as a level of ‘discourse’, in the Habermasian sense, available here; neither is there any other discursive procedure through which participants could validate their ‘statements’. As a matter of fact, in as far as material participation does imply a recognizable procedure, it is hard to say whether it could evince more than a ‘feedback loop’ in a system driven by more or less arbitrary system imperatives. In the case of *Material participation*, these imperatives are ecological – one might say imperatives produced by the system itself in order to protect itself against abuse and exhaustion. In a sense, such imperatives would be the exact reverse of Baudrillard’s ‘fatal strategies’. In any case, such ‘participation’ means little more than being conscripted as part of a cybernetic feedback mechanism.

But then again, we may ask: how does this ‘conscripted’ take place? And: are the imperatives – ecological or otherwise – really ‘the system’s imperatives’? With regard to conscription, in the absence of prudential or moral reasons to join, there must be some other factor involved that persuades, or seduces, people to participate. There must be *some* promise that it will make their lives better, or more fun. In a way this persuasion comes from the object itself, such as the Tea Light, which we may perceive as friendly, unobtrusive and perhaps even fascinating. But there must be something more than this seductive lure of objects. As the Tea Light is apparently a prototype (63-66), it is unclear how it would be acquired – ‘marketed’, or otherwise distributed. But *someone* has to buy this object, as a consumer, and thus in some way consider its function and value – which would turn participation into a conscious, prudential, moral, or political act. Or alternatively someone else has *designed* this object, and considered how it should function, and attract users – has *scripted* it, in ANT-speak. And someone else again may decide to install it, for instance a

housing corporation, or to promote it by giving a discount, for instance an energy company, etcetera.

In this last case material participation again seems reduced to a cybernetic feedback loop that can be attached to any policy initiative – and in that sense a handmaiden of public administration, or even of commercial enterprises. But indeed it seems intended to be something like that: a kind of self-regulating democratic re-arrangement (redistribution) of whatever policy is being implemented. As Marres puts it, ‘participation cannot be primarily identified with a singular normative agenda’ (21). Just as the Deweyan public is intended to function as a democratic form of self-regulation. The big question is whether ‘participation’ as Marres defines it, can yield democratic results in the sense of ‘rule by the people’. Or as I called it, in the sense of empowerment. My Tea Light here glows red.

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¹ See the ‘dossier’ of three essays discussing this book in *Krisis*, 2006, issue 2.