Participation and knowledge: A theory-driven re-analysis of the project's interventions

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Executive Summary

Deliverable 2.4 *Participation and Knowledge: A Theory-Driven Re-Analysis of the Project's Interventions,* (a) reports in its introduction on the continuous theoretical support provided to the different MeDeMAP work packages, and (b) constitutes, in its main part, the theoretical component of the final reflection stage on the project interventions (together with the analytical component in Deliverable 6.4) that were informed by the Participatory Action Research methodology. Particularly important here is the organisation of MeDeMAP's citizen parliaments.

This deliverable 2.4 is grounded in an approach to participation as power-sharing aimed at empowering non-privileged societal actors, in alignment with democratic culture and its value discourses. Instructed by this approach, this deliverable develops a theoretical framework for examining the relationship between participation and knowledge, through six particular lenses, each presented in a dedicated chapter.

- The first lens concerns the complex relationship between knowledge, data, information, and wisdom, emphasising the importance of both situated knowledge and participatory knowledge production.
- The second lens involves stupidity, which not only has the potential to problematise and disrupt participatory processes, but also has been weaponised to delegitimise and restrict access to participatory processes.
- The third lens, identity, or knowledge about the self and others, allows paying attention to the role of the expert (and leader) subject positions, and their relationship with epistemic authority, in participatory processes.
- The fourth lens involves the importance of time for knowledge development through participatory processes.
- The fifth lens addresses play and playful participation as essential components of situated and embodied knowledge.
- Finally, the sixth lens, creativity—and its related notions of affect and intuition—allows to highlight the complexities of knowledge production, and to demonstrate, through discussions on political and civic creativity, the significance of the relationship between participation and knowledge.

This theoretical elaboration on the relationship between participation and knowledge, and the choice for the six lenses, is inspired by the organisational and empirical work conducted at the Czech, Slovene, Irish and Austrian citizen parliaments (and the German online citizen parliament experiment). In this deliverable, empirical insights serve as a basis for theoretical development and re-theorisation. The theorisation of these experiences, strengthened by the confrontation of these theorisations with existing academic literature, allowed to reflect about these experiences, but also to transcend them, contributing to the (intersection of the) fields of participatory theory and epistemology.

Introduction

1. Participation in the 21st century

Participation is a core democratic principle, indispensable to democracy's functioning. In Western representative democracies, participation is—to a large extent—enacted and performed through the election of the members of the bodies of political governance by different political communities. But within the field of institutionalised politics, also other participatory mechanisms exist, in intersection with other societal fields. Activism and lobbying play vital roles, keeping in mind that interest groups—"sets of individuals with some values, purposes, and demands in common" (Dahl, 1961, p. 5)—are not only to be found within political parties, but also in civil society and the world of business. Especially in neo-pluralist research, "a complex welter of group participation in public policy making" (McFarland, 2007, p. 55) could be observed.

The political struggles over the formal organisation of democracy are not limited to the mainstreamed political-democratic practices, e.g., elections. Some of these reconfigurations are more theoretical, with Van Reybrouck's (2016) *Against Elections: The Case for Democracy* as an example, where he—building on the earlier work of Bouricius (2013)— defends sortition as an alternative to election, or as a democratic practice that can be combined with election. Van Reybrouck (2016, p. 151) (and Bouricius) defend multi-body sortition as a (partial) solution for "the systemic crisis of democracy", also referring to the current practices of people's juries in the criminal justice system. In addition, there is a multitude of participatory practices that have been developed to complement representative democracy—and its emphasis on the election of representatives—with referendums and deliberative mini-publics as key examples. Later in this book, we will use one particular type of deliberative mini-publics—the citizen assembly (see Vrydagh, 2023, p. 3, for a definition)—as example of these practice-based reconfigurations.

Still, participation is not restricted to the field of institutionalised politics, but can be activated in all other societal fields as well. Participatory models have been developed and mobilised in a variety of fields, with, for instance, the economy, where Pateman (1970, p. 35) argued for "participation in the workplace", which "can be regarded as political participation in its own right." She continues to argue that the "industry and other spheres provide alternative areas where the individual can participate in decision making in matters of which he [or she] has first hand, everyday experience" (Pateman, 1970, p. 35). Also more recent[1] pleas for a participatory economy (Hahnel, 2022, p. 4) reiterate these ideas where "worker and consumer councils and federations formulate and agree on 'self-activity' proposals themselves", through a series of participatory procedures. Equally important are the discussions (and practices) in the field of the arts, despite—or, arguably, because of—the privileged position of the artist. For instance, the community arts movement (Binns, 1991; Jeffers and Moriarty, 2017), as "its advocates argued, offered new possibilities of more democratic forms of art and

[1] Michael Albert and Robin Hahnel's work on participatory economy goes back much earlier, with, for instance, Albert and Robin (1991).

new ways for art to act as a catalyst for social change" (Crehan, 2011, p. 79). As an arts movement, it emphasises collaborative work involving (professional) artists and local community members, allowing for the equalisation of power relations. Bishop (2012), who prefers the term participatory arts, argues that this concept "connotes the involvement of many people (as opposed to the one-to-one relationship of 'interactivity')" (p. 1) where participation is seen "as a politicised working process" (p. 2) and where the "audience, previously conceived as a 'viewer' or 'beholder', is now repositioned as a co- producer or *participant*" (p. 2—emphasis in original).

Media is yet another societal field where participation has been theorised and practiced. As signifying machines, media provide opportunities for the signifying practices of a diversity of actors—some privileged, others not—to circulate (in always particular conditions), which opens up spaces for citizens to exercise their communication rights. The MacBride Commission (1980, p. 166) report is one of the places where the right to communicate has been described, with the report using the following terms: "(a) the individual becomes an active partner and not a mere object of communication; (b) the variety of messages exchanged increases; and (c) the extent and quality of social representation or participation in communication are augmented." While traditional mainstream media deployed high levels of curation—resulting in the production of often only minimalist participatory projects and formats, e.g. audience discussion programmes (see Carpentier, 2011)—different waves of contestation occurred. A first wave consisted of alternative and community media which produced organised, small-scale and not-for-profit spaces for community participation and self-representation, which was followed by a wave of social media (which can also be termed social mass mainstream media) which provided limited spaces for self-expression. Soon after this second wave came a third wave, which consisted of a series of alternative non/anti-democratic media, supporting a radical right-wing hegemonic project. In particular the first wave produced strong opportunities for participation in the media organisations themselves. As Berrigan (1979, p. 8) summarised it, community media "are media in which the community participates, as planners, producers, performers. They are the means of expression of the community, rather than for the community."

The second and third waves of traditional mainstream media contestations have also triggered a re-articulation of (media) participation, where, through the presence of fundamentalism, extremism and (symbolic) violence—especially on social media platforms—participation became problematised as a threat to democracy and society. Also in academic research, participation has become associated with darkness again, first through an emphasis on the 'dark sides of participation' (see Bouchard, 2016; Lutz and Hoffmann, 2017; Tzur, Zalmanson and Oestreicher-Singer, 2016) and later through the introduction of the 'dark participation' concept (Frischlich, Boberg and Quandt; Quandt, 2018). Without denying the existence of media capture processes — in particular by the far right—and the many cases of online abuse, we also need to question whether participation in itself can be dark, whether this is not a conflation of participatory processes and their outcomes and consequences (Carpentier, Melo and Ribeiro, 2019), and whether dark interaction is not a better label. The articulation of participation with darkness also has profound consequences for how we construct the people and their empowerment, and how this articulation is in alignment with the long history of the construction of the people as incapable or unworthy of empowerment, because of their perceived lack of morality and knowledge. One of the many

(historical) examples can be found in Schumpeter's (1994, p. 262) perspective on the "typical citizen", in *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy*, originally published in 1942, where he writes:

> "Thus the typical citizen drops down to a lower level of mental performance as soon as he enters the political field. He argues and analyzes in a way which he would readily recognize as infantile within the sphere of his real interests. He becomes a primitive again. His thinking becomes associative and affective."

These representational politics also construct the people as passive in their interpretative capacities, which is seen to render them vulnerable to (media) manipulation. Societal conversations about, again in particular, social media frequently return to hypodermic needle theories, which assume that discourses circulating on (social) media will be automatically accepted. One illustration of this articulation, in relation to disinformation studies, will be discussed in Chapter 1.

The articulation of participation in the West is also impacted by the (attempts for the) recentralisation of power. Katsambekis (2023, p. 429) lists some of the different labels used to describe these political projects:

> "Authoritarianism becomes 'authoritarian populism', or just 'populism'. Similarly, 'illiberalism', 'anti-pluralism', 'demagoguery' or (new) 'despotism', among others, emerge as alternative names to describe the threat, while even various versions of fascism (that is, prefascism, neo-fascism) have been put back on the table."

Also notions such as 'democratic backsliding' (Bermeo, 2016), 'democratic erosion' (Plattner, 2014; Schedler, 1998) and 'autocratisation' (Cassani and Tomini, 2020) are used to describe the weakening of (some) Western democracies. One of the main targets of authoritarian projects, which, in the West, still operate within formal democratic contexts—what some call illiberal democracies (Zakaria, 1997)—is participation. Authoritarianism affects the key equilibrium between representation and participation, skewing the power relations between the political community and its leadership, thus shifting towards minimalist or even token forms of participation. Moreover, authoritarianism attempts to reduce the political to institutionalised politics (by extending the reach of institutionalised politics into other societal fields), attempting to permanently fill the empty seat of power (Lefort, 1988). In the 21st century Western world, different regimes, most notably the USA, but also countries like Hungary, have moved towards authoritarianism, with its strong leaders and more minimalist forms of participation, centralising power as much as possible. At the same time, the omnipresence of the resistance of citizens towards this rebalancing of representation and participation still bears witness of the importance of—and the willingness of citizens to protect—participation.

The discussion in this section also demonstrates that participation in this book is treated from a political studies perspective. Participation is here defined as sharing power—and not so much as taking part—or, in other words, as the "equalisation of power inequalities in particular decision-making processes" (Carpentier, 2016, p. 72). On the base of the four-level and 12-step analytical model for participatory processes that one of us developed earlier (Carpentier, 2016), we can briefly summarise the core

characteristics of participation. Participatory practices are always-situated formal or informal decision-making processes, where power relations become equalised. This narrower definition—which distinguishes it from the sociological approach to participation as taking part—allows differentiating participation from access and interaction, where the former refers to the establishment of presence, and the latter to the creation of socio-communicative relations.

The situatedness of participation in particular societal fields does not mean that the rebalancing of power relations takes place exclusively in the field where the participatory process is rooted. We can have "transgressive forms of participation (where the participatory process transgresses the boundaries of a particular field and becomes situated in several fields) and transferred forms of participation (where a non-participatory process in a particular field allows for participation in another field)" (Carpentier, 2016, p. 78). These dynamics can be illustrated by the distinction between participation *in* the media, and participation *through* the media (Carpentier, 2011, p. 67).

Moreover, participation involves different actors (or actor groups), where at least one actor (group) is non-privileged in the field(s) related to the participatory process, with this process aimed at rebalancing these unequal power positions. It is important to immediately add that the rebalancing of power relations, e.g., between elites and ordinary people, does not imply the elimination of diversity and the de-validation of expertise or skills. In this book, we shy away from populist forms of participation, grounded in the myth of a unified people by its antagonism towards the establishment. Equity thus becomes an important mechanism for, and objective of, participatory processes.

At the same time, participatory processes consist out of chains of decision-making moments, which are the "micro-processes of the main participatory process" (Carpentier, 2016, p. 81). Participatory processes are characterised by a wide range of these formal or informal decision-making moments, where actors (in their discursive-material contexts) perform their power relations, allowing for the equalisation of these relations, through the activation of the generative, restrictive and resistant aspects of power. Participation can have different intensities, with sometimes more minimalist forms of participation (where privileged actors maintain strong levels of control over process and outcome) and in other cases more maximalist forms of participation (where the power relations between privileged and non-privileged are fully balanced). This dimension approximates Pateman's (1970) distinction between partial and full participation, keeping in mind that 'pure' forms of maximalist (or full) participation are unlikely to occur, and even more unlikely to be maintained. Still, as argued elsewhere (Carpentier, 2014a), maximalist (or full) participation is an important fantasy to drive (and maintain) the shift towards more balanced power relations in society's many fields.

Finally, participation becomes aligned with democratic culture and its value discourses. The definition of participation as power-sharing aimed at empowering non-privileged societal actors articulates participation with substantive democracy and human rights, including peace, justice, equality and equity, freedom and dignity (see Carpentier and Wimmer, 2025, p. 16; Fetrati, 2023). This articulation implies a series of requirements, but also imposes limits on what can be considered participatory..

Carpentier, Melo and Ribeiro (2019, p. 25) provide a (hypothetical) illustration of these limiting consequences of this articulation:

> "One way of illustrating this discussion [...] is through a hypothetical situation: imagine a perfectly decentralised decision-making process, that is focussed on how to murder an individual. Or, in other, even more provocative terms: Can a pogrom or a lynch mob be (considered) participatory? Instinctively, it is difficult to acknowledge the participatory nature of this process, which then raises questions about the ground of this refusal to accept such a process as participatory."

In this book, we work within this definition of participation to highlight the relationship between participation and knowledge, through six particular lenses, analysed in six chapters. The first lens is knowledge's complex relation to data and information on the one hand, and wisdom on the other hand, which allows emphasising the importance of both situated knowledge and participatory knowledge production. A second lens is stupidity, which not only has the potential to problematise and disrupt participatory processes, but which also has been weaponised to delegitimise and restrict access to participatory processes. Identity, or knowledge about the self and others, the third lens, allows emphasising the role of the expert (and leader) subject positions, and their relationship with epistemic authority, in participatory processes. The fourth lens is time, where the importance of acquiring knowledge for participatory processes is highlighted. Through the fifth lens, play and playfulness, which translates into playful or ludic participation, the notion of seriousness (frequently articulated with decision-making and knowledge) is deconstructed, but also the role of embodied knowledge is addressed. Finally, the sixth lens is creativity—and related notions, such as affect and intuition—which not only allows to complicate knowledge production, but also allows, through discussions on political and civic creativity, to again demonstrate the importance of the participation-knowledge relationship.

2. A theoretical reflection embedded in the MeDeMAP project

This theoretical work on participation and knowledge is intrinsically connected with the project on Mapping Media for Future Democracies (MeDeMAP). More specifically, it originates from the second work package of MeDeMAP, titled 'Theoretical embedding', which has provided theoretical support for the entire MeDeMAP project, through three earlier deliverables, namely (1) the theoretical framework development (D2.1), which became the book *Democracy and Media in Europe: A Discursive-Material Approach* (Carpentier and Wimmer, 2025); (2) the operationalisation plans for the other work packages (D2.2) and (3) the deployment of the theoretical framework for a second-stage literature review (D2.3), whose results were later published as an article (Doudaki, Carpentier and Filimonov, 2026) and a book chapter (Doudaki, Carpentier and Filimonov, 2025). Arguably, more important than these deliverables was the continuous (formal and informal) support through collaborations, reflection moments, consultations and feedback, in particular (but not only) with the project's work package responsible for the organisation of the MeDeMAP citizen parliaments (work package 6, entitled 'Supply meets demand'), which we will detail in the first subsection. The support (outcomes) for the other empirical work packages of MeDeMAP is then discussed in the second subsection.

This book is the fourth and final deliverable of MeDeMAP work package 2 (D2.4), entitled *Participation and Knowledge: A Theory-Driven Re-Analysis of the Project's Interventions*. It simultaneously (1) reports on the continuous support for the other MeDeMAP work packages (in this introductory section) and (2) forms the theoretical component of the final reflection stage on the project interventions, as part of the Participatory Action Research methodology that structured work package 6 (and arguably, a substantial part of the MeDeMAP project). This is also why this book is closely related to the analysis of the process and outcomes of the citizen parliaments, as captured in the deliverable D6.4 (*Future Roadmap for European Media and Democracy*[2]), as this deliverable forms the analytical component of the reflection stage.

At the very heart of this *Participation and knowledge* book lies the lived experience of the organisation of the Czech citizen parliament, together with the support for, and close interaction with, the organisation of the Slovene, Irish and Austrian citizen parliaments, and the German online citizen parliament experiment. Even though *Participation and knowledge* is a theoretical reflection with little explicit references to particular data analyses or particular (events in the) citizen parliaments (for this, see the WP6 deliverables), it is deeply inspired by the organisational and empirical work performed in/with/on these citizen parliaments. The notion of inspiration is important here: It allows to create a bridge between experiences and theory formation. In literary studies, we can find the idea that experiences are translated into texts, while these narratives simultaneously become abstractions of the experiences, recognisable by readers, turning them into arguments that might change the perspectives of these readers (see, Hampe, 2018, p. 202). In this book, we combine a similar perspective—the theorisation of experiences—with the confrontation of these theorisations with other academic literature (and *their* theorisations, empirical research and experiences). These iterations legitimate the choice for the six lenses—data/information/knowledge/wisdom, stupidity, identity, timescapes, play and playfulness and creativity—within the multitude of concepts that would have been relevant to investigate in relation to participation and knowledge. More broadly, these iterations allowed us to theoretically reflect about these experiences, but simultaneously it also allowed us to transcend them, and thus offer a contribution to the (intersection of the) fields of participatory theory and epistemology.

2.1 The work package 2 support for the work package 6 citizen parliaments

Before engaging in the reflections about the intersection between participation and knowledge—inspired by the experiences of organising and analysing the MeDeMAP citizen parliaments—we will first report on how the theoretical work package 2 (WP2) supported the work package that was responsible for the *organisation* of these citizen parliaments, namely work package 6 (WP6). This WP6 addressed how 'demand meets supply', focussing on citizen parliaments and integrating key components of Participatory Action Research (PAR) in its design and implementation, "requiring

[2] Also the development of this deliverable D6.4 was enabled by the theoretical support from work package 2.

permanent interaction between reflection (and theory-building) and action" (original research proposal, p. 30).

As was described in this original proposal, "[t]he objective of WP6 is to realise dialogical interactions of citizens and media stakeholders meeting in citizen parliaments to contribute for the development of the future media map" (original research proposal, p. 35). WP2 provided the theoretical support for the design and implementation of these WP6-related tasks, and offered guidance for their dissemination, as is explained further-on.

Design of the citizen parliaments

In fulfilling the aims of WP2, D2.2 (Carpentier and Wimmer, 2024) included a series of specific proposals for the operationalisation of the WP6-related tasks and deliverables, being conceptually and theoretically instructed by D2.1 (Carpentier and Wimmer, 2023; 2025). For instance, the operationalisation proposal for Task 6.2, which concerned the design of citizen parliaments for all partner countries, focussed on:

> "(1) the thematic focus of the citizen parliaments, with three subthemes, (2) the organization of the training component, fixating a more maximalist definition of democracy, (3) the need to analyse the citizen parliaments as a struggle over media's role in democracy, (4) the use of resolutions, majority decision-making and dissenting opinions in the citizen parliaments, and (5) the protection of the participation in and through the citizen parliaments" (D2.2, p. 35).

These suggestions were integrated in the methodological guide for WP6 (D6.2) (Monnot *et al.*, 2025) informing the design, organisation, implementation and dissemination of the citizen parliaments and their outputs. More in detail, the thematic focus of all citizen parliaments on 'media and democracy' reflected the MeDeMAP's project overall orientation, while the three topics of all MeDeMAP citizen parliaments—media systems, media and representation, media and participation—were selected on the basis of the theoretical framework developed in D2.1 (Carpentier and Wimmer, 2025) and the broader theoretical guidance provided by the WP2 team.[3]

The citizen parliaments included training/learning components in each meeting, stimulating understandings of more maximalist definitions of democracy, not reducing democracy to institutionalised politics, or to the procedural version of democracy. These training/learning components included three videos, one for each of the citizen parliament topics, two of which were produced by the WP2 team, and one by the WP6 team, again in line with the D2.1 theoretical framework. Moreover, the overall training/learning component of the citizen parliaments was instructed by D2.2's suggestions concerning the integration of PAR in the citizen parliaments, adjusted to serve their needs.

All citizen parliaments, implementing the core design as elaborated in D6.2 through a series of WP2/WP6 dialogues, were structured around the development of resolutions for each of the three topics. These resolutions were then accepted (or not) by each

[3] See also, 'WP6: Initial methodological guidelines for CP design and organization', Annex 14 of D6.2.

citizen parliament following the parliamentarians' own preferred decision-making methods. They included the expression of supporting and dissenting opinions for each selected resolution,[4] as it is illustrated in the resolutions reports produced by the citizen parliaments.

Finally, the recommendation in D2.2 for *participation in and through* the citizen parliaments to feed to overall design, implementation and dissemination of the citizen parliaments and their outputs was implemented through WP2/WP6 dialogues, driven by the theoretical framework. For instance, as was already explained, when it concerns participation *in* the citizen parliaments, the parliamentarians decided on the rules of decision-making and on the elaboration of the subtopics (under each of the three topics), around which specific resolutions would be formulated; they then formulated and selected their preferred resolutions, implementing their own decision-making rules. Moreover, adjustments to each specific citizen parliament design took place during the 3-month operation of the citizen parliaments, as the organising teams were attentive to the parliamentarians' feedback and their reactions during and after each citizen parliament meeting (as expressed, among others, in the online surveys, which followed each meeting). While the parliamentarians did not participate in the initial design of the citizen parliaments, the organisers were attentive to the participants' experiences and preferences during the operation of the citizen parliaments, but also to their own experiences, implementing several adjustments in the programme of the citizen parliament meetings and activities, applying the main principles of reflection and action of PAR. This practice allowed for both structure and flexibility, creating the conditions for maximising participation in the citizen parliaments. Lastly, D2.2's recommendation for participation *through* the citizen parliaments was implemented, among others, via the presentation of the CPs' resolutions by the parliamentarians, to politicians, policy makers and media stakeholders at the national and European levels.

Research focus and analysis

The deliverable 6.4, *Future roadmap for European media and democracy* presents the research findings of the analyses of the organisation, operation and outputs of the citizen parliaments. WP2's D2.2 addresses a set of recommendations regarding the research design and focus, with D2.1 again providing the theoretical support for the analyses of the citizen parliaments. The adoption of these recommendations is reflected in both the design (D6.2) and analysis (D6.4) of the citizen parliaments.

More specifically, the D2.2 recommendations emphasised the need "to ensure that there is sufficient theoretical support for the analysis of the citizen parliaments" (D2.2, p. 40), directly connecting the theoretical work of WP2 to the analyses of WP6. This was implemented by using the theoretical framework elaborated in D2.1 (Carpentier and Wimmer, 2025) as a series of sensitising concept for the analysis of the citizen parliaments. This then became crystalised in the analysis of the two main research questions (and their secondary research questions), which were again formulated through a WP2/WP6 dialogue (led by Nico Carpentier (CU) and Andrea Sedlaczek

[4] Also the online citizen parliament platforms (allowing for training/learning, for participant feedback and for the formulation of supporting/dissenting opinions) were designed by WP2.

(COMMIT)). Both the first research question on democratic media roles, and the second research question on the construction of democracy, participation and media, originated from the theoretical framework, together with the overarching focus on discursive struggle.

When it comes to data gathering for the analysis of the citizen parliaments, the recommendations of D2.2 emphasised the need for sufficient data, in order to allow for these research questions to be thoroughly investigated and adequately answered (D2.2, p. 41). This was implemented in D6.2, by requiring all partners organising citizen parliaments to collect and analyse the following data: "[1] the final resolutions/recommendations adopted on each of the 3 topics (with votes and expressions of confirmation or dissent), [2] minutes of the CP sessions, [3] flipcharts and posters produced during the CP sessions, [4] audio recordings and selective transcripts of plenary discussions (no video recording), [5] field notes (from ethnographic observers), [6] online surveys after each CP, [7] interviews with a selection of participants (after the end of the CPs)" (D6.2, pp. 27-28).

Training and analysis

Trainings in ethnographic research and in coding for qualitative research were offered to the different WP6 teams who organised citizen parliaments, to provide support and enhance consistency in data collection and analysis across countries. These trainings were instructed at different levels by the theoretical framework on democracy and media developed for D2.1.

Ethnographic training: A full-day online workshop on ethnographic observation was organised by Vaia Doudaki on 25 February 2025, with support from Nico Carpentier (CU, WP2), which focused on training the citizen parliament observers of all partners organising a citizen parliament. This workshop—apart from offering training on the basics of ethnographic observation, note-taking and the production of ethnographic reports—was conceptually focussed on the main and secondary research questions that guided the data collection and analyses of the four citizen parliaments (see D6.2, pp. 81-82). The training focused on using the sensitising concepts originating from the D2.1 theoretical framework, to guide the ethnographic observers as to what to look for during their observations at the citizen parliament meetings, and to focus on what is relevant for each research question. This was further operationalised through the recommendation to engage two observers for each citizen parliament, each one focusing on one main research question for the 4 citizen parliament days. This model allowed for consistency, facilitated knowledge development on issues/topics/aspects connected to the designated research question, facilitated reflexivity and allowed for a posteriori enrichment and improvement of the produced fieldnotes. Written guidelines were provided to the trainees as to what to look for, for each secondary research question, operationalising and unpacking the key sensitising concepts further. These guidelines were accompanied by simplified 'cheat sheets', to help the observers to take notes of what was most relevant and help them later produce their

ethnographic reports, protecting the research focus and rendering the ethnographers' work manageable.[5]

Training on data coding: A series of online training and calibration meetings was organised for the MeDeMAP research teams that organised citizen parliaments, focussing on the coding and the analysis of the collected materials (4 June, 17 June, 11 September 2025). They were led by the MeDeMAP citizen parliament analysis coordinator Andreas Martin (Austrian Academy of Sciences (OEAW)), and supported by WP2 leader Nico Carpentier (CU). These meetings offered training on coding and coding trees calibration and synchronisation across the research teams. The trainings addressed the main principles and practices of coding for the purpose of qualitative analysis, focussing on the WP6 research questions. Main sensitising concepts, as elaborated in the D2.1 theoretical framework, guided the trainings, and the partners' actual coding and analyses. During the training and calibration meetings, the different research teams engaged in dialogues regarding the coding process, the coding outcomes (coding trees), and the reporting of the findings, which allowed the teams to revise, validate, enrich and refine their analyses, identifying both similarities across countries, but also specificities related to the particularities of each country's context.

Coding and analysis: For the analyses of the materials of the citizen parliaments, the respective teams were guided by key theoretical sensitising concepts, extracted from Carpentier and Wimmer's (2025) theoretical framework. The specific sensitising concepts varied to a certain extent, depending on the specifics of each secondary research question, and on the particularities of each citizen parliament, but were largely guided or inspired by the key components listed in the concluding Figure 3.2 of Carpentier and Wimmer (2025, p. 99).

2.2 The role of WP2 in the other MeDeMAP working packages

Apart from supporting WP6, WP2 also provided theoretical support for the other empirical work packages. Here, for reasons of brevity, we work with three vignettes, written by the three work package leaders, Josef Seethaler, Beata Klimkiewicz and Andrea Miconi, who were asked to describe the role of WP2 for their work packages.

Josef Seethaler (WP3):
"WP2 as a theoretical framework for WP3 As an analytical model to examine and analyse the legal and (self-)regulatory frameworks for media in EU Member States must take into account the democratic potential of different norms and regulations as well as the impact that they might have on the democratic roles of the media, research in Work Package 3 can draw in several respects on the theoretical framework provided by deliverable 2.1 (Carpentier and Wimmer, 2023). First, the main perspectives highlighted by Carpentier and Wimmer when discussing the relationship between democracy and the media are taken as appropriate guidelines for focusing on those aspects of media law and regulation that (1) can be

[5] See internal documents: 'Citizen parliament observers' training', by Vaia Doudaki and Nico Carpentier, 25 February 2025; 'CP observers' training - Research Question 1+ cheat sheet', by Vaia Doudaki, March 2025; 'CP Research Question 2+ cheat sheet', by Vaia Doudaki, March 2025.

seen as crucial to safeguarding the *conditions of possibility of democratic media*, or (2) may *pose a threat* to certain democratic roles of the media or democratic media at all. At the same time, legal provisions and regulatory measures (3) reflect, as a result of negotiations, the *struggles over the roles that media are expected to play in society*.
Secondly, since legal norms can be regarded as applications of values, the struggles over media's democratic roles can be understood as value-driven struggles, with the values of freedom, equality, and pluralism, which Carpentier and Wimmer emphasise in their theoretical approach as main constituents of a "democratic media culture," playing a "key role" in these struggles. Both the meaning and significance attributed to media's various roles and the values on which they are based are shaped by different conceptions of democracy and democratic participation, for which deliverable 2.1 provides a comprehensive framework, on which the analyses in work package 3 can be built."

Beata Klimkiewicz (WP4):

"The theoretical groundwork described both in WP2 deliverables as well as the book (Carpentier and Wimmer, 2025) resonates with structuring task 4.1. and deliverable 4.2. A common ground is apparent in a chosen approach (three basic media sectors studied empirically) and specification of the sample for media supply (definition of the news media). Referring to the *conditions of possibility of democratic media*, the three media sectors represent not only three different logics of media operation, but also different mandates, forms of actions and engagement as well as values that back their very existence. Secondly, WP2's conceptual frameworks contributed to the specification of thematic areas used for the empirical study of the news production from the perspective of democratic and political participation. In particular, this translated to categories were *conditions for media freedom and pluralism* were subjects of scrutiny, inspired by Carpentier and Wimmer's recognition of these standards as key pillars of a model of democratic media. Finally, WP 2 conceptualisation of participation **in** the media and **through** the media helped to design a questionnaire and provide a structure for the analysis of the surveys conducted among media professionals in the ten MeDeMAP countries. Understanding different potentials of these two types of participation may play a crucial role in the development of future journalistic practices of the three sectors studied."

Andrea Miconi (WP5):

"In combination with the overarching research questions foreseen in the DoA, the work package 2 framework has constituted the basis for the empirical investigation carried out in WP5. In particular, we moved from the five conditions of possibility, with an emphasis on participation and trust (and namely, the tension between horizontal and vertical trust). In terms of results, a sort of misalignment emerged between the micro and the macro dimensions singled out in Carpentier and Wimmer's 'complete model' (respectively, decentralisation and legitimate state, and democratic culture and non-passive people), showing that people's idea of democracy is hardly limited to its top-down, institutional codification. Derrida's notion of democracy as 'always to come' (discussed in Carpentier and Wimmer, 2025) will be called to action, in the last WP5 deliverable, to explain this discrepancy."

1
On data, information, knowledge, and wisdom,[6] with Andrea Miconi and Benjamin De Cleen

1. Introduction

Capturing the meaning of the concept of knowledge in one chapter is a difficult task, given that there are entire academic fields—in particular, epistemology and the sociology of knowledge—which have extensively debated this concept and its diversity of meanings. Nevertheless, our strategy to discuss the concept's meanings is grounded in a negative-relationist approach, which allows defining knowledge by juxtaposing it to three other—related—concepts: data, information and wisdom. In order to do so, we start from a widely critiqued model, the hierarchy of data, information and knowledge model, or DIK-model, which will allow us to also clarify the meanings of the notion of knowledge.

Simultaneously, this strategy allows us to reflect more on the societal positioning of knowledge in relation to these three other concepts, firstly arguing that data and information have gained considerable importance, sometimes overshadowing knowledge and (especially) wisdom. When it comes to data, we have first seen the fascination with big data (Gezging, 2022; Miconi, 2023), followed by an even stronger enchantment with artificial intelligence (AI) (and technology in general, see Batteau and Miller, 2025, p. 185ff). This fascination is driven by what we will call—following Miconi and Carpentier (2026)—a data fetishist discourse which attempts to reverse the hierarchy of the DIK-model, at the expense of knowledge and wisdom. Similarly, we can also witness a societal fascination with disinformation, driven by the anxieties it evokes, which are, in turn, grounded in the absence of trust in the epistemic capacities of audiences and people in general. This articulation of audiences (and people) as passive and vulnerable have also led to the reappearance of the old-school hypodermic needle media effect models.

These data fetishist and disinformation discourses have not achieved hegemonic positions, though, as they are countered by a series of discourses that acknowledge the importance of knowledge and wisdom. In this chapter, we will discuss two of these (re)validation discourses. First, there is the societal importance that is still attributed to literacy and education, partially (and ironically) as a countermeasure to the perceived threats of AI and disinformation, but partially through a persistent humanist agenda that validates learning. Second, there are the theories (and practices) related to situated and participatory knowledge (production), which are more amenable towards the diversity of knowledges, the possibilities for generating settings for knowledge exchange, and the equalisation of power relations in the processes related to knowledge production itself. These two (re)validation discourses still provide a counterforce, in the political struggles over the hierarchy of data, information, knowledge, and wisdom.

[6] This chapter uses text from three earlier publications: Carpentier, 2025; Miconi and Carpentier, 2026; and Carpentier and De Cleen, 2026.

2. Theorising the hierarchy of data, information and knowledge and its extension to wisdom

The DIK-model (Braganza, 2004; Davenport and Prusak, 1998; Jasimuddin, 2012; Müller and Maasdorp, 2011; Nissen *et al.*, 2000;) can be considered—following Müller and Maasdorp (2011, p. 2)— the dominant view in the field of information science and knowledge management. Zins's (2007) "Knowledge Map of Information Science" study, which deployed a critical Delphi methodology (generating about 130 definitions from 45 contributing scholars) to map the different definitions of data, information and knowledge, makes a similar argument. Even though Zins distinguishes between five different approaches, which are structured through an internal-external (or subjective-universal) dimension, also in this study, the DIK-model provides the central architecture to reflect about knowledge.

At the same time, Zins's article (2007) is an illustration of the multitude of discussions and definitions, and—secondly—of the limitations of the DIK-model. This multitude and diversity of definitions becomes apparent in the first part of Zins's (2007, pp. 480-486; 492) article, which lists all definitions generated by the 45 contributing scholars. This list is an impressive overview of the differences that characterise this debate about the meaning of data, information and knowledge. Other authors have explicitly pointed to this diversity in meanings allocated to these concepts. Davenport and Prusak (1998, p. 1—emphasis in original) refer to the "[c]onfusion about what data, information, and knowledge are—how they differ, what those words *mean* […]." A second example is Baškarada and Koronios's (2013, p. 6) article, where they write: "Since only limited consensus regarding definitions has been reached, the terms as well as their relationships remain ambiguous." And Bolisani and Bratianu (2018, p. 1)—focussing on knowledge—start their chapter on the "Elusive Definition of Knowledge" with the following sentence: "Knowledge is an abstract concept without any reference to the tangible world. It is a very powerful concept, yet it has no clear definition so far."

The latter statement returns us to our introduction, and to the fields of epistemology and the sociology of knowledge, whose mere existence demonstrate the diversity of approaches towards knowledge. For instance, in a mapping of the conceptual diversity in epistemology, Foley (2002, p. 177) writes that "[e]pistemologists have their disagreements about how best to understand the concept of knowledge, but their disagreements about the […] cluster of [normative] concepts [applying to beliefs] are more extreme." Similarly, also the field of the sociology of knowledge, is characterised by conceptual diversity. Merton (1957, p. 467), for instance, writes that "[e]ven a cursory survey is enough to show that the term 'knowledge' has been so broadly conceived as to refer to every type of idea and every mode of thought ranging from folk belief to positive science." McCarthy (1996, p. 1—emphasis removed), as a representative of the so-called new sociology of knowledge, argues that "knowledge is best conceived and studied as culture, and the various types of social knowledges communicate and signal social meanings—such as meanings about power and pleasure, beauty and death, goodness and danger," but also juxtaposes this approach to how "Marx, Durkheim, Mannheim, and Mead" thought about the "mind's sociality".

Zins's article (2007) not only maps conceptual diversity, but also points to the limitations of the DIK-model. Even though Zins (2007, p. 479) writes that "[m]any scholars claim that data, information, and knowledge are part of a sequential order," he also raises the question whether "we [should] refute the sequential order?" One of experts who participated in Zins's study, Capurro (cited in Zins, 2007, p. 481), formulates this critique as follows: "Information is set together out of data and knowledge comes out from putting together information. This is a fairytale." A similar critique on the sequential order can be found in Tuomi's (1999) work, who argues for a reversal of the hierarchy, as Tuomi considers knowledge a necessary requirement for the construction of information and data. A similar reversal strategy leads Braganza (2004) to argue for the KID-model.

More fundamental critiques on the DIK-model point to its weak philosophical foundations. For instance, Müller and Maasdorp (2011, p. 3) refer to the foundationalist "simplifications of DIK", simultaneously arguing that this simplicity is one of the reasons that makes the DIK-model attractive, together with its alignment with the conceptual world of information theory, and with an accumulative worldview (p. 4). Frické (2009) refers to the model's positivist and inductivist grounds, which produces a reductionist perspective on data, information and knowledge, or as Frické (2009, p. 135) summarises it in the case of information: "[A] good account of information should count as information rather more than the DIKW theory permits." Finally, Williams (2014, p. 102), in his summary of critiques on the DIK-model, argues that "[m]uch of the criticism states that the hierarchy has oversimplified the complex nature of knowledge and that the elements should not be defined in terms of each element", but also adds that "[w]here many critiques of the hierarchy fall short is in still considering that the elements exist in a continuum."

One additional point—particularly relevant in this context—is that the DIK-model is often complemented with wisdom. One of the starting points[7] of this entire debate (and the modelling of these concepts) is Ackoff's 1988 presidential address to the International Society for General Systems Research, *From data to wisdom* (which was later published, see Ackoff, 1989).[8] Before, Cleveland (1982, p. 34—emphasis in original) had already argued that "we're still struggling with definitions of basic terms", referring to the "hierarchy suggested a long time ago by T. S. Eliot in *The Rock*", with its sentences "Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge? Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?" (Eliot, 1934, p. 7).[9] Cleveland also refers to Tuan (cited in Cleveland, 1982, p. 34): "The difference is one of order of complexity. Information is horizontal, knowledge is structured and hierarchical, wisdom is organismic and flexible." In parallel, also Zeleny (1987) is credited (e.g., by Sharma, 2008) for articulating data, information, knowledge and wisdom, when he wrote the following:

[7] Others are also mentioned as starting points. For instance, Williams (2014, p. 81) mentions Henry's (1974) work.
[8] Ackoff also included understanding, as the fifth element.
[9] The Eliot poem features frequently in the DIK(W) literature, e.g., Müller and Maasdorp, 2011, p. 2; Rowley, 2007, p. 166; Williams, 2014, p. 80; Zins, 2007, p. 482. To his credit, Sharma (2008, p. 3) also refers to the lyrics of Frank Zappa's song "Packard Goose" from the album "Joe's Garage: Act II & III" (Tower Records, 1979): "Well, information is not knowledge / Knowledge is not wisdom / Wisdom is not truth / Truth is not beauty / Beauty is not love / Love is not music / Music is the best / Wisdom is the domain of the wits which is extinct / Beauty is a French phonetic corruption of a short cloth / Neck ornament currently in resurgence"

> "While data and information are piecemeal, partial and atomized by their very nature, knowledge and wisdom are 'holistic', related to and expressed through systemic network patterns, integrative by definition" (Zeleny, 1987, p. 59).

In particular in the literature evaluating the DIKW-model, a reoccurring critique is that the notion of wisdom is left underdeveloped. For instance, Rowley (2007, p. 178) writes that "despite being at the top of the DIKW hierarchy, wisdom is a neglected concept in the knowledge management and information systems literature." Similarly, Frické (2008, p. 133) writes that "[w]hile wisdom is traditionally taken to be a layer in the hierarchy, few authors discuss it or use it."

The debates about the DIK(W)-model could also be perceived differently. From a discourse-theoretical perspective (Carpentier, 2017; Laclau and Mouffe, 1985) the concepts of data, information, knowledge and wisdom can be perceived as floating signifiers. Floating signifiers are signifiers that are "overflowed with meaning" (Torfing, 1999, p. 301) which implies that they assume different meanings in different contexts/discourses. The considerable volume of definitions, originating from different (academic) fields discussed earlier in this text, only demonstrates their significatory fluidity. Moreover, from the same discourse-theoretical perspective, we can also highlight the discursive struggles over the meanings of these signifiers, as is witnessed by the many contestations and critiques—for instance, over the nature, qualities and relevance of the DIK(W)-model. The title of one article on the DIKW-model, by Van Meter (2020), which is *Revising the DIKW Pyramid and the Real Relationship Between Data, Information, Knowledge, and Wisdom*, nicely illustrates this struggle and its different reality claims.

The contingency argument can also be deployed to move away from some of the reductions of societal complexity caused by the positivist and inductivist grounds of the DIK(W)-model. In particular when it comes to knowledge, we instead entertain the idea that "the will to knowledge does not achieve a universal truth", as Foucault (1984, p. 95) wrote in a discussion of Nietzsche's work. Knowledge thus becomes constructed as truth through a series of power dynamics, which elevate discourse to knowledge. Or in Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) terminology: Always particular discourses thus become sedimented through discursive struggles for hegemony, establishing regimes of knowledge. As Ristić and Marinković (2023) argued (in the case of Foucault), this also had a significant impact on the sociology of knowledge. Earlier, we already referred to what McCarthy (1996) and others labelled the new sociology of knowledge, where knowledges continue to be viewed "as highly relative social forms undergoing processes of continual change" (McCarthy, 1996, p. 23). Or, in other words, "knowledge itself is a historical construct, forever changing its forms and the ways that it positions people within the worlds they inhabit" (McCarthy, 1996, p. 23—emphasis removed).

A last element originating from this discourse-theoretical perspective is the negative-relationist strategy that has been used in handling floating signifiers before (see, e.g., Carpentier (2011b, p. 128) for defining participation and its conditions of possibility, access and interaction). Here, the argument is that there is still a need to differentiate between these concepts, and that a definitional strategy is aided by relating these different concepts, also considering their differences.

To start with the data concept: One approach would be to define data as the quantification of a part of social reality, but this would privilege a more quantitative approach to data. Ackoff's (1989, p. 3) definition is slightly broader, defining data as "symbols that represent properties of objects, events and their environments." One mild variation, inspired by a discourse-theoretical vocabulary, is to define data as signifiers. When we take a more materialist perspective, we could also approach data as *potential* signifiers, stored in archives, waiting for actual signification. Equally important is Gunnlaugsdottir's (2003, p. 364) definition of data as "facts without context". Even though the emphasis on facts remains problematic, this definition does offer the opportunity to think in terms of increasing the weight of their contextualisations when looking at the information and knowledge concepts.

Information can—again using a discourse-theoretical framework—then be defined as the articulation of data. In discourse theory, articulation is the combination of signifiers, keeping in mind that the practice of articulation implies that all elements, and the whole, receive a particular meaning. To use Laclau and Mouffe's (1985, p. 105) words: Articulation is "[…] any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice". This implies that when data become articulated, the result is no longer 'mere' data, they become what Hall (1997) labelled signifying practices, which further increases the particularity of their meaning. But in contrast to the more encompassing concept of the signifying practice, information is its more de-personalised version.

Thirdly, there is knowledge. This concept has a more complex definition, as knowledge not only articulates signifiers (and signifying practices) into discourses—to use a more Foucauldian language—but also implies a move from an individual to a collective (discursive) production level. In the DIKW-model, the acknowledgement of this shift structurally absent, resulting in the formulation of a considerable number of critiques (see, e.g., Williams, 2014), arguing for the existence of a structural difference between data and information on the one hand, and knowledge and wisdom on the other. Moreover, knowledge also has the element of truthfulness articulated with it. This component was already part of the ancient definition of knowledge as justified true belief,[10] even though Gettier's (1963) short article showed (through the analysis of two case studies) the complexities of this definition. Later definitions, for instance by McCarthy (1996, p. 2), emphasise the socially constructed nature of this truthfulness or real-ness: "[K]nowledge refers to any and every set of ideas accepted by one or another social group or society of people, ideas pertaining to what they accept as real." Knowledge then becomes the discourses that are considered truthful, real or plausible. This also implies that some signifying practices (e.g., information) are accepted and considered part of knowledge, while others are not, and, for instance, discarded as misinformation and disinformation, or considered illegitimate knowledge.

Wisdom is the fourth and last component, which refers to *application* of knowledge, as Sternberg's (1998, p. 347) definition of wisdom as "the application of tacit knowledge as mediated by values toward the achievement of a common good" illustrates. Still, the nature of wisdom's relation to the knowledge domain is debated. As Ryan (2007)

[10] This definition is sometimes attributed to Plato, even though, as Gettier (1963, p. 121) writes, this is not entirely clear: "Plato seems to be considering some such definition at *Theaetetus* 201, and perhaps accepting one at *Meno* 98."

argues, one type of wisdom-knowledge relationship is epistemic humility, exemplified by a (contested) interpretation of Socrates' work. Frické (2008, p. 140) labels this a "fallibilist" position: "Socrates was considered wise largely because all he knew was that he knew nothing." Other types of the wisdom-knowledge relationship articulate—again following Ryan (2007)—wisdom as epistemic accuracy or wisdom as (extensive or particular) knowledge. This also includes the articulation of wisdom as knowing how to live well, as is captured by Aristotle, who describes practical wisdom as knowing "about what sorts of thing conduce to the good life in general" (Aristotle, cited in Ryan, 2007).

Even though knowledge remains crucial in the articulation of wisdom, the latter is sometimes articulated with other signifiers. A first set of articulations are related to practice and experience, as, for instance the reference above to the application of knowledge exemplifies. Ryan (1996, p. 241) refers to the practice of living well in their definition: "S is wise" if "(i) S is a free agent, (ii) S knows how to live well, (iii) S lives well, and (iv) S's living well is caused by S's knowledge about how to live well." A second set of articulations brings in a moral dimension, for instance through the concept of virtue: "Wisdom is, in whole or in part, a virtue. [...] Virtue is knowledge that embraces everything that is good" (Socrates, cited in Lum, 1996, p. 86). Also the notion of good judgment features here, as Kekes' (1983, p. 277) description illustrates:

> "The possession of wisdom shows itself in reliable, sound, reasonable, in a word, good judgment. In good judgment, a person brings his knowledge to bear on his actions. To understand wisdom, we have to understand its connection with knowledge, action, and judgment."

Van Boxsel (2001, p. 24—our translation) uses the term morosophy here, to argue that knowledge in itself is insufficient, as, without good judgement, it can turn into "foolish wisdom or wise foolishness". Another moral articulation can be found in Swartwood and Tiberius (2019, p. 15) when they write that "[w]isdom is a prescriptive ideal in the sense that it is a state that we ought to cultivate or promote." This implies that "wisdom is the integration of knowledge in discursive-material assemblages, structured through the desire for normatively defined outcomes, benefitting society" (Carpentier, 2025).

3. A first reversal of the normative-cultural DIKW-hierarchy: Data fetishism

One of the still-relevant aspects of the DIKW-hierarchy is that it renders visible a normative-cultural prioritisation, where especially the societal value of knowledge and wisdom are emphasised. Arguably, the advent of, first, big data, and later AI, has produced a set of discourses that have reversed this hierarchy. This is hardly a new debate, though, as T. S. Eliot's earlier-mentioned lament ("Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge? Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?" (Eliot, 1934, p. 7)) exemplifies.

But in our contemporary cultural, political and social practices, we are now more and more centralising the notion of data. Different notions have been developed to critique this socio-cultural centralisation of data, and the reversal of the hierarchy. One of these concepts is dataism, which was—as far as we can establish—coined, in 2013, by

David Brooks in a New York Times opinion piece, and later picked up by Harari in his 2016 book *Homo Deus* (see Harari, 2016, p. 428ff; see also Syllaidopoulos, 2023). This is Brooks' original formulation:

> "If you asked me to describe the rising philosophy of the day, I'd say it is data-ism. We now have the ability to gather huge amounts of data. This ability seems to carry with it certain cultural assumptions — that everything that can be measured should be measured; that data is a transparent and reliable lens that allows us to filter out emotionalism and ideology; that data will help us do remarkable things — like foretell the future" (Brooks, 2013).

The particularly valuable point that Brooks makes in his definition of dataism is captured by the reference to "certain cultural assumptions," which allows emphasising the discursive nature of dataism. Dataism is not a purely material practice, it is also a way of thinking, or, in other words, a discourse. Dataism is not the only critical concept that allows us to think about the societal centralisation of data, though. Inspired by Habermas' (1987) notion of the colonisation of the lifeworld, we can, for instance, speak about the digital colonisation of the lifeworld, and/or the colonisation of the digital lifeworld. The concept we prefer to use here, though, for the critical analysis of this first reversal, is data fetishism, which builds on an integration and reconciliation of the two main theoretical approaches toward fetishism, namely the Marxist and the Freudian approaches.

As Miconi and Carpentier (2026) argue, according to the most canonical critique of political economy, the fetishism inversion is due to the commodity appearing as an autonomous entity and hiding the human work by which it had been produced. For Marx, fetishism appears as a specific feature of the capitalist relations of production, ultimately based on a split: the separation between labour as a human activity and control of the material means necessary for it, which results from the cyclical advent of so-called primitive accumulation. Later, Freud deployed a very different perspective, with fetishism being related to the archetypal prototype of the male genitalia, where it unfolds through the replacement of the sexual organ by a sexualised different part of the body. More precisely, Freud (1905, p. 33) defines a pathological form of fetishism, when "the longing for the fetish passes beyond the point of being merely a necessary condition attached to the sexual object and actually takes the place of the normal aim, and, further, when the fetish becomes detached from a particular individual and becomes the sole sexual object."

A combination of these two approaches—and, inspired by Lacan and Žižek, shifting Freud's focus on the individual level to a more societal level—can be used to discuss and further unpack data fetishism. While rarely used for the analysis of datafication processes (see Sharon and Zandbergen, 2016, for an exception), the idea of fetishism has been more frequently applied to the related case of AI (e.g., Dubrovsky *et al.*, 2022; Helmreich, 2001; O'Dowd, 2024; Weckert, 2022). Magee (2025, p. 69) notes that AI fetishism is in place "in both Marxian and Freudian senses", respectively as a replacement and displacement of human labour, and as a distortion of mimetic desire. A number of authors have developed first typologies—even though, arguably, they too need further development and improvement (as, for instance, the distinction between the categories they use is not always clear). One example is León (2001, p. 124), who identified three variants of AI fetishism, labelled as naturalisation, inversion and

dehistorification. Shipley and Williams's (2023) article is another example, when they mention four forms of fetishism related to AI: objectification, alienation, fetishism in the proper sense, and oppression. Arguably a more developed version is Miconi and Carpentier's (2026) combination of the Marxist and psychoanalytical approaches to produce a six-dimensional theoretical model of data fetishism, with the following components: de-contextualisation; displacement; reification; misplacement; de-humanisation; centralisation (see Figure 1).

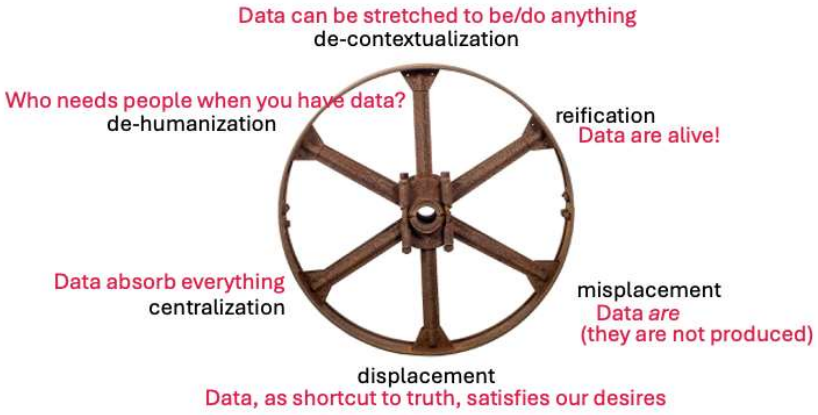

Figure 1: The six dimensions of data fetishism
Source: Carpentier, 2025

Miconi and Carpentier's (2026) six dimensions can be described as follows:

1. *De-contextualisation* refers to data being taken out of its context and mobilised to explain more general societal facts, external to the original domain of the investigation. This is a broader version of what León (2001, p. 124)—discussing AI fetishism—labels dehistorification, and captures the obscuring of the specificity of data generation processes, and the impact these processes have on data, which is—in Freudian terms—similar to the disconnection of the object of desire and the body it is affiliated to. In our case, the emphasis on data-as-object comes at the expense of the processes through which the data is generated, and the relations of production in which they are framed and premised (Fuchs, 2020, p. 318; Gezging, 2020, p. 191; Miconi, 2023, pp. 5-9).

2. *Reification* can be seen as the 'purest' Marxist case of fetishism. A formulation of reification in Marxist theory can be found in Lukács (1922, p. 84), where he writes that "a man's own activity […] becomes something objective and independent of him, something that controls him by virtue of an autonomy alien to man." In the case of data, reification comes in force when the data are presented as if they existed as a living creature, or in other words, when data become hypostatised, as if they come *before* the facts, in force of numbers appearing "simple and incontrovertible" (Rosenberg, 2013, p. 17) and potentially serving the goals of decision-makers and "those who exercise power" (Ruppert *et al.*, 2017, p. 3). Reification also feeds the reduction of social processes (in)to data (Berry, 2014, p. 126).

3. *Misplacement* leads us the closest to the orthodox materialist interpretation, as codified in Marx's (1867, pp. 47-48) *Capital*, where he writes that the

> "social character of men's labour appears to them as an objective character stamped upon the product of that labour; because the relation of the producers to the sum total of their own labour is presented on them as a social relation, existing not between themselves, but between the products of their labour."

   Two sub-dimensions of data fetishism can be identified here, which respectively deal with the exclusion of human labour from the discourse around automated and synthetic data (or AI), and with the underestimation of the industrial procedures required by data capitalism, and their harmful impact on the living environment. In this respect, the widespread metaphor of the *cloud* can be held up as an emblematic example, as it perpetrates the illusion of a non-material part of the digital economy.

4. *Displacement* refers to the focus on a particular object of desire (e.g., data), used as an epistemological shortcut, so that the "belief […] is directly incarnated in the fetishist object" (Žižek, 1991, p. 249). As to data fetishism, this can be seen as a displacement of the desire for clear-cut and univocal knowledge about the world, and the permanent frustration over its understandability. Here, the idea of measurability is key, as this shows the desire to know the world, often by ignoring the limits of statistics, and the impossibility of measurement to provide total knowledge. A variation of displacement is theorised by Possati (2020, p. 10), who argues that AI offers new forms of identification for humans, grounded in Lacan's mirror stage: "[T]his does not mean that the machine becomes a human being seeking identification, but that humans interpret the behavior of machine in this way."

5. *Centralisation* further radicalises the fetishist process, by putting the data on the top of the societal pyramid and articulating them as privileged inquiry tools. Centralisation has, in its turn, both a material and a discursive dimension. At the material level, centralisation is about the hierarchical configuration of the client-server architecture, and the corresponding impact on user quality of experience (Antoniou, 2021), with end users only being in control of a relatively limited amount of information, or 'small data'—which nonetheless may play a relevant role in organising people's life—and big data being stored by the major companies. At the discursive level, the argument is that the data ideology has eventually taken on a hegemonic form, where the generalisation of an ideology to the whole system is in itself a process of fetishisation.

6. *De-humanisation* has to do with the entrenchment of the data discourse within the trans-human paradigm and the myth of the machines eventually replacing mankind. León (2001, p. 124) summarises this as "machine dominates men". But de-humanisation also captures the idea that data can 'handle things on their own', without human intervention, and with increased reliability and trustworthiness. This results in the activation of data-driven solutions in

> decision-making processes, which occurs in the most disparate fields, and reduces humans to data providers (Shipley and Williams, 2023, p. 628).

Although the data fetishism discourse is not the only discourse to articulate the role of data in contemporary societies, it still has strong interpellative capacities, tempting elites and non-elites to underestimate the importance of knowledge and wisdom, thus placing data at the centre of the cultural, social, political and economic realms. This reductionist process also tends to downplay the importance of participation, in deciding on data access, data use, data infrastructures and data policies, despite, for instance, the calls for data democracy (Batarseh and Yang, 2020) and digital commons (Bauwens, Kostakis and Pazaitis, 2019; Birkinbine, 2020).

4. A second reversal of the normative-cultural DIKW-hierarchy: Disinformation

Also the discussions on disinformation demonstrate the shift away from knowledge and wisdom, where the notion of disinformation often brings in a paradigmatic alliance with positivism and realism. Moreover, disinformation studies tend to ignore the knowledge (and arguably wisdom) of both the producers and the audiences of disinformation. In this section, we want to revisit this notion of disinformation (and in particular its definition), demonstrate these absences, and increase the visibility of the—often-hidden but necessary—presence of knowledge (and wisdom). Support for this rearticulation can be found in the subfield of so-called critical disinformation studies, where, or instance, Kuo and Marwick (2021, p. 2) argue for a reframing of disinformation, "from a problem of information pollution to a form of knowledge that is propagated and circulated."

The notion of disinformation—and some of its pseudo-synonyms such as 'fake news'[11]—(re)gained popularity in the 2010s, partially because of its use by political actors, and partially because of an upsurge of false and deceptive signifying practices in the same period, notably related to the Brexit referendum (resulting in the United Kingdom leaving the European Union) and the 2016 US presidential elections (Terzis *et al.*, 2020, pp. xiv-xv). As is often the case, the concept of disinformation is considered as "contested" (Terzis *et al.*, 2020, p. xv), because of the "unclarity on the context, intentions and actor-perspective of disinformation" (Hameleers, 2023, p. 1). To deal with these conceptual instabilities, Hameleers (2023, p. 1) introduces first what they call a "short minimal working definition of disinformation", which defines disinformation as "the intentional creation and dissemination of false and/or deceptive information." Later in the article, Hameleers (2023, p. 2) proposes the following "more inclusive working definition":

> "Disinformation refers to all practices of intentionally creating or disseminating deceptive content to cause harm, sow discord, or create financial and/or political gain. Its practices of deception may range from the decontextualisation of known facts to the fabrication of alternative narratives."

[11] Tandoc *et al.*'s (2018, p. 147) typology of usages of fake news distinguishes six meanings allocated to the concept of fake news, namely "(1) news satire, (2) news parody, (3) fabrication, (4) manipulation, (5) advertising, and (6) propaganda". Some authors, e.g., Coady (2021) have argued against the academic use of the fake news concept, which is a position we follow here as well.

The emphasis on intent in this definition also allows to distinguish between disinformation and the related concepts of misinformation and mal-information (see Wardle and Derakhshan, 2017), where "misinformation" is seen "as accidental falsehood and disinformation as deliberate falsehood" (Stahl, 2006, p. 86), and mal-information as information "which is true, but intended to harm" (Hayward, 2025, p. 3). The emphasis on intent allows to bring in an emphasis on knowledge, as producing disinformation requires particular knowledges (and skills). Albeit scarce, in the disinformation literature, we find references to, for instance, the knowledge that the producers of disinformation have about journalistic practice (Chadwick and Stanyer, 2022, p. 14). For the case of public broadcasting, Aufderheide (2021, p. 231) makes a similar point: "Public broadcasting's decentralised structure has shown capacity for resilience, but it can also be exploited by those with knowledge of its arcane structures, awareness of market imperatives for local executives, and good-enough looking and sounding programming." Moreover, we find (some) references to the knowledge and skills required (by journalists) to counter disinformation, when, for instance, Larssen (2021, p. 210) writes: "Several journalists also argued that knowledge and competence regarding advanced fact-checking is unevenly distributed." But it is in the neighbouring field of propaganda studies, where the knowledge and skills of the propagandist are emphasised. In their *Propaganda & Persuasion* book, Jowett and O'Donnell (2014) refer to Bogart's (1995) study of the U.S. Information Agency, where the latter wrote the following:

> "Propaganda is an art requiring special talent. It is not mechanical, scientific work. Influencing attitudes requires experience, area knowledge, and instinctive 'judgment of what is the best argument for the audience.' No manual can guide the propagandist. He must have 'a good mind, genius, sensitivity, and knowledge of how that audience thinks and reacts'" (Bogart, 1995, pp. 195–196, cited in Jowett and O'Donnell, 2014, p. 5).

The second element in Hameleers' (2023, p. 2) definition of disinformation is the presence of one or several strategic objectives that motivate the deployment of disinformation; the interrelated notions of harm and gain feature prominently in Hameleers's work. Harm is sometimes reconfigured as potential harm, or as threat, as in Pavliuc *et al.*'s (2023, p. 1) reference to disinformation "as a threat to public discourse, democratic decision making, society's cohesion". Bennett and Livingston (2018, p. 135) write that "[t]he intention is often to create irreparable breaches in democratic public spheres that have traditionally been based on enlightenment values and reasoned debate." The second element, gain, can be situated at economic, political and social levels (see Hameleers, 2023, p. 3ff). Here, knowledge mostly features as one of the realms where harm can be done; for instance, "established media, journalists, and other elites that are responsible for disseminating knowledge are delegitimised as part of populism's blame-shifting label" (Hameleers, 2025, p. 77). Similarly, Nieminen (2024, p. 126)—analysing what he calls the "conventional wisdom on disinformation"—explains that in this model disinformation is seen to undermine "the validity of expert knowledge and the truthfulness of quality news media." In turn, this then becomes connected to the harm done to democracy, as Čatipović (2024, p. 4163) argues: "Fake news potentially leads to misconceptions and inequality in political knowledge, and this is detrimental to democracy."

The third element in Hameleers' (2023, p. 2) definition of disinformation, stating that "[i]ts practices of deception may range from the decontextualization of known facts to the fabrication of alternative narratives," refers to the variability of disinformation practices, at the level of the degree of truthfulness. Hayward (2025, p. 9) makes a similar argument when writing that "disinformation can operate without necessarily involving any direct factual inaccuracy by relying, instead, on the selective emphasis of certain considerations and suppression of others." As Taylor (2024, p. 172) summarises it briefly: "[C]ontent is often unlikely to be wholly false." This diversity has led to the production of typologies, such as, for instance, Wardle and Derakhshan's (2017, p. 17) seven types of misinformation and disinformation. This debate also allows to raise the possibility that non-hegemonic knowledge is being repressed, as Kuo and Marwick's (2021, p. 2) work suggests, for instance, when they write that "examples of multiple racial realities exemplify how different forms of 'truth' and knowledge have always co-existed with uneven impacts and values."

Variation also exists at the level of the systematic nature of disinformation practices. Starbird's (2019, p. 449) brief discussion about the difference between communications and campaigns already demonstrates the range of possibilities, with Starbird focussing on the latter when they write: "[T]he key is not to determine the truth of a specific post or tweet, but to understand how it fits into a larger disinformation campaign." Similarly, Bennett and Livingston (2018) argue for looking "less at isolated examples of 'fake news' and paying more attention to how they and other disruptive processes fit into larger 'disinformation orders'", still acknowledging the existence of these different levels of systematicity.

Finally, there is variation in terms of the diversity of actors—and actants, to use an actor network theory concept—where disinformation can be produced by state actors, (un)civil society actors, companies, but also ordinary people—what some, with a touch of irony, have called the democratisation of propaganda (Carpentier, 2022, p. 74; Woolley and Howard, 2018, p. 191). In Giusti and Piras's (2021, p. 7) words (writing about 'fake news'): "[A]lmost anyone with access to technologies and social media can forge fake news (although her/his social status and know-how can affect the reach and impact of the fake news' spread)." In addition, also non-human actants, for instance in the form of bots—software applications that run automated tasks—are among the many actors. This has led Hillebrandt (2021, p. 1) to suggest the concept of the assemblage, to capture this diversity of networked actors, where disinformation can be regarded "as a communicative phenomenon consisting of an 'assemblage' of people, practices, values, and technologies."

Disinformation studies have been subjected to a series of critiques, two of which are important in the context of this chapter. A first set of critiques fundamentally challenge the field's paradigmatic alliance with positivism and realism. For instance, Sheehan (2023, p. 51) firstly argues that "[t]he old hypodermic needle model is resurfacing in disinformation theory, insofar as there is anything in the way of theory there." Sheehan (2023, p. 51) then continues that:

> "A whole generation seems to know nothing of decades of debate about positivism, neo-positivism, and post-positivism, in which it has become clear that a fact is not such a simple thing as they seem to believe it is, making the current emphasis on facts and fact-checking seem somewhat simpleminded."

A more elaborate paradigmatic critique can be found in Hutchings's (2025) analysis of four leading counter-disinformation units. He too points to the "positivist epistemologies embracing empirically demonstrable truth/falsehood distinctions" (Hutchings, 2025, p. 567), but he also lists several practical consequences of this paradigmatic choice, namely the difficulties faced by "true/false paradigms" in handling particular discursive elements, e.g., irony, genre specificities and indirect speech structures (Hutchings, 2025, p. 568). Deploying a broader scope, Hutchings (2025, p. 567) argues that counter-disinformation strategies encounter tensions between capitalism and democracy, "truth as scientific rationality and as normative value, […] impartial observation and civic participation, […] [and] the dispassionate, formal idioms of experts and the affective vibrancy of popular, informal registers." Finally, he also points to "deceit's centrality to democracy itself" (Hutchings, 2025, p. 567), an argument that has already been made by Keane (1991, p. 101) when he pointed to the historical prevalence of "the nasty business of lying in politics," including democratic politics (see also Arendt, 1972).

A second set of critiques—which returns us to the discussion on the many variations of disinformation, and its actors—raises concerns about the reductionist construction of the audience and the people in disinformation studies. These constructions often refer to the problematic nature of the levels of political knowledge of ordinary people. For instance, Loveless (2021, p. 65) writes: "Yet, and still, Americans and Europeans continue to show low levels of both political knowledge and sophisticated processing skills." This also applies to the ordinary people's technological knowledge, as this citation from Zelenkauskaitė (2022, p. 42) illustrates: "Because general public users lack both knowledge about bot technologies and the ability to recognise disinformation and their actors, hiding in online spaces is guaranteed." Even though there are exceptions, and some authors express confidence in ordinary people deploying what Hayward (2025, p. 10) calls epistemic diligence, the risk remains that, as Nieminen (2024, p. 126) argues, "people are regarded as vulnerable to disinformation because they suffer from a cognitive disorder or 'knowledge gap' that must be corrected or cured by media literacy (education)."

Moreover, the reductionist construction of the people in disinformation studies also risks discrediting participatory processes, and perversely supporting power re-centralisation processes, strengthening elite positions and disempowering ordinary people. One element here is the use of the dark participation concept, as illustrated by Zelenkauskaitė (2022, p. 131) when she writes that "the forces behind dark participation reconfigure our expectations about what we need to understand within the online world." As Carpentier, Melo, and Ribeiro (2019, p. 25) write in their introductory essay of the special journal issue on *Rescuing Participation*, the discrediting of the notion of participation "might produce democratic harm", while "many of the problematic social practices captured by this bad/dark participation concept might not be considered participatory on the grounds that they are antagonistic forms of (symbolic) violence." A second element is Kuo and Marwick's (2021) already-mentioned argument that the legitimate knowledge of disempowered or oppressed social groups risks being articulated as disinformation, as it does not align with hegemonic knowledge. Here, we have to return to the idea that also knowledge is a discursive construction, and object of political struggle, where the concept of disinformation (or 'fakeness') can become weaponised in this political

struggle. Finally, a third element is the rarity of references to wisdom in disinformation studies. One exceptional example here is the *Wisdom of the Crowd* paper by Marda and Milan (2018), where the authors state that there are only "limited opportunities for citizens, and individual users above all, to have a say in the fake news controversy, beyond raising concern and expressing public outrage" (Marda and Milan, 2018, p. 13). In response, Marda and Milan (2018, p. 13) argue that "[p]articipatory governance in the realm of the digital should be redesigned in view of tilting the balance of power towards the user," in order to activate these forms of collective wisdom.

5. A first (re)validation of knowledge (and wisdom): Literacy

The reductionist representations of knowledge and wisdom that circulate in and through data fetishist discourses and disinformation discourses are countered by a series of knowledge (and wisdom) validating discourses. The first one focusses on literacy—as is exemplified here by one particular branch, media and information literacy (MIL)—which entails the circulation and distribution of knowledge. Even though we should be careful not to position ordinary people as fundamentally and endlessly lacking knowledge, as was mentioned in the previous section, the need for education and literacy remains.

MIL has a multiplicity of definitions, as, illustrated, for instance, by the first annex of Grizzle *et al.* (2013, pp. 180-184); however, the UNESCO (2013) definition—a type that Dadakhonov (2024, p. 119) labels as knowledge-based definition—is particularly relevant. For UNESCO (2013, p. 17),

> "MIL is defined as a set of competencies that empowers citizens to access, retrieve, understand, evaluate and use, create, as well as share information and media content in all formats, using various tools, in a critical, ethical and effective way, in order to participate and engage in personal, professional and societal activities."

Moreover, MIL helps to "empower people, communities and nations to participate in and contribute to global knowledge societies" and to "develop critical thinking and problem solving, while also increasing collaboration and participation" (UNESCO, 2013, p. 17).

This definition's emphasis on knowledge acquisition, through the development of "critical thinking and problem solving" explicitly aims to move away from citizens being reduced to "consumer[s] of information and media content", but instead advocates a citizen subject identity which consists of being a "responsible information seeker, knowledge creator and innovator" (UNESCO, 2013, p. 17). While only limited attention is spent on the constructed nature of knowledge, knowledge features prominently in the competences of this framework (together with "Rights / Attitudes / Values" and "Skills", UNESCO, 2013, p. 47), and in the one of the three[12] framework components, the "Creation, utilization and monitoring of information and media content", which is

[12] The other two components are "Recognizing the demand for, being able to search for, being able to access and retrieve information and media content" and "Understanding, assessment and evaluation of information and media" (UNESCO, 2013, p. 57). They too refer to knowledge, but these references feature more implicitly in the two other component descriptions.

defined "as the ability to master the production knowhow of information, media content and new knowledge and effectively communicate with others" (UNESCO, 2013, p. 57).

The UNESCO MIL framework demonstrates the frequent privileging of formal educational structures and teaching practices. UNESCO (2013, p. 48), for instance, explicitly "acknowledges that teachers, as knowledge gatekeepers, play a crucial role in building knowledge societies." This statement is strengthened through a visual representation, which has been included here as well (as Figure 2). But as Haider and Sundin (2022, p. 30) write, "[l]earning does not only happen in goal-oriented activities within the frameworks provided by dedicated learning institutions, such as schools and, to some extent, libraries, but also outside those settings in everyday life or at work. Yet, often, research regarding media and information literacy focuses on precisely these formal educational settings."

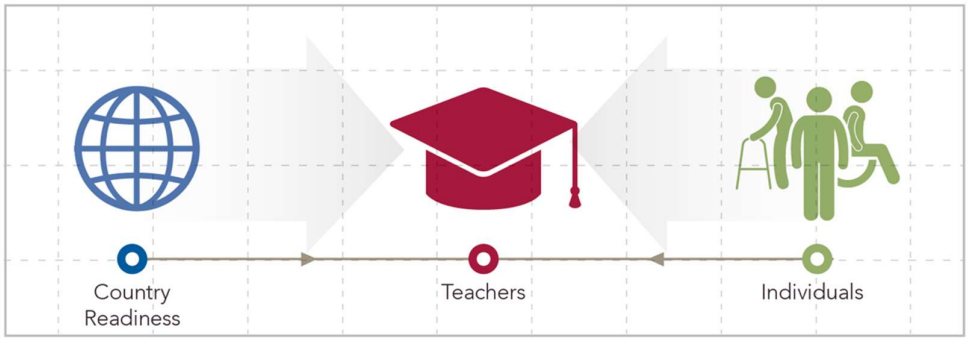

Figure 2: A visual representation of teacher centrality in the UNESCO MIL framework
Source: UNESCO, 2013, p. 48

Haider and Sundin's (2022) argumentation allows emphasising the need for the inclusion of informal practices in creating knowledge and enhancing wisdom, keeping in mind that we learn through experience, where the confrontation with practice also allows us to become wise(r). Everyday life experiences, in individual but also in informally organised contexts, are as vital as formal learning environments (see Figure 3). After all, to quote Pateman (1970, p. 105): "[W]e do learn to participate by participating."

Secondly, in more traditional approaches to MIL, we often see a focus on how media systems work, how technology works, and how representation works. Sometimes it seems that content and structures are the main 'heroes' of these educational narratives. Of course, these issues are vital, and should be part of knowledge sharing, also when it concerns AI, data, and media as a whole. But there is again a need to broaden the scope and include a focus on process and practice, including participatory practice—focusing on what people actually do, and how this performativity intersects with knowledge and wisdom.

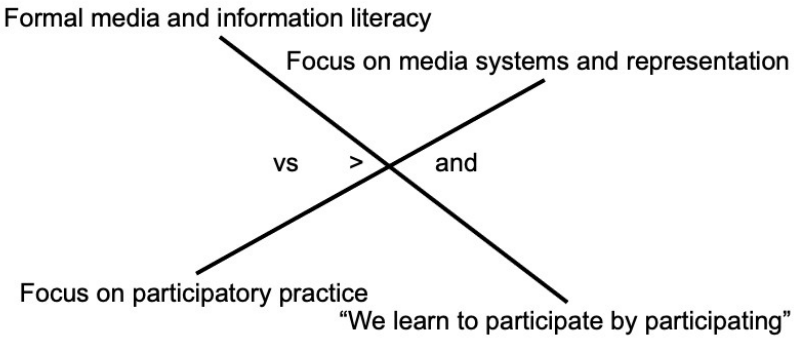

Figure 3: Dimensions of media and information literacy
Source: Carpentier, 2025

In the UNESCO (2013) MIL framework, we can find—despite the teacher centrality—ample attention for participation and creation, even though participation is sometimes defined as 'taking part' in what the framework consistently labels as the 'knowledge society', shying away from the stronger power sharing definition of participation (Carpentier, 2011a; 2011b). At the same time, we should keep in mind that the formal education system, with its many hierarchies, is not completely vertically structured, but also provides opportunities for student participation. Still, the UNESCO (2013) MIL framework is particularly relevant because it is an illustration of how the active role of citizens in the creation of (new) knowledge can be acknowledged and validated through models of literacy enhancement. In this particular framework, MIL is seen to support the ability to "Create and produce new information, media content or knowledge for a specific purpose in an innovative, ethical and creative manner" (UNESCO, 2013, p. 59).

As the previous citation illustrates, the UNESCO (2013) MIL framework places considerable emphasis on the articulation of a participatory ethics into MIL, which also generates a bridge between knowledge and wisdom (through the importance attached to the implementation of (ethical) knowledge). More broadly, there are many building blocks for the development of this participatory ethics which can be considered. Carpentier (2025) suggests a variety of these building blocks. First, Habermas' ideal speech situation (1984)—and discourse ethics as a later development (Habermas, 1990)—offers one of them, knowing that this model, with its focus on equal (communicative) power relations, is deeply utopian (which strengthens its relevance, and does not weaken it). Habermas' more consensual approach could be extended—according to Carpentier (2025)—to avoid underestimating the importance of conflict, and more in particular, agonistic (or peaceful) conflict (Mouffe, 2005), which allows for the integration of different other models that argue against the use of violence (see, e.g., Canetti, 1960, p. 222), and in favour of respectful practices, procedures, institutions and communications. Another building block is the intersection of a participatory ethics with an ethics of truth, without foreclosing the contingencies and constructed nature of truth (see also, e.g., Zagrebelsky, 2009). This is exemplified by Said's (1996, p. 85ff) "speaking truth to power", and Foucault's interpretation of parrhesia. In the latter case, Foucault (2010, p. 66, emphasis in original) translates

parrhesia as veridicity, and describes it in the following terms: "*Parrēsia* is the free courage by which one binds oneself in the act of telling the truth. Or again, *Parrēsia* is the ethics of truth-telling as an action which is risky and free." A final building block is the intersection of a participatory ethics with an ethics of care (Gilligan, 1982), focusing on the collective care and responsibility for the participatory process itself, the care of all participants for all participants, and the care for the broader participatory culture.

This discussion on ethics brings us to the necessary connection of literacy, teaching, knowledge and wisdom. hooks's (2010) book *Teaching Critical Thinking: Practical Wisdom* is a—still rare—example of this articulation, where hooks (2010, p. 185) relates wisdom to "our capacity to live fully and well" and to practice, where it becomes necessary to oppose "any system of education or culture that would have us be passive recipients of ways of knowing" and to acknowledge that "knowledge cannot be separated from experience." Simultaneously, hooks articulates wisdom with ethics, as she argues for the articulation of knowledge (sharing) with an ethics of compassion, a rejection of the deployment of knowledge to dominate others and the need to grasp "the opportunity to use knowledge in ways that positively transform the world we live in", driven by the "experience of wonder" and the "ability to be awed, excited, and inspired by ideas" (hooks, 2010, p. 188).

6. The second (re)validation of knowledge (and wisdom): Situated and participatory knowledge

Apart from the educational field, knowledge is also produced (and communicated) in a variety of other knowledge production centres, including—but not limited to—those in the academic field. The discursive-material practices of these different knowledge production centres, with, for instance, their many publications that condense knowledge, are incessant performances of the relevance of knowledge. At the same time, as Lyotard (1985, p. 37) argued in his *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, the legitimation of knowledge cannot rely on a discursive consensus (over the so-called grand narrative): "The grand narrative has lost its credibility, regardless of what mode of unification it uses, regardless of whether it is a speculative narrative or a narrative of emancipation." As a consequence, knowledge producing centres cannot rely exclusively on their self-legitimation of knowledge, but are, as part of a semi-autonomous field, forced to engage in—internal and external—political struggles over what is legitimate knowledge. To use Lyotard's (1985, p. 40) formulation: "[S]cience plays its own game; it is incapable of legitimating the other language games. [...] But above all, it is incapable of legitimating itself [...]."

Even when Lyotard (1985, p. 14) takes a pessimistic stance, in claiming that unequal power relations will continue to exist ("Access to data is, and will continue to be, the prerogative of experts of all stripes. The ruling class is and will continue to be the class of decision makers"), these political struggles have opened spaces for resistance against elitist expert cultures. Fiske (1989, p. 116) emphasises the pleasure that these opportunities generate: "[T]he pleasures in the failures or inadequacies of science [...] are the pleasures of seeing the dominant, controlling explanations of the world at the point of breakdown, pleasures that are particularly pertinent to those who feel barred from participating in controlling discourses of any sort, scientific or not." A more negative evaluation of these resistances is discussed in the section on disinformation,

where populist projects set up a chain of equivalence of different elites—including academic experts—in opposition to the subject position of the people (and its new representatives), in order to (try to) establish new political regimes.

Deploying a participatory perspective—focussing on the equalisation of power relations (Carpentier, 2011a; 2011b)—in relation to knowledge production, allows to circumvent an exclusive emphasis on the problematisation of these political struggles over legitimate knowledge. A first concept that allows to validate differences and to decentre legitimate knowledge production is situated knowledge. Haraway (1988, p. 581) uses this concept to argue for "a doctrine of embodied objectivity that accommodates paradoxical and critical feminist science projects: Feminist objectivity means quite simply situated knowledge." Later, in the same article, she writes:

> "We seek not the knowledges ruled by phallogocentrism (nostalgia for the presence of the one true Word) and disembodied vision. We seek those ruled by partial sight and limited voice-not partiality for its own sake but, rather, for the sake of the connections and unexpected openings situated knowledges make possible. Situated knowledges are about communities, not about isolated individuals. The only way to find a larger vision is to be somewhere in particular" (Haraway, 1988, p. 590).

As Rolin (2020, p. 216) explains, "[s]ituated knowledge, broadly understood, is the view that the social location of the inquirer is of epistemic importance." The acknowledgement of the particularity of knowledge through its groundedness in social contexts allows resisting the "god trick of seeing everything from nowhere" (Haraway, 1988, p. 581), but instead validates local communities, and their "local knowledge and social experiences that are specific to the social location in question" (Rolin, 2020, p. 217). This also produces opportunities for disempowered or oppressed social groups to contest hegemonic knowledge constructions, and to acknowledge a context-dependent multiplicity of knowledges, while care needs to be taken to avoid the "romanticizing and/or appropriating the vision of the less powerful while claiming to see from their position" (Haraway, 1988, p. 584). Or, to use Harding's (1991, p. 5—emphasis in original) words, from a (standpoint) feminist position: "Women need sciences and technologies that are *for* women and that are for women in *every class, race, and culture*." Still, it remains vital to acknowledge the objectivity and truthfulness of situated knowledge, as Rolin (2020, p. 223) formulates it: "That knowledge claims are situated does not mean that they cannot be objective."

This brings us to the discussions that acknowledge the potentialities of ordinary people to contribute to knowledge production. More than the notion of the people, Negri and Hardt's (2004) concept of the multitude captures the promise of collective empowerment. For Negri and Hardt (2004, p. 99), the multitude is defined through the articulation of singularities—with a singularity being a "social subject whose difference cannot be reduced to sameness, a difference that remains different"—where the "plural singularities of the multitude thus stand in contrast to the undifferentiated unity of the people." Still, the multitude is not "fragmented, anarchical, or incoherent" (Negri and Hardt, 2004, p. 99), but capable of collective action, also in relation to knowledge. They write: "The task is to discover a way in common, involving men, women, workers, migrants, the poor, and all the elements of the multitude, to administer the legacy of

humanity and direct the future production of food, material goods, knowledge, information, and all other forms of wealth" (Negri and Hardt, 2004, p. 310).

A similar validation of ordinary people is captured by the wisdom of crowds concept, popularised by—amongst others—Surowiecki (2004), but with its first traces in Aristotle's politics (Landemore, 2012, p. 1). Even when, as Landemore (2012, p. 2) argues, Aristotle's emphasis on deliberative processes is very different than the large-scale "forms of judgment and preference aggregation procedure" that the more recent literature highlights, the wisdom of the crowds (or collective wisdom) concept entails a validation of the judgement—or knowledge application—of ordinary people. While some have pointed to the risks of collective derailments (e.g., Mandeville's (1989) *The Fable of the Bees* from 1714), one of the arguments to defend the wisdom of crowds (e.g., Page, 2008, p. 314) is grounded in cognitive diversity, which "improves performance at problem solving and predictive tasks" (see also Suiter *et al.*, 2016; Courant, 2020) This also grounds—in democratic decision-making—the importance allocated to deliberation, in a variety of practices, ranging from citizen assemblies to people's juries in the legal field. Landemore (2012, p. 13) summarises this argument as follows:

> "Deliberative synergies are supposed to appear when many people pool their information and arguments, thus guiding each other to the most accurate picture of the situation, and/or the best argument or 'rational consensus,' and/or the 'global optimum' of a given situation [...]."

This brings us to the last concept, or practice, which is participatory research, which facilitates the sharing of power between different types of actors (including scholars and ordinary people). As Doudaki and Carpentier (2021, p. 6) point out, several (academic) traditions have been engaged with participatory modes of collaborating with societal groups and communities. These research strands and their related projects, encountered in a variety of fields—including development, media and cultural institutions, and the environment (with the considerable presence of citizen science in the latter case, see Dickinson and Bonney, 2012)—have a critical, engaged and change-oriented agenda, involving non-academic partners in the research process, joining forces with local communities and civil society in their efforts for social change (Endres *et al.*, 2009; Kemmis *et al.*, 2014; Raphael, 2019). Their focus allows, under certain conditions, for maximalist forms of participation.

One such example is (participatory) action research (see also Chapter 6), where knowledge is largely evaluated on the basis of "whether the resulting action solves problems for the people involved and increases community self-determination" (Kindon *et al.*, 2010, p. 14). Participatory action research is generally described as:

> "a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes ... It seeks 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" (Reason and Bradbury, 2006, p. 1).

Participatory action research brings together different strands of research and theoretical traditions from the social sciences and humanities, ranging from, e.g., Freire's (2018/1970) approach to emancipatory education, based on community-led processes that support people's involvement in knowledge production and social transformation; Fals Borda's (2006) engagement with emancipatory research that fosters social change; and diverse approaches to development that reject a top-down process and argue for people's involvement as agents of their own development (Chambers, 1994).

7. Conclusion

Even though knowledge and wisdom are floating signifiers in their own right, this chapter focussed on the discursive-material struggle over the societal importance of data and information on the one hand, and knowledge and wisdom on the other. Arguably, the fascination, and even enchantment, with data and information—translated into a series of processes, e.g. their commodification and their weaponisation—necessitates a critical analysis that attempts to understand the reversal of the hierarchy of importance, at the expense of knowledge and especially wisdom. One tool to allow for this critical analysis is data fetishism, whose strength lies in its capacity to pinpoint data fetishist processes and the attempts to hegemonise them, but which should not be used as a blanket concept pretending to capture all contemporary usages of data (and information). Equally important is the development of critical disinformation studies (see Kuo and Marwick, 2021), as a tool to overcome (dis)information's reductionist articulation through basic realist and positivist paradigms. What these critical positions share is a—sometimes implicit—argument for the revalidation of knowledge and wisdom, to become (articulated as) entangled with data and information, at the level of production, content and reception.

Significant counter-movements do exist, in the form of literacy discourses and articulations of knowledge as situated and participatory, even though they do not always escape from fetishist incorporation attempts, for instance, where learning becomes instrumentalised to legitimate the societal significance of data and information. In some cases—building on Nieminen's (2024) argument—knowledge acquisition becomes a necessary-to-attain but impossibly-to-reach horizon in order to cope with the challenges of the 'data and information society', only to further disempower ordinary citizens. Still, these counter-movements have managed to develop more extensive and sophisticated perspectives, also about the need to acknowledge the existence of vast reservoirs of more diverse knowledge and wisdom, including knowledge (and wisdom) about data and information themselves.

This is also where participation becomes important, while at the same time it gets entrapped in a series of paradoxes. Participatory processes can activate and validate existing knowledge reservoirs beyond the confinements of hegemonic knowledge centres, but they can also facilitate disempowered or oppressed social groups to have their voices (and knowledges) heard. But participation in knowledge production is obstructed by populist ideologies, which articulate intellectual elites as the Other, impeding the necessary dialogues between these intellectual elites and ordinary citizens. Moreover, knowledge acquisition processes are often reduced to top-down formal teaching processes, leaving insufficient space for forms of emancipatory

education (Freire, 2018/1970), reducing opportunities for participation in the assemblages of the educational system itself and downplaying the importance of wisdom. Finally, as we will discuss in Chapter 2, stupidity is a complex and highly political notion, but its existence needs to be acknowledged, not to stigmatise particular societal groups, but to combine the public validation of knowledge and wisdom with the facilitation of more balanced knowledge exchanges.

2
On stupidity

1. Introduction

Stupidity is a term frequently used in everyday language, and as a common-sense concept, its meaning appears to be clear and straightforward. At the same time, stupidity, at different points in time and with different intensities, has also been object of academic inquiry. One notable example is the role this concept played in the (earlier stages of the) development of psychology. For instance, Hoffbauer (1808) distinguished between two forms of mental deficiency, namely '*Blodsinn*' (imbecility) and '*Dummheit*' (stupidity), resulting in the following description of both subject positions:

> "[T]he stupid person is more liable than the imbecile to form erroneous decisions; the latter experiences great difficulty in bringing himself to any conclusion […] the stupid person sometimes judges very correctly on subjects to which his attention has been strongly applied; occasionally he surpasses, in this respect, those of superior intelligence. When he judges wrongly, it is through neglect of some of the considerations which ought to have formed the groundwork of his judgment, and he will say, in order to excuse himself, that 'he never should have dreamed of this or that circumstance.' To the imbecile, on the contrary, the most simple act of judgment is difficult." (Hoffbauer, 1808, pp. 30-31, translated by Ray, 1853, p. 80)

This intellectual history of the concept of stupidity—and related notions such as the subject position of the stupid person—demonstrates not only how its meaning has changed over time, but also how it is a political concept, with the ability to generate or maintain hierarchies and even antagonistic relationships in society. Despite this conceptual contingency, we need to acknowledge that the signifier of stupidity has some degree of stability, as the first section of this chapter will show, with meanings that relate to a lack of sense, a lack of intelligence, idiocy, naïveté, ignorance, a lack of sophistication, or "the antithesis of enlightened thinking" (Sokoloff, 2025, p. 163), positioning stupidity at the opposite end of knowledge. Still, as will be elaborated further on, the relation of stupidity and knowledge is not straightforwardly antithetical or oppositional.

The second section in this chapter then retraces the role of stupidity in the Enlightenment and democratic politics, which can also be seen as sedimented political projects to counter stupidity and validate ordinariness (with its situated knowledges, see Haraway, 1988, and Chapter 1), while at the same time creating mild hierarchies of leadership and expertise. In the following third section, the different forms of resistance against these hierarchies are discussed, including both populist and emancipatory forms of resistance.[13] The final section then examines the violence inherent in the deployment of stupidity as a signifier, as manifested in (the intersection of) totalitarian, colonial and genocidal practices.

[13] This also implies that we are careful to accept Mouffe's (2018) call for a "left populism".

2. Constructions of stupidity

The meaning of the signifier stupidity—as already touched upon in the introduction—combines a series of partially overlapping layers, sometimes articulating stupidity with the absence of knowledge, but also with the rejection of ignorance and with insensitivity.

2.1 Stupidity as cognitive failing and as absence of relation to knowing

Stupidity is often described as a lack of intelligence, which is connected to underdeveloped cognitive skills, and which scientists have been testing and measuring with instruments such as IQ tests (Goddard, 1914; Gould, 1996/1981). It is also seen as lack of critical thinking or the inability to attain and apply knowledge, which is often connected to a general lack of wisdom (see Aczel, Palfi and Kekecs, 2015; Engel, 2016; see also Chapter 1).

Several authors articulate stupidity with a lack of knowledge or judgment. Engel (2016, p. 3) explains that stupidity is expressed through people's incapability "of properly navigating the domains of reasoning, planning, problem solving, abstract thinking, complex ideas, and learning from experience". What is important, for Engel (2016, p. 3), is that "these peoples' actions are often devoid of mature judgment or reflective thinking", which echoes to a certain extent Kant's definition of stupidity as "[t]he lack of the power of judgment" (Kant, 1998, p. 268), where judgement is the "intellectual faculty […] of discerning whether something is an instance of the rule or not" (Kant, 2007, p. 306). Similarly, for Golob (2019, p. 562), stupidity is "a distinctive form of cognitive failing." Horkheimer and Adorno (2002, p. 214) associate stupidity with a deficiency in learning and knowledge, arguing that it is expressed, among other ways, through the aimless repetition of actions and responses that have already been shown to be futile. This position relates stupidity with the inability to learn from the past or from one's failures, the inability to act on the basis of prior knowledge, and to avoid action that has already been tested and failed. So, in this regard, stupid is the one who does not use knowledge or the one who fails to learn. Other scholars have defined stupidity or related it to dim-wittedness, foolishness and the construction of false problems (see, de Beistegui, 2022); superstitious thinking, dogmatism and fanaticism; lack of emotional or social skills, inattention, thoughtlessness, lack of practicality or stubbornness (see Aczel, Palfi and Kekecs, 2015).

Stupidity is also articulated with nonsense, with that which lacks sense, meaning, coherence or a foundation in reason. [14] As the antithesis of rational or reasoned thinking, stupidity is seen as obstructing debate and deliberation, hindering the production of knowledge. According to Keane and Razer (2014, p. 2), contemporary forms of stupidity are found in the declining relevance of fact-based conversation coupled with the increasing prominence of opinion that blocks argumentative

[14] In Dostoevsky's (2003) *The Idiot* from 1869, kindness and compassion become articulated with irrational behaviour and idiocy, thus adding a moral dimension to this discussion.

reasoning: "Facts do not matter. They have been eclipsed by opinion", which is considered "empowering" and helps to construct high self-esteem.[15]

While some approaches to stupidity focus on biological factors and inherent cognitive limitations, others associate stupidity with a lack of elegance, refinement, sensibility and intelligence, qualities typically cultivated through education. This is described in Aristotle's *agroikos,* the individual who is stubborn and ignorant, and who is insensible, or insensitive (*anaisthétos*) to these qualities (Ronell, 2002, p. 40).

Still, the relation of stupidity and knowledge is not straightforward. Deleuze (1994/1968, p. 151) argues that stupidity (together with cowardice, cruelty and baseness) "are not simply corporeal capacities or traits of character or society; they are structures of thought as such". Also, as Ronell (2002, p. 5) expounds:

> "stupidity does not allow itself to be opposed to knowledge in any simple way, nor is it the other of thought. It does not stand in the way of wisdom, for the disguise of the wise is to avow unknowing. […] the question of stupidity is not satisfied with the discovery of the negative limit of knowledge; it consists, rather, in the absence of a relation to knowing."

This "absence of a relation to knowing" forms part of stupidity's force and perseverance, as it directly disrupts reason-based thinking, and the systematicity and scientificity that knowledge production requires. By ignoring reason or prior knowledge, stupidity does not abide to law or episteme and becomes immune to science. Moreover, by not adhering to the norms of any discipline, it stays undisciplined and unbounded. Attesting to the force of stupidity, Bonhoeffer (2010/1951, p. 43) maintained:

> "Against stupidity we are defenseless. Neither protests nor the use of force accomplish anything here; reasons fall on deaf ears; facts that contradict one's prejudgment simply need not be believed — in such moments the stupid person even becomes critical — and when facts are irrefutable, they are just pushed aside as inconsequential, as incidental."

2.2 Stupidity as denial of ignorance and doubt

Socrates' maieutic method of reaching the truth was grounded in the conscious confrontation of knowledge with its limits, and the ignorance it reveals, while stupidity tends to ignore or reject such ignorance. Reflecting on the 'stupidity of the writer', Pynchon (1984, pp. 15-16) urged for the familiarisation with one's ignorance as the path to knowledge:

> "Everybody gets told to write about what they know. The trouble with many of us is that at earlier stages of life we think we know everything — or to put it

[15] Breton argues that the a priori discrediting of opinion, as a domain that (co)produces knowledge, is problematic. Reflecting on Aristotle's three domains of knowledge—"demonstrative science (analytics), reasoning from probable premises (dialectics and rhetoric) and lastly production of fiction (poetics)" (Breton, 2007, p. 116)—he explains that dialectics, and even more so rhetoric, use the formation of opinion as their tool.

> more usefully, we are often unaware of the scope and structure of our ignorance. […] So as a corollary to writing about what we know, maybe we should add getting familiar with our ignorance […]."

Stupidity's denial of ignorance is also linked to (over)confidence (see Aczel, Palfi and Kekecs, 2015; Sternberg,1998). In this regard, stupidity is described as foolishness or as lack of rationality, which is not identical to the lack of intelligence (Aczel, Palfi and Kekecs, 2015), but being more closely associated with the lack of wisdom. According to Sternberg (1998; 2002), intelligent individuals—including powerful leaders—may be prone to unwise or foolish decisions and actions, driven by overconfidence in their skills and knowledge, which is fed by a sense of omniscience, omnipotence and invulnerability.

This sense of omniscience is expressed as certainty regarding one's overall knowledge, or as certainty in "absolute knowledge or a single way of explaining the world" (Keane and Razer, 2014, p. 8). As Ronell (2002, p. 43) argues, "[s]tupidity makes stronger claims for knowing and for the presencing of knowledge than rigorous intelligence would ever permit itself to make". Hence, in a way, stupidity's force lies in its solid truth claims, as it

> "paradoxically plays on the side of truth, or at least it poses itself as a replica of absolute knowledge: achieving closure, knowing its ground and meaning, stupidity is accomplice to the narcissism of systems that close in upon themselves as truth" (Ronell, 2002, p. 43).

In this context, stupidity denies doubt, which is among the foundations of science and knowledge, and rejects critique or negativity, adhering to a rather superfluous sense of positivity (Ehrenreich, 2009). Stupidity's performance through an affirmative mode of certainty closes down the space for doubt and for dialogic learning, disallowing for questions that permit the exploration of truth and the creation of knowledge. As Keane and Razer (2014, p. 300) explain:

> "Socrates wasn't particularly positive and neither was Descartes, whose methodical doubt forms an important part of all scientific method and discovery. In fact, anyone who ever eliminated ideas and hypotheses by looking at them and testing them is a doubter […]".

2.3 Stupidity as epistemic insensitivity

Scholars have articulated stupidity also with moral and ethical aspects, asking "to what extent is stupidity a matter of intellectual deficiency or a matter of ethical deficiency?" (Engel, 2016, p. 198). For Engel (2016, p. 200), "a distinct species of stupidity lies … in a failure to appreciate our epistemic goals". For the scholar, this constitutes a "kind of epistemic vice which consists in a failure to respect intellectual values" (Engel, 2016, p. 200), "a failure of sensitivity to the value of knowledge and to the value of truth" (Engel, 2016, p. 208), which he calls epistemic folly or foolishness, epistemic insensitivity or insensibility (see also Battaly, 2010; 2014, cited in Engel, 2016, p. 213).

Such conscious disregard for truth is expressed in what has Frankfurt described as the production of "bullshit" (Frankfurt, 2005; 2006). A bullshit statement

> "is grounded neither in a belief that it is true nor, as a lie must be, in a belief that it is not true. It is just this lack of connection to a concern with truth—this indifference to how things really are—that I regard as of the essence of bullshit" (Frankfurt, 2005, pp. 33-34)

The bullshitter, Frankfurt argues, "does not reject the authority of the truth, as the liar does, and oppose himself to it. He pays no attention to it at all" (Frankfurt, 2005, p. 61).[16]

This kind of indifference to truth and knowledge is not tied to a person's level of intelligence, and is reflected, for instance, in how, (populist) politicians (e.g., US President Donald Trump) strategically employ stupidity as a mode of unorthodox communication and deliberate suspension of reason (see e.g., Sheppard and Young, 2021; Svehla and Lyons, 2024).

3. Enlightenment, rationality and social change

The work of scholars arguing for the importance of reasoned, argument-based deliberation for well-functioning societies (see, e.g., Habermas, 1996) has its roots—to a large extent—in the legacy of the intellectual project of the Enlightenment, which aimed to curb ignorance, superstition, lack of information and knowledge, and create, through education and literacy, knowledge-based societies (Duignan, 2025; Israel, 2013) (which, in turn, was inspired by the work of ancient Greek and Roman philosophers, such as Aristotle, Socrates, Plato, or the Stoics).[17]

For Israel (2013, p. 7), the Enlightenment is "best characterized as the quest for human amelioration occurring between 1680 and 1800, driven principally by […] philosophy, science, and political and social science including the new [at that time] science of economics". For the scholar, the Enlightenment, "was the most important and profound intellectual, social, and cultural transformation of the Western world since the Middle Ages and the most formative in shaping modernity" (Israel, 2013, p. 3).

The Enlightenment, often described as the Age of Reason, aspired to the liberation of humankind (or, mankind) from ignorance through reason. It developed a pedagogy bringing reason to the centre of human civilisation, targeting stupidity, prejudice, and superstition, also trying to tame brutality and violence through reason (Duignan, 2025; Israel, 2013). The Enlightenment was not a uniform intellectual project, and scholars rather identify several Enlightenments, which were elite-driven phenomena of middle- and upper-class western male 'enlighteners'. Scholars have also identified more conservative and more radical strands and key figures within the Enlightenment movement. Conservative key figures (e.g., Voltaire) would target, for instance, the Catholic Church, but were not advocating for democratic reforms or for the equality of

[16] See also: Cohen, 2002; Maes and Schaubroeck, 2006; Olsson, 2008.
[17] For instance, as Bourke (2008, p. 10) argues, elaborating on the work of Edmund Burke, one of the key thinkers of the French Revolution: "Burke's indictment of Revolutionary democracy was indebted to enlightenment analyses of ancient systems of democratic government."

people. More radical philosophers (e.g., Diderot) would express claims for fairer and more equal societies, targeting, for instance, women's oppression or the exploitation of colonies (Israel, 2009; 2013; Keane and Razer, 2014, p. 295). Still, what united these diverse voices, was their shared emphasis on reason, coupled with the claims for the limitation of illiteracy, and the provision of access to education and knowledge, as key instruments to support human emancipation.

4. The people, democracy and stupidity

The project of the Enlightenment, with all its contradictions and shortcomings, was fundamental to the democratisation of societies (Israel, 2009), and to the establishment of reason-based debate and deliberation as key instruments of democratic organisation. Informed by these principles, a set of expectations emerged regarding what constitutes legitimate or illegitimate participation in politics, instructing also particular articulations of both the people and political leadership.

Much earlier than the Enlightenment, within the context of Athenian democracy, participation in public affairs was considered a responsibility of the citizen, articulated, among others, through the distinction of the private individual and the public person. This is also where the etymological roots of the word idiot can be found. In ancient (and in contemporary) Greek, *ιδιώτης* ("*idiotis*"), referred—and still refers—to the private person, to be distinguished from the public person, which is indicative of the value that was attributed in ancient Athenian Greece to the active role of the citizen (Sparkes, 1988): A good, useful citizen (*πολίτης*, "*politis*", i.e. a member of the polis) takes public action and engages in public affairs. Notwithstanding the problematics of the Athenian democracy, such as the maintenance of slavery and its narrow delimitation as to who counts as citizen, but also the difficulty or impossibility to distinguish between the private and the public, this premise constructed the citizen as a public subject—and not a private subject—who is expected to participate in public debate and deliberation.

Still, the subject position of the citizen remains an object of political struggle (see Carpentier and Wimmer, 2025). More decentralised or pluralist models of democracy articulate the citizen as an active agent, well-informed, intelligent and not ignorant, who has the skills and knowledge to participate as a full member of the polis, also by taking rational decisions and selecting competent leaders. Such capacities of the citizen have been cultivated throughout the history of the democratisation of education,[18] as described earlier in the Enlightenment project, as more people would get access to education, which would help enhancing their critical and reason-based thinking skills. The citizen as the intelligent subject who is the master of their own life is to a large extent product of this process.

[18] For Bondarenko and Kozulin (1991, p. 74), the democratisation of education "is based on the interaction of four major interrelated components: the democratization of the forms of educational activity, the democratization of the content of education, the humanization of the functioning of education institutions and extra-curricular student activities, and the democratization of the interactions of education with the other spheres of social life."

In contrast, non-democratic and highly centralised democratic models articulate the citizenry (or 'the people') as weak, incompetent, and—in some cases—stupid. The ancient Greek philosopher Plato, in his Republic (*Politeia*), dreamt of a king-philosopher and used the allegory of the ship of fools, creating the image of a ship with a dysfunctional crew (see Seymour, 1902), to illustrate the problems of governance in a political system not based on expert knowledge. In more contemporary scholarship, Schumpeter's model of competitive-elitist democracy (1994) questioned citizens' or commoners' ability to participate in political processes in a well-informed or rational manner, advocating instead for strong leadership, only kept in check through elections.

These arguments have been used over the centuries to restrict the democratic participation of women, people of colour or immigrants, often supported by scientific 'evidence', claiming, among other things, that these groups are less intelligent or rational, hence incapable of fully participating as citizens (let alone assuming leadership positions). For instance, American psychologist and eugenicist Goddard, who used broad-sweeping IQ tests to measure intellectual (dis)ability, asserted that democracy "means that the people rule by selecting the wisest, most intelligent and most human to tell them what to do to be happy. Thus democracy is a method for arriving at a truly benevolent aristocracy" (Goddard, 1919, p. 237, cited in Gould, 1996/1981, p. 191). For Goddard's standards and measurements, large parts of the populace did not qualify to be categorised as wise, intelligent or even adequately human, being incapable of managing their own lives. In such conditions of 'people's rule', democracy itself becomes irrelevant.

Even if such ideas of the people and their 'deserved' aristocratic leadership appear outdated today, still, the construction of (competent) democratic leadership—and the construction of the people, as mentioned earlier—continues to be an object of political struggle. The discursive struggles over competent leadership have been grounded in arguments regarding the need for both broad and in-depth knowledge concerning state or societal problems and challenges, coupled with sets of skills and competencies of governance, forward thinking and problem solving (Brinkmann, 2018; Cwalina and Falkowski, 2016). Leadership thus also becomes articulated with wisdom and ethics (see Chapter 1). In the context of a representative, meritocratic democracy, citizens then select the most competent or trustworthy members of the citizenry to represent them in the governance of their communities or countries (Zhiwei and Bell, 2025). Still, in practice, as meritocracy does not function in a social vacuum, arguments regarding the selection of leaders on the basis of excellence, disregarding social class, cultural or economic capital, tend to perpetuate inequalities (in opportunities), rather than limiting them (Crawford, 2010). Such approaches to participation in institutionalised politics articulate visions or models of democratic participation restricted to few experts, creating restrictive or narrow frameworks of what constitutes both competent leadership and competent citizenry.

Moreover, the expertise of experts may also be shortsighted or unwise. For instance, Horkheimer and Adorno (2002, p. 173) brought to the fore the "stupidity of cleverness" exhibited by experts who ignored the worrying signs of rising Nazism in Germany, out of short-sighted self-assurance:

> "One of the lessons of the Hitler period is the stupidity of cleverness. How many were the expert arguments with which Jews dismissed the likelihood of Hitler's

> rise, when it was already as clear as daylight. […] Clever people have always made things easy for barbarians, because they are so stupid. It is the well-informed, farsighted judgments, the prognoses based on statistics and experience, the observations which begin: 'I happen to be an expert in this field,' it is the well-founded, conclusive statements which are untrue. Hitler was against intellect and humanity. But there is also an intellect which is against humanity: it is distinguished by well-informed superiority."

5. Defiance of (institutionalised political) knowledge

Contemporary societies are characterised by assemblages of diverse elites, able to mobilise equally diverse levels of control, and characterised by fluid and complex mutual relationships. Also, their relationship with knowledge is highly complex. At the same time, particular discourses—for instance, populism—articulate these diverse elite (subject) positions in one chain of equivalence, and place this chain in opposition to the people. Again, knowledge becomes implicated in these political struggles, as some of these responses to the debates around democratic leadership have been articulated through anti-intellectualism, denialism and conspiracy theories, which in turn, have been linked to stupidity, ignorance and lack of sophistication.

Anti-intellectualism has a long history, which can be traced back, for instance, to religion, and the Puritans' movement in 16th-17th century America (Hofstadter, 1963; Rigney, 1991), where literacy and education were seen as turning people away from God. Also, some of the romanticised ideas of Rousseau's 'noble savage' (Israel, 2012) echoed ideas of anti-intellectualism. In its contemporary forms, anti-intellectualism is defined as a "generalized mistrust of intellectuals and experts" (Merkley, 2020, p. 24) and is closely associated with the opposition to scientific and expert positions. Shogan (2007, p. 295) defines anti-intellectualism "as disparagement of the complexity associated with intellectual pursuits, and a rejection of the elitism and self-aware attitude of distinction that is commonly associated with intellectual life." Furthermore, Shogan (2007, p. 295) argued that anti-intellectualism had been adopted by Republican presidents in the USA as "a strategic response to the plebiscitary demands" aimed at "forging an intimate connection with the American public." This implies that this "conservative form of populism" (Shogan, 2007, p. 295) appeared much earlier than Donald Trump's presidency.

Anti-intellectualism has been used as an ideological tool by populist movements and leaders, sometimes framed as a claim to the people's right to participation in institutionalised politics without the 'barriers' of education or knowledge. Anti-intellectualism then appears as a form of resistance against labels of stupidity due to a perceived lack of knowledge or sophistication, legitimating one's right to reject elitism or avoid intellectual pursuits without being considered ignorant or stupid. (Right-wing) anti-intellectualism (Wodak, 2015) and the (primarily far-right) anti-systemic rejection of science, of epistemic and institutionalised knowledge, reflects populism's construction of a people-elite opposition, rejecting knowledge as a product of the elite. Such anti-intellectualism finds its expression in anti-science and science denialism, as was manifested, for instance, in the anti-vaccination movement against COVID-19 (Grimwood, 2023; Hotez, 2023) and, more recently, in the administration of the USA's

health sector, under the Trump presidency and the tenure of Robert F. Kennedy Jr. as Secretary of Health and Human Services.

For Keane and Razer (2014, p. 309), contemporary populist political elites are "marvellous at taking science and making it into a matter of opinion rather than a rigorous system of doubt". Anti-intellectualism often manifests in public debate as an emphasis on emotion over rational thought, using feelings "or an unexamined urge" "as the foundation for action" (Keane and Razer, 2014, p. 309), which prevents complex societal problems from being addressed: "Opposition to rational thought informs progressive politics these days just as much as it does conservatives. 'Lived experience' and emotional storytelling is now seen as a foundation for Meaningful Social Change on all sides" (Keane and Razer, 2014, p. 309).

The above-mentioned notion of denialism, which is often coupled with anti-intellectualism, is "a refusal to change one's viewpoint even in the face of indisputable data" (Keane and Razer, 2014, p. 28). Denialism, according to Keane and Razer (2014), differs from doubt or scepticism, as "scepticism implies a willingness to accept evidence if it meets a certain standard. Denialism is a refusal to accept *any* evidence, no matter how good or epistemologically sound—unless it says what you want it to say" (Keane and Razer, 2014, p. 28–emphasis in original; see also, Specter, 2009).

Denialism and anti-intellectualism have been deployed to reject institutional knowledge and to offer alternative ways of understanding the world, which are neither scientific nor reason-based. These strategies are also used to create the idea (or illusion) of public participation in knowledge creation, of authentic knowledge creation and dissemination by the people, without the intervention of experts and other elites, which Carpentier (2011a, p. 26) has labelled the democratic-populist fantasy of participation. Anti-intellectualism thus functions as a strategy to counter stupidity claims and contributes to the populist democratisation of stupidity. When combined with the spread of conspiracy theories (Grimwood, 2023; Keane and Razer, 2014) which circulate easily in online spaces and help to construct spaces of like-minded individuals, denialism and anti-intellectualism are articulated as contributing to a reversed enlightenment and to people's authentic, real knowledge, exposing elites' apparatuses and re-establishing genuine truth.

These dynamics, which are not restricted to online spaces, point to more structural forces of segregation and dissociation, at the social, economic, political and ideological levels,[19] and provide fertile ground for populism, and for far-right rhetorics arguing for more authoritarian models of organising societies. For instance, Anderson (2021, p.11) links the rise of populism to the spread of "epistemic bubbles", which are "self-segregated network[s] for the circulation of ideas, resistant to correcting false beliefs." Populism, according to Anderson (2021, p.11), creates epistemic bubbles "(1) by promulgating biased group norms of information processing; and (2) by replacing empirically-oriented policy discourse with an identity-expressive discourse of group status competition." Especially in times of rising "populist authoritarian politics," such epistemic bubbles not only increase in number, but also show "increasing extremity, and asymmetrical distribution across political groups" (Anderson, 2021, p.11).

[19] These dynamics have not left also science and academia unaffected, as to how knowledge is produced and disseminated.

At the same time, one needs to be careful not to discredit all acts of defying institutionalised knowledge as rejecting knowledge per se or the methods and processes of attaining knowledge. We should rather appreciate the "playfulness and parodic capacities of active audiences" (Carpentier and Wimmer, 2025, p. 59), who perform stupidity to mock elites, as part of what Fiske (2011) labelled semiotic democracy (see also Chapter 5). These forms of resistance might also be understood as mechanisms to address power imbalances and reclaim some degree of control. In Chapter 1, we already cited Fiske's (1989, p. 116) argument—which is worth repeating here—namely, that

> "the pleasures in the failures or inadequacies of science [...] are the pleasures of seeing the dominant, controlling explanations of the world at the point of breakdown, pleasures that are particularly pertinent to those who feel barred from participating in controlling discourses of any sort, scientific or not."

It is an emancipatory mechanism, linked to the logic of *détournement*—defined by Debord (2005, p. 114) as "the flexible language of anti-ideology." Although these disruptions sometimes serve a desire to control others, as is the case with the pleasure derived from trolling (Munro, 2025), disruptions can also be activist and creative.

6. Destructive stupidity and authoritarianism

The literature on stupidity does not confine stupidity to (critiques on) the everyday practices of ordinary people. There is also ample attention for the instances where authoritarian regimes reject knowledge and take not only non-sensical, but also destructive decisions, suspending both reason and democracy. Out of the many examples in history, the case of Nazism is prominent, in the context of both the rejection of established knowledge regarding democratic social organisation and political practice, and the construction of its own forms of historic, cultural, political, scientific (e.g., biological and medical) knowledge in support and legitimation of the regime's imperialist and racist causes (Conroy, 2017; Dennis, 2012).

Intellectuals, such as Bonhoeffer (2010/1951), formulated fierce critiques against (the force of) Nazism's destructive stupidity in Germany, seeing stupidity as a moral failure related to the abandonment of independent, critical thought and uncritical acceptance of dominant ideologies and propaganda. Bonhoeffer saw a direct relation between increasing authoritarian power and people's abandonment or loss of intellectual autonomy through manipulation and propaganda. As he argued: "[E]very strong upsurge of power in the public sphere, be it of a political or of a religious nature, infects a large part of humankind with stupidity. […] The power of the one needs the stupidity of the other" (Bonhoeffer, 2010/1951, pp. 43-44).

Similarly, Musil, who sought to explain the hegemonisation of the Nazi project in 1930s Germany, argued that National Socialism "demands above all that the intellect completely assimilate and subordinate itself to the Movement" (Musil, 1978, p. 214), which, for Musil, assaulted the independence of intellectuals. For Musil, the Nazi project for "the renewal of the German mind" (1978, p. 214) resulted in "[p]olitics prescribing the law for the intellect" (p. 225). Even if scholars have critiqued Musil's

narrow approach to politics, questioning also his claims regarding the possibility of the intellect-politics separation, they have nonetheless acknowledged his contribution in addressing the destructive "conjunction of stupidity and politics" (Ronell, 2022, p. 22). What is also reflected in Musil's claims regarding the intellect–politics separation is the debate concerning which fields, spheres and actors are entitled to produce knowledge, and in Musil's view, politics is not one of them.

7. The criminalisation of stupidity

While Nazism' policies and actions were "against intellect and humanity" (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002, p. 173) and can be seen as major instances of destructive stupidity, they also produced constructions of Others as stupid, supported by medical science. These articulations grounded their racist rage of annihilation against Jews, but also against other groups such as Roma people, Jehovah's Witnesses, homosexual people and people with disabilities (Bergman, 2012).

Throughout history, the usages of the label stupidity, through the generation of positions of superiority, have supported and enabled the oppression of ethnic and social groups, for instance through colonialist projects (with slavery as one of their materialisations) and the destruction of indigenous peoples. In this context, the stigmatisation of stupidity as part of the Enlightenment's intellectual project—while promoting the democratisation of education and battling illiteracy—"operated alongside colonialism, dispossession of first peoples, the enslavement of conquered populations, genocide, and the creation of hierarchies denoting racial superiority and inferiority" (Sokoloff, 2025, p. 163). Also in the West itself, these hierarchies worked against women, peasants and working class people—who were articulated as uneducated, stupid, or, in the best case, as common people (Gould, 1996/1981).

As argued in Gould's fierce critique of *The Mismeasure of Man* (1996/1981), the 19th- and early-20th century work of highly influential American psychologists, medical doctors, eugenicists and statisticians, who attempted to measure human intelligence—or its opposite, human stupidity—was fundamentally discriminatory, racist and scientifically flawed. Gould (1996/1981, p. 57) contended that what "craniometry was for the nineteenth century, intelligence testing has become for the twentieth, when it assumed that intelligence (or at least a dominant part of it) is a single, innate, heritable, and measurable thing." He described how craniometry and the Intelligence Quotient (IQ) tests were used to categorise women, Indigenous people and immigrants, as of low intelligence or as stupid, through flawed measurement designs, and even by tampering with test results or fabricating data.

Highly influential, for instance, was the work on the 'feeble-minded', by psychologist and eugenicist Goddard, who developed a classification system of people's intellectual (dis)ability based on IQ measurements. For Goddard, the feeble-minded were "all persons who are incapable of adapting themselves to their environment and living up to the conventions of society or acting sensibly" (1914, p. 571, cited in Gould, 1996/1981, p. 191). The 'feeble-minded' were categorised by Goddard as 'morons', 'imbeciles' and 'idiots' (depending on their IQ scores). Morons, scoring the highest on the scale, were defined as the adults with a mental age between eight and twelve, and

were classified as unfit for society (see Goddard, 1914) (and in need of institutionalisation or other actions, such as sterilisation).

Illustrative of Goddard's attachment to eugenics, and its logics of racial-social discrimination, is the following quote from a speech he delivered at Princeton university students, in 1919 (cited in Gould, 1996/1981, p. 191):

> "Now the fact is, that workmen may have a 10 year intelligence while you have a 20. To demand for him such a home as you enjoy is as absurd as it would be to insist that every laborer should receive a graduate fellowship. How can there be such a thing as social equality with this wide range of mental capacity?".

Such fundamentally racist and discriminatory arguments served for a long time the legitimation and cementation of structural inequality and injustice, eliminating the possibilities of access to education for large parts of the populace—in the above-mentioned example for the entire working class and its offsprings—consequently rejecting a priori and discrediting any forms of knowledge created by such groups.

Also, as already mentioned, both colonialism and Nazism, assisted by biological science and eugenics, deployed, and further developed, similar theses regarding people's superiority or inferiority, to legitimate regimes of domination, exploitation and annihilation (Bergman, 2012; Dennis, 2012; Levine, 2010). As Whitt, (2009, pp. xiii-xiv- emphasis in original) contends:

> "The conduct of imperial science by nation-states during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and its effect upon other nation-states, has led historians of science to conclude that the issue is no longer science *in* imperial history but science *as* imperial history."

In colonial regimes, diverse forms of torture, physical violence and coercion, forced displacement and assimilation of the local peoples, aiming at the total domination of peoples and lands, had the instrumentalisation of stupidity and (in)access to knowledge at their core. Indigenous peoples were articulated as savage, ignorant, superstitious, unsophisticated, *bêtes*, and in need of civilisation by their colonisers. The modes of civilising included the banning of local cultures, religions, languages and education systems and the imposition of foreign ones (the colonisers'), aimed at de-rooting and erasing local knowledges and local knowledge systems (Moyo and Gonye, 2022). This also resulted in the appropriation of indigenous knowledge by Western companies, creating what has been called extractive bio-colonialism (Whitt, 2009). Such practices subordinated local populations to foreign systems of knowledge over which they had no control, creating conditions that made the production of new local knowledge nearly impossible. Even though some of this damage has been repaired through the processes of decolonisation, the disruptive and traumatising repercussions on these peoples', communities' and countries' systems of knowledge production remain significant (Taiwo, 1993; Wilson, 2004).

8. Conclusion

Anchored in an overview of the main approaches to stupidity, and their theoretical and ideological underpinning, the chapter elaborated on the facets of stupidity in the production of knowledge, in politics and in public life, showing also that stupidity is object of political struggle.

The exploration of the dimensions of, and approaches to, stupidity showed the inherent contradictions in what counts as stupid and how societies respond to it. Over the centuries, the democratisation of education and knowledge and the broader democratisation of societies have consolidated forms and methods of reason-based knowledge production and deliberation as broadly beneficial and 'ethical', that is, as instructed by values that serve the greater good. These processes have increased societal tolerance for difference and have contributed to the de-criminalisation of stupidity.

At the same time, societies grapple with the contradictions and paradoxes of stupidity. For instance, while we value wisdom and education—and recognise that education can contribute to wisdom—we cannot argue that people without formal education are not intelligent and will remain stupid. Similarly, we need to avoid stigmatisation by uncritically calling unorthodox methods and opinions stupid, or discrediting critiques against established interests and elites as nonsense, but we also need to protect deliberation and argumentation in public life, which puts societies in paradoxical positions.

As this theoretical exploration showed, among the different manifestations of stupidity, the most destructive ones seem to be those that consciously ignore and disregard the values of truth and knowledge, showing an epistemic insensitivity. Especially in the case of authoritarian regimes and imperialist systems of colonialisation, the disregard for truth and knowledge was weaponised to produce imbeciles, morons and stupid Others supporting and legitimating their systematic exploitation, persecution and even extermination.

Hence, developing normative standards over socially acceptable or destructive levels of stupidity, is not straightforward—and for some, not desirable—as these negotiations are product of political struggle, and compromise. In all cases, any such standards make sense if they are built on the basis of democratic values and principles, serving societies and the greater good.[20]

As Breton (2007, p. 126) argued, who still supported the value of opinion as (co)producing knowledge based on analytics and reasoning (through dialectics and rhetoric):

> "A heuristics of opinion becomes meaningful only in a democratic society, where a vast space is open for politics, that is to say for the three fields covered

[20] This renders Popper's (2013/1945, p. 581) "paradox of tolerance" relevant here as well. As he elaborated on this paradox: "If we extend unlimited tolerance even to those who are intolerant, if we are not prepared to defend a tolerant society against the onslaught of the intolerant, then the tolerant will be destroyed, and tolerance with them" (Popper, 2013/1945, p. 581).

> by opinion: the management of public affairs (political debate), the practice of justice (judicial debate) and the organization of public debate (the debate on the values of society)."

Such democratic conditions on the one hand create opportunities for pluralistic conversations by fostering respect for dignity, difference and equality; on the other hand, they may enhance alertness against destructive practices that consciously ignore and disregard the values of truth and knowledge, and use stupidity to suspend reason and democracy.

3
On identity, with Jeffrey Wimmer

1. Introduction

Identity is a central concept and resource for participatory processes. Arguably, it co-determines who participates, how people speak, whose knowledge counts, and what results emerge (Young, 2000). Participation does not occur in a neutral space but is structured by the identities individuals inhabit, perform, negotiate and reject. While the academic literature on identity includes psychological approaches, this chapter focuses on social identity, understood as discursively constructed subject positions (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985) and as knowledge about Self and Other. Of course, also in this social constructionist approach to identity, psychological processes—or, in a discourse-theoretical language, processes of identification and subjectivation—do matter, but they operate in conjuncture with these discursive constructions, which are, in turn, embedded in discursive-material assemblages.

Although research on participation has produced rich accounts of representation, recognition, deliberation and inequality, identity is often treated as a contextual or derivative category, rather than as a constitutive dimension of the entire participatory process (Carpentier, 2011a; 2011b; Young, 2000). Insights from political psychology, discourse theory, sociolinguistics and democratic theory remain fragmented, obscuring how identity structures participation from initial mobilisation to final outputs. This chapter aims to contribute to these debates by conceptualising participation as a multi-layered field of identity construction, drawing, in particular, on Carpentier's (2017) framework on the subject positions which are activated in participatory processes (see also Carpentier and Hannot, 2019). This framework allows acknowledging the importance of identity for participatory processes. As Carpentier (2016, p. 80) wrote: "Understanding how […] identities and identifications function in the participatory process is highly instrumental and necessary." Moreover, this framework also allows emphasising that participatory processes do not merely make use of, and depend on, pre-existing identities; these processes also contribute to the shaping, stabilising, and reconfiguring of identities across the three stages of participatory processes that we will distinguish in this chapter, inspired by systems theory, namely input, throughput and output (Miller, 2015).

The chapter proceeds in four steps. Section two develops a theoretical framework for understanding social identity as subject position, elaborating five subject positions that Carpentier (2017) sees as intrinsically interconnected with participatory processes, then illustrating how these subject positions become activated in participation in relation to mediated communication. The following three sections discuss how participatory processes intersect with these and other subject positions in the three stages of input, throughput, and output.

2. Theorising social identity and participation

From a discourse-theoretical perspective, social identities are understood as subject positions made available through historically situated regimes of truth, power, and knowledge (Foucault, 1972). These positions emerge within discourses that simultaneously enable and delimit what can be said, by whom, and how. In this perspective, identities do not belong to the subject, but are social-discursive constructions that circulate in societies, and with which subjects can then identify (or not), using these subject positions as building blocks for their subjectivities. Foucault (1966/2005, p. 340) describes these dynamics in epistemic terms, when analysing Diego Velázquez's *Las Meninas*: "man appears in his ambiguous position as an object of knowledge and as a subject that knows: enslaved sovereign, observed spectator […]." Identity discourses—or subject positions—produce knowledge about the self, external to these subjects, but they also provide the tools for subjects to know themselves. Althusser (2014, p. 190ff) describes this relationship as interpellation, where discourses (or ideologies) hail and seduce subjects to accept their terms. But at the same time, subjects can generate identificatory links with particular articulations of particular subject positions—to use Butler's (1990) terminology: subjects can bend identity discourses. Moreover, subjects can combine a variety of different subject positions to constitute unique selves.

Subject positions themselves are also contingent, relational and open to contestation through political struggle (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). Hegemonic projects seek to fixate the articulations of subject positions, whereas counter-hegemonic practices attempt to re-signify them (Butler, 1997; Glynos and Howarth, 2007). These political struggles over the meaning of subject positions sometimes focus on their particular articulations, but at other times concern which (material) subjects are entitled to identify with them, or the societal significance of these signifiers in capturing (part of) the human existence.

When zooming in on participatory processes, and the role of subject positions, there are a diversity of relevant identities to discuss. Carpentier (2017, pp. 97–104) identifies five subject positions that have intrinsic importance to these participatory processes: the citizen, the ordinary person, the expert, the owner and the leader, but he also adds that "other subject positions, such as gender, ethnic, class, caste, rural, community, national, regional, local, and diasporic identities—to name but a few—might also play an equally crucial role in structuring the participatory process" (Carpentier, 2017, p. 97). Each of these subject positions is tied to specific rights, normative expectations, and forms of epistemic and political authority. These positions do not simply pre-exist participatory processes but are continuously performed, contested, and stabilised through the discursive-material participatory practices.

In the case of the citizen—a subject position which mediates the relationship between (political) subjects and the state—this identity discourse plays a role through the levels of empoweredness, where:

> "Citizen articulations with low levels of empoweredness will complicate the balancing of power imbalances (which is the core of the participatory process), as power imbalances then become more easily acceptable. In contrast, an

> empowered citizen identity may be more conducive towards balanced power relations, and feed resistance when these relationships are not balanced (enough)" (Carpentier, 2017, p. 99).

The second subject position—the ordinary person—is related to the citizen, but brings in a more hierarchical and relational perspective, given the concept's two main articulations, namely a class-based structure and a negative (significatory) relationship with elite subject positions (including the subject position of the expert) (Carpentier, 2014b). As Carpentier (2017, p. 99) writes: "Both approaches enable the articulation of the ordinary as irrelevant, marginal, and not entitled to being part of a participatory process, or, inversely, as a significant location of citizenship, emancipation, and empowerment."

Thirdly, the expert refers to both (domain-related) knowledge and skills (Sternberg, 2000, p. 3), or, in Eyal and Medvetz's (2023, p. 5) words, to "a historically specific type of performance aimed at linking scientific knowledge with matters of public concern." Collins and Evans (2007, p. 3)—in their realist approach—point to the material importance of expert groups, where "individuals acquire real and substantive expertise through their membership of those groups", but we would add that the expert as a subject position is constructed through these discursive-material assemblages, which also provides space for so-called "lay experts" (Epstein, 2023) and "experts-by-experience" (Videmšek, 2016), which are hybridisations of the ordinary people and expert subject positions.

A fourth subject position is the owner, which refers to the hegemonic way to construct a relationship between a subject and particular material objects, namely through the control that ownership produces. The owner is a subject position which can introduce privilege in participatory processes, through their willingness and ability to share control over the resources relevant to a participatory process (or not).

Finally, the fifth subject position—the leader—is another identity of privilege, this time in relation to decision-making processes, "entitling them to decide" (Carpentier, 2017, p. 107). This subject position—with the many different articulations of leadership—has the potential to disrupt the core dimension of participatory processes, namely their power-sharing practices, but can, in more horizontal articulations (see, e.g., Lewin and Lippitt, 1938), offer support for the very same participatory processes.

Different approaches, fields and disciplines have contributed to the reflections about these key subject positions—albeit often in more fragmented ways, and frequently more restricted to empirical research, with only limited theorisations. Here, we can use communication and media studies research as example, at it focusses on two elements: The construction of the citizen, on the one hand, and the strong presence of the expert position—the media professional (Carpentier, 2005; Deuze, 2005)—in combination with (mediations of) ordinary people in mainstream media and ordinary people as producers of non-professionally curated content, on the other hand.

The subject position of the citizen features prominently in discussions on media and participation. Even in the more traditional—minimalist-participatory—models of media and democracy relationships, the notion of the informed citizenry is crucial, as media

are seen as necessary providers of (political) information, allowing citizens to make political choices (mostly at elections). As Carpentier and Wimmer (2025, p. 54) write:

> "The argument here is that the functioning of a democracy presupposes that the members of its political community have access to the information they need to form their opinions on all political issues considered relevant, and media are allocated a central role in producing and distributing this information."

Approaches that tilt more towards maximalist-participatory democratic media roles argue for media to provide citizens with participatory opportunities. Jenkins (2006, p. 260), for instance, concludes his book on convergence culture with the following sentence: "Consumers will be more powerful within convergence culture—but only if they recognize and use that power as both consumers and citizens, as full participants in our culture." Moreover, these more maximalist-participatory approaches also argue for the inclusion of a diversity of citizens, and pluriform media representations of the political and the social. Carpentier and Wimmer (2025, p. 60) provide the following overview of some of these inclusionary representational mechanisms: "the avoidance of symbolic annihilation (Tuchman, 1978), the fair, respectful and dignified representation of misrepresented groups, and the avoidance and deconstruction of reductionist representations or stereotypes."

Also the expert and ordinary person feature prominently in mediated communication. In traditional mainstream media settings, media professionals took (and still take) central positions, as journalistic or production experts, who are often constructed as "powerful and knowledgeable" (Filimonov and Carpentier, 2022, p. 124 – see also Carpentier and Hannot, 2019; Livingstone and Lunt, 1996). In some formats (e.g., talk shows, with the subgenre of the audience discussion programme, see Carpentier and Hannot, 2019, p. 241), ordinary people gain access to mainstream media production settings, being validated, to a certain extent, as relevant voices. For instance, Esau *et al.* (2021) argue that narrative reasoning in immigration debates enables "ordinary citizens" to assert moral authority and challenge expert dominance. At the same time, traditional mainstream media also impose a series of (discursive) restrictions, which articulate this subject position with having opinions (but not knowledge) and with being managed (Carpentier, 2001). Hutchby (2001), discussing political call-in radio, shows how callers represent themselves as "responsible citizens" or "ordinary taxpayers" to bolster their claims, while hosts may represent them as misinformed. The ordinary person is likewise mobilised as a figure of authenticity in news discourse: Journalists frequently feature ordinary people—for instance, as vox pop—to illustrate different stances on societal issues (Lewis, Inthorn and Wahl-Jorgensen, 2005, p. 17), but here too are ordinary people simultaneously articulated as lacking formal expertise, which again limits their epistemic authority (Montgomery, 2017, pp. 148–151). In reality-TV, these seemingly empowering representations are often curtailed further, reducing participants to objects of viewing pleasure (see, for instance, Carpentier, 2019, on the reality-TV show Temptation Island).

Moreover, ordinary people are also selected on the basis of professionalised norms of clarity and middle-class respectability, as Carpentier's (2001, p. 215) analysis of audience discussion programmes and Jakobsson and Stiernstedt's (2018) analysis of Swedish TV broadcasting demonstrate. Similar dynamics arise in online media spaces, where editorial and algorithmic filtering elevate a narrow subset of citizen

voices as representative of 'the public' (Jönsson and Örnebring, 2011; van Dijck and Poell, 2013; Williams, 2025). This places ordinary people close to the expert subject position, without being able to fully reach it. Wright and Street (2007, pp. 857–859) show that online deliberation environments privilege participants who can perform the expert position through technical vocabulary or evidence-based reasoning, reproducing epistemic hierarchies even in ostensibly egalitarian forums. Similar identity work is evident in deliberation forums, where users perform expert subject positions by deploying technical vocabulary and policy references. Sprain and Reinig (2017) show that citizens enact "institutional", "local" and "issue" expertise through scientific classifications and administrative terminology, practices which stabilise technocratic hierarchies.

Even if ordinary people are attributed some forms of expertise in (traditional mainstream) media environments, still, institutionalised forms of expertise are generally privileged, while ordinary voices are more easily marginalised (as is shown in a series of critical discourse analyses by Fairclough, 1992; 2003; Wodak and Meyer, 2009). For instance, van Dijk's analysis of televised political debates shows that access to voice is unequally distributed: Elites and articulate middle-class speakers are consistently granted discursive authority, while marginalised groups appear less often and with fewer opportunities to frame issues (van Dijk, 1993, pp. 50–67). Marginalised groups appear mainly as passive subjects or anecdotal figures, with limited authority to define issues (Philo *et al.*, 2013, pp. 112–138). This also applies to digital—algorithm-driven—media, with, for instance, Freelon *et al.* (2020, pp. 781–784) demonstrating that ordinary users' contributions are often relegated to anecdotal or peripheral roles through algorithmic ranking, while expert and elite accounts are systematically prioritised.

Finally, in the context of non-professionally curated media, ordinary people have more abilities to gain visibility and represent themselves. Especially in the previous decades, there was ample emphasis on the democratic affordances of digital media. For instance, John Perry Barlow (1996), one of the founders of the Electronic Frontier Foundation, formulated a *Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace*, where he claimed that

> "We are creating a world that all may enter without privilege or prejudice accorded by race, economic power, military force, or station of birth. We are creating a world where anyone, anywhere may express his or her beliefs, no matter how singular, without fear of being coerced into silence or conformity."

This utopian discourse constructed ordinary people as highly empowered, capable of banning "Governments of the Industrial World" (Barlow, 1996) to the past. Of course, the idea of the empowerment of ordinary people through media organisations predates the so-called 'digital age', as, for instance, community media organisations articulated ordinary people in similar ways (Berrigan, 1979; Howley, 2005). More recently, the subject position of ordinary people has become articulated with a series of problematic practices, also leading to the discrediting of the notion of participation itself (see Carpentier *et al.*, 2019, the Introduction and Chapter 1). Through these problematisations, ordinary people become articulated as unethical, irresponsible, selfish and uninformed, thus rupturing the chain of equivalence between ordinary people and (good) citizenship. At the same time, the also-present populist celebration

of ordinary people is combined with an anti-intellectualist agenda which re-articulates the expert subject position through an antagonistic repositioning (see Chapter 2).

The role of these diverse subject positions in mediated participation illustrates their importance and paves the way for a more structured discussion about how these subject positions intersect with participatory processes. As mentioned in the introduction, we use a systems-theory-inspired structure—of input, throughput and output—to detail this intersection.

3. Input: Entering participatory processes

First of all, identity co-determines who considers themselves entitled, invited, or even obligated to engage in a participatory process, because subject positions impact on motivation and mobilisation (Polletta and Jasper, 2001; Tajfel and Turner, 1979). As a result, the social composition at the input stage already biases which knowledges, needs and interests become thinkable (Young, 2000). Identifications with particular (articulations of) subject positions and the multiple epistemologies they introduce (Dean *et al.*, 2022; Roberts *et al.*, 2020) can support the inclusion into these participatory processes, because potential participants consider (and feel) themselves validated and welcomed, and their presence and contribution into the participatory processes becomes considered relevant. Inversely, when potential participants consider the investment of joining a participatory process irrelevant or useless, and they deem themselves to be outside the target group, these subject positions contribute to self-exclusionary (and demotivational) practices. This applies, above all, to the subject positions closely linked to the participatory process, such as the citizen, the ordinary person and the expert. For instance, Barnes *et al.* (2003) argue that people who see themselves as ordinary people or as "non-political" often self-exclude from governance forums, perceiving participation as a domain for experts or political leaders. Likewise, Felt and Fochler (2011) demonstrate that in science-policy consultations, participants who could credibly perform the expert subject position (e.g., as community representatives or local knowledge holders) were more likely to enter the process and be recognised as legitimate contributors. Conversely, those positioned as "just ordinary citizens" reported uncertainty about their entitlement to take part.

This does not only apply to the subject positions related to the participatory process, but to a variety of other (intersecting) subject positions, such as gender, race, class, age, migration status, disability or care responsibilities, which produce patterned inequalities that activate exclusionary mechanisms (Crenshaw, 1989; Yuval-Davis, 2011). For instance, in the case of disability, the access restrictions to participatory processes are not only material—even if these are often significant in their own right—but also structured by an ableist discourse, which "produces a particular kind of self and body (the corporeal standard) that is projected as the perfect, species-typical and therefore essential and fully human" and consequently constructs disability "as a diminished state of being human" (Campbell, 2001, p. 44), which in turn dissuades participatory involvement.

A second (and related) mechanism where subject positions impact on participatory processes deals with the decisions about who becomes invited (and who can be

reached through these invitations), which roles are available in the participatory processes, and how the participatory process has been structured. As Snow and Benford (1988) argue, boundary frames, in the sense of "us" or "them", structure recruitment networks and define problems before formal processes begin. As Doudaki and Carpentier (2021, p. 6) point out: "most of the elements structuring [participatory processes] have been put in place before the participants are invited into the process." This allows the organisers of a participatory process—who often act as gatekeepers—to make crucial decisions, also about who should become invited, often using particular categories to structure the participatory process. Here too, specific requirements, linked to distinct subject positions, drive these selection processes. Examples include eloquence and willingness to engage, which are grounded in particular articulations of expertise, citizenship and ordinariness. Also the hybrid notions of the "lay expert" and the "expert-by-experience" are used to structure the access to participatory processes, and thus privilege particular 'types' of participants. In digital platforms, levels of activity, response frequency and speed are used to privilege contributors through algorithmic visibility (Cotter, 2019; Magalhães, 2022). Finally, the desire to generate representativeness in certain participatory tools, such as, for instance, citizen assemblies (see Reuchamps *et al.*, 2023) results in the deployment of socio-political categories to achieve that diversity (and thus to have the assembly represent 'the people').

Lastly, in large-scale participatory processes, such as those built on multi-stakeholder involvement, civil society actors represent particular social groups or interests, legitimating their role by invoking their representational relationship with the citizen subject position, or, other gender-, class- or ethnicity-based subject positions. In their discussion on multistakeholder dialogues, Ndulu *et al.* (2023, p. 112), for instance, refer to "groups representing the citizen voice", while Simon (2004, p. 175—our emphasis) in their discussion of associative democracy points to the privileged role of "participation *through* nongovernmental organizations" instead of relying on "spontaneous unorganized citizen action." This implies that these civil society actors also claim to speak on behalf of 'the community' or 'the citizenry', again risking privileging some identities while silencing others (Cornwall, 2008; Gaventa, 2006).

4. Throughput: Co-deciding during the participatory process

Identity impacts on how participants contribute and whose voices are heard, how contributions are evaluated by others and how participants position themselves *within* a participatory process. Subject positions can thus play an enabling or disabling role in co-structuring participant involvement. For instance, gendered interruption patterns and differential recognition in group discussion can reduce the authority of women's contributions, thereby reproducing unequal power dynamics even in formally egalitarian deliberative institutions. In controlled deliberative settings, Karpowitz and Mendelberg (2012) show that women in minority positions within discussion groups tend to speak less and are less likely to persuade others, indicating a structural disadvantage in voice and influence. In other words, identity threats can limit individuals' willingness to contribute, whereas identity-safe norms and spaces, and active facilitation can enhance equality and deliberative quality (Steele, 1997; Young, 2000), impacting on how people speak and can be heard.

Moreover, participants might also adapt to how they are expected to live up to particular subject positions, in relation to expertise or experience. Participants are sometimes seen to perform an expert subject position by using technical or policy language. As we mentioned before, Sprain and Reinig (2017) argue that such performances stabilise technocratic hierarchies through "institutional", "local" and "issue" expertise. Yet participants also deploy experiential narratives to resist such hierarchies. Esau *et al.* (2021) find that narrative reasoning in immigration debates enables ordinary citizens to articulate alternative epistemic standards and moral claims, thereby challenging the dominance of expert discourse.

Thirdly, as the previous mechanism already indicated, also the 'weight' of participants' contributions within participatory processes is related to the subject positions they identify with, for instance, through the authority and credibility supported by these subject positions, and the epistemic hierarchies they generate. As several authors (Collins, 1990; Haraway, 1988; Jasanoff, 2004) have argued, authority and credibility is unevenly distributed across professional, racialised, gendered, aged and classed identities. While carefully designed deliberative formats—small groups, rotating roles, anonymised inputs, co-framing—can disrupt these dynamics (Fung, 2006; Mansbridge *et al.*, 2012), less supportive environments amplify them, drifting toward tokenist participation or polarisation (Mason, 2018; Sunstein, 2002).

Finally, participatory processes are also sites of the politics of recognition, where participants actively seek the acknowledgment of 'their' social identities—ethnic, gendered, religious, activist, etc. What is sometimes dismissed as 'wokeness' can strengthen participatory processes. For instance, Dembinska and Montambeault (2015)—analysing a deliberative process over the "Common Approach" between Innu communities, the Quebec government and local non-Indigenous residents—argue that carefully designed forums which acknowledge contested group identities as legitimate interlocutors can foster mutual understanding, recognition and steps towards reconciliation in a deeply divided multicultural setting. Similarly, Curato *et al.* (2019) argue, through a comparative analysis of citizens' assemblies, that institutionalised recognition of marginalised identities (e.g., through agenda-setting power or testimonial inclusion) enhances deliberative respect and reduces status disparities among participants. By contrast, misrecognition can have a negative impact on participatory intensities. Karpowitz and Mendelberg (2014) show that in mixed-gender deliberative groups, failure to recognise gendered speaking norms leads to men dominating airtime and decision-making, suppressing women's contributions, even when they hold relevant expertise. And when it concerns digital environments, Sobieraj and Berry (2011) argue online harassment disproportionately targets participants identifying with minoritised identities, reducing their willingness to engage in participatory practices, and undermining democratic equality.

Support for the importance of subject positions within participatory processes can be found in epistemic injustice theory (Fricker, 2007) and its focus on how participatory inequalities are rooted not only in differential access or authority, but in structurally patterned processes of harm that undermine individuals' capacities to be recognised as credible 'knowers'. Testimonial injustice occurs when speakers from marginalised groups are afforded less credibility because of prejudicial articulations of subject positions, while hermeneutical injustice arises when the interpretive resources needed to make sense of their experiences are absent or devalued. Both forms reflect the

identity dynamics observed in participatory processes, often resulting in situated knowledge being dismissed or rendered unintelligible in participatory processes.

5. Output: Communicating results and impact

Identity impacts on how outputs are produced, whose interests are substantively reflected in final decisions, but also how these outputs are communicated to, and interpreted by, the 'outside' world. Output thus concerns both whose perspectives shape the eventual outcomes, and how these outcomes are received by participants and broader publics.

Firstly, subject positions play a role in how the decisions resulting from a participatory process are received by the participants themselves, but also by other actors (e.g., political actors). Again, the politics of recognition plays an important role here, as participatory practices are grounded into power-sharing logics, which also requires the production of respectful representations of the actors (and their subject positions) allowing participants to recognise themselves, including from minority or marginalised perspectives, and consider themselves to be recognised. As some participatory processes also produce decisions that are (to be) implemented, several authors (Fraser, 2008; Mansbridge, 2003) have argued that decisions are perceived as fairer and more legitimate when actors see themselves not only present but substantively influential in agenda-setting and justification. Where identities are experienced as being respected, and power as having been shared throughout the process, participants are also more willing to comply with and sustain decisions, strengthening civic capacity and coalition durability (Ostrom, 1990; Putnam, 2000). Moreover, policies that integrate situated knowledges are more likely to be implementable and equitable because they reflect lived experiences across intersecting subject positions rather than abstract averages (Crenshaw, 1989; Haraway, 1988).

This also applies to how outside actors interpret (and in turn generate) representations of participants in participatory processes, where subject positions are also objects of political (interpretative) struggle. While the authenticity of ordinary people and citizens is important, and their representation as subjected to elite power strategies can undermine their credibility and acceptance (Vowe and Henn, 2017; Wessler *et al.*, 2016), other discourses will articulate these subject positions with a lack of expertise—or even as stupid (see Chapter 2)—or with societal irrelevance. Inversely, the presence of different elites—epistemic or political—in participatory processes can be articulated as relevant, democratic-dialogical and authentic, while anti-elitist and populist articulations remain also possible, for example, articulating politicians as power-hungry, manipulative and disconnected from society.

Here we should keep in mind that the outcomes of participatory processes do not straightforwardly reflect 'the people', but, as Saward (2010) argues, political outputs make claims about who the relevant constituency is, its demands and needs, and whose voices it embodies. These representative claims extend beyond those who actively participated, and symbolically construct a vision of the demos—privileging certain subject positions, while rendering others absent or marginal. In participatory settings, outputs therefore function not only as decisions but as discursive artefacts that define who is recognised as part of the political community. This perspective

underscores that inclusion cannot be evaluated solely by who speaks during a deliberation; rather, it depends on how outputs mobilise identity categories and whether they credibly represent participants and non-participants alike.

6. Conclusion

This chapter argues that participatory processes are intensely intertwined with identity, and the multitude of subject positions. These structures of knowledge about the subject—both the self and others—thus merit more attention than they have received so far. Across the input, throughput and output stages of the participatory processes, subject positions are clearly seen to matter, as they impact on who participates, how deliberations unfold, and whose contributions meaningfully influence decisions. Not reducing identity to an individual psychological trait, but instead configuring it as a set of discursively constructed subject positions which intersect with individual subjectivities, allows to show that participation is embedded in broader regimes of knowledge, recognition, and visibility, which are historically patterned and mediated through a series of discursive-material assemblages.

Three overarching insights emerge. First, participation often begins long before participants enter the site of participation. In some cases, participants enter into pre-existing participatory structures. In other cases, particular organisers (or facilitators) of participatory processes have established these participatory processes, and they then act as gatekeepers of these processes, also by creating (and thus consciously privileging) particular roles for participants. These organisers might also (sometimes inadvertently) exclude particular subject positions. In these different scenarios, the participants' voices cannot be heard, as they were not involved yet when key decisions were made about the participatory design. Entry into these processes then becomes co-determined by how particular individuals recognise themselves in the subject positions that are deployed to structure these participatory processes, which weakens the basic participatory principle of sharing power. Moreover, participatory processes require a degree of structuring, which privileges those who can structure the process, and who have the knowledge of how participatory processes can be structured, even when these processes are constructed with all involved from the very early stages.

Second, subject positions play an important role in structuring the interactions in participatory processes. Here, subject positions affect the power dynamics between different actors, as epistemic authority and recognition risk being unevenly distributed. Participants might also feel compelled to live up to certain expectations about which subject positions to identify with. The discussion on throughput, importantly, shows that participatory processes are not sealed-off processes, where discourses, which circulate in society, cannot enter. Instead, they are permeable to outside discourses and materials, affecting how participants behave, feel, think and interact.

Third, connecting participatory decisions and outcomes to that outside world, is far from easy, and dependant on the internally experienced and externally recognised legitimacy of that process. Again, this legitimacy connects to the construction of the subject positions activated by the process. When these subject positions, with which participants identify are validated and recognised by them, the legitimacy of the participatory process can be strengthened, also for those external to the process. As

participatory processes are grounded in the logic of power redistribution to societal actors who are not privileged, outcomes become also vulnerable to critique or rejection when they are dominated by elite voices, rendering them more technocratic rather than democratic. Still, as participatory processes that deepen representative democracy are not always welcomed by all institutional-political actors—and find themselves ignored or actively contested—having outcomes politically and societally validated often faces considerable political challenges, even in optimal circumstances.

Taken together, this multi-stage perspective again shows the complexity of participatory processes, where maximalist participation turns out to be an elusive and ephemeral objective. One reason for this complexity—among many—is located at the discursive level, where a diversity of subject positions is articulated in multiple ways, and integrated into people's subjectivities in even more varied ways. Still, when understanding or organising participatory processes, these subject positions matter. Ultimately, participation can only fulfil its democratic promise if it takes identity seriously—not as a problem to be managed but as a constitutive element of how people understand themselves as political actors, and how collective decisions come to be understood as legitimate and just.

4
On timescapes, with Miloš Hroch

1. Introduction

Participation, when defined as sharing power, offers opportunities for a diversity of people to become involved in decision-making processes, in varying intensities. As decision-making is an omnipresent socio-political process—whether it is more maximalist-participatory, more minimalist-participatory or non-participatory—decision-making intersects with a multitude of other practices and phenomena, including time. In order not to get locked into abstract articulations of time, and as we prefer to approach time from a lived-experience perspective, we revert to Adam's (1998, p. 10) concept of the timescape, which they define as "the embodiment of practiced approaches to time." The notion of timescape focuses on the "past and present activities and interactions of organisms and matter," and allows to "emphasise their rhythmicities, their timings and tempos, their changes and contingencies" (Adam, 1998, p. 10). In still different terms: The timescape concept captures the "temporal features of living" (Adam, 1998, p. 10), and in our case, of participatory decision-making.

Still, this leaves us with ample opportunities, as Schedler and Santiso (1998, p. 6—emphasis in original) indicate:

> "One may view time as a *horizon* […] Or one may view time as a *resource*, scarce and nonrenewable, a limited measurable quantity to be allocated through timetables that determine the duration, the tempo, the timing, the sequence, and the periodicity of actions and events."

This is why—in the first part of this chapter—we will focus on duration, and how taking time and giving time connects with (maximalist) participatory intensities. One first element in this debate—which will be handled more in-depth further on—is O'Neill and Doherty's (2011, pp. 4-5) reference to Bergson (1946), to make the argument that duration is "a state of being within time that surpasses itself in a manner that makes duration the very material of individual creative action." In this first part, we will first discuss the temporal aspects of participation in a more general way, to then analyse the different argumentations that support long durations for participatory processes, followed by the limitations of, and counterarguments for these relations.

At the same time, the discussion on duration is considered too restrictive, as duration risks being limited to linear time and phased processes. In the second part of this chapter, we will then focus on one specific participatory method—the citizen assembly—which has a strong phased approach, and confront it with participatory action research (PAR), which uses a more cyclical approach, arguing for a combination of both approaches—termed the PAR-ification of citizen assemblies.

2. Time and participation

Participatory processes with more maximalist participatory intensities are oftentimes associated with longer durations. Some authors, such as Christiano (1996, p. 256) simply point out that "[w]e must devote time, resources, and energy to acquire knowledge." Also Soncini-Sessa (2007, p. 15) write that "[a] participatory process takes time" even though in this case, they are quickly to add that "it is this aspect in particular that often discourages its implementation" (see also Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, 2002). Arnstein's (1969, p. 221) *A Ladder of Participation* article has a brief reference to the importance of time, when arguing for financial resources for leaders of citizens groups "for their time-consuming efforts", and Ludvigsen *et al.* (2011) use the concept of "trajectories of participation" (in learning) to emphasise participation's temporal dimension.

In a more extensive discussion of the temporal aspects of participation—within the field of development studies—Hickey and Mohan (2004, p. 15—emphasis in original) start from a broader perspective, moving beyond duration. They point out that development and societal change cannot be thought outside the time dimension, where "the *longues durées* of immanent development […] lie in stark contrast to the rapidity of the project timeframe of imminent interventions or the timeless romanticism of some post-developmental visions." They argue that the temporal is important to participation in three ways, which all relate to duration, although in a different fashion. These three components are the need to understand histories, the different speeds of (political) processes (e.g., formal versus informal democratic processes) and "the unfolding of political processes." Hickey and Mohan (2004, p. 16; see also Williams *et al.*, 2003) explain the latter as the tension between "one-off transformative events" and "long-term political projects" allowing for "deeper transformations to take place." These long-term interventions might be more difficult to realise, while the participatory intensities of the one-off events might be more limited, as insufficient time has been allocated to them, resulting in "[p]articipatory development" having "been charged with being too rapid and participatory methodologies" having been "used cynically to 'prove' a project's participatory credentials" (Hickey and Mohan, 2004, p. 16). One more concrete example in the field of development studies is Masaki's (2004, p. 136) analysis of the power dynamics of flood control projects in Western Nepal, who concludes that it is "imperative to heed the micro-level practices of local actors over time, which cause power relations to be ceaselessly renegotiated and modified."

A similar discussion can be found in the field of participatory arts, where, for instance, Holm (2024, p. 2) writes that "[i]n art theory, discussions of participatory practices and community engagement have normatively supported long-term or durational approaches." In the introductory chapter of one of the key works on these durational approaches—the book *Locating the Producers: Durational Approaches to Public Art*—O'Neill and Doherty (2011, p. 10) argue that "[d]urational approaches to public art involve a process of being together for a period of time with some common objectives, to constitute a new mode of relational, conversational and participatory practice." At the same time, durational approaches "allow for open-ended, accumulative processes of engagement" (O'Neill and Doherty, 2011, p. 14). The temporal approach is also present in the related field of participatory design (Bossen *et al.*, 2025), which focuses on involving people in the design of the tools, systems and technologies they use,

while also attending to sustainability. For example, Saad-Sulonen *et al.* (2018a) called for further examination of how participatory processes unfold in time, offering (2018b, pp. 7-9) five temporal lenses for analysis: the phasic lens, the emergent lens, the retrospective lens, the prospective lens, and the long-term lens.

Similarly, in the field(s) of democracy and policy studies, the temporal dimensions of participation are also discussed. Representative democracies, with their strong emphasis on elections as a key participatory moment, rely—as Linz (1998, p. 19ff) remarks—on the principle of government *pro tempore*, because the "idea of electing someone for life to exercise effective power, or representatives for unlimited time […] does not fit into our thinking about democracy." But this also implies a structural restriction of the time allocated to citizens' participation, as their participation becomes—to a large degree—concentrated in the election phase, where the 'regular' political decision-making processes are temporarily suspended, until the election results become known and implemented. Once this stage has been completed, and representatives have been elected, citizens' participation becomes minimised again, shielding them—again to a large degree, but not completely—from these 'regular' political decision-making processes.

This strong emphasis on representation has produced a series of models—e.g., participatory democratic models, see Pateman (1970) and Macpherson (1966)—allowing to rebalance the representation/participation dimension (without eliminating the component of representation), which also implies a rebalancing of the time allocated to both components. In practice, this has led to the development of additional mechanisms in the field of democratic politics, and to the (further) expansion of democratic principles to other societal fields, keeping in mind that the assemblage of liberal representative democracy is "an apparatus that changes more slowly and with greater inertia than do the local, contemporary assemblages of participation within it" (Kelty, 2019, p. 42). Also Dobson and Parker's (2024, p. 116) words, that "[…] the control and the colonisation of time are expressions of power that have inclusionary and exclusionary potentials for different actors and their interests"—in particular in the contemporary "neoliberal speed-growth paradigm"—should be kept in mind, together with the sobering comment that "[n]o arrangements are likely to produce some perfect or *uchronic* timescape" (Dobson and Parker, 2024, p. 116—emphasis in original).

In a discussion of planning cells, which is one of the many additional mechanisms that have been developed, Dienel (1999, p. 84) again stresses the importance of time, when they write: "Time is perhaps the most important factor of all. One has to have the time to listen, to understand, to ask questions, to discuss alternatives and to make up one's mind. Participants are given this time, although past experience has shown they assimilate information surprisingly quickly." But in practice, these additional mechanisms also face severe limitations, as Felt (2016, p. 192; see also Simmons, 2007, p. 86) critiques the tendencies to reduce participatory processes to "moments of engagements", relying on a "temporal understanding of participation" that "is intimately tied to the ideal of efficiency and planning."[21] Instead, Felt (2016, p. 192) argues that "time is necessary to collectively carve out what is at stake," with "the speed of decision-making not necessarily being a sign of efficiency or success in an

[21] This logic intersects with discussions about upstream/downstream participation (Wilsdon *et al.*, 2005), as these debates are then focused on the preferred timing of these moments.

engagement event."

3. Why does duration matter for participatory intensities?

In the above-mentioned discussions—comprising different research fields—a wide variety of arguments are deployed to support the relationship between duration and participatory intensities. To structure these arguments, we can deploy two distinctions that Carpentier *et al.* (2019, pp. 23-24) make, namely the distinction between participation and its conditions of possibility (in particular access and interaction), and between participation and the outcomes of participation, resulting in a three-layered model of power sharing (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: The three-layered model of power sharing

3.1 Duration and participation's conditions of possibility

Conditions of possibility are necessary but insufficient requirements for participation to occur—keeping in mind that participation is defined here as the rebalancing of unequal power relations. As argued by Carpentier (2011a; 2011b), access and interaction are two of participation's significant conditions of possibility, which means that "[i]nteraction (and access) remain very necessary to achieve this rebalancing of power relations, but cannot be equated to participation" (Carpentier *et al.*, 2019, p. 21). Access is a concept that theorises presence, while interaction refers to the creation of socio-communicative relationships (Carpentier, 2011b, p. 129).

Here, time matters, as longer periods of access and interaction also allow for the strengthening of interpersonal relationships, facilitating collaboration, mutual understanding and consensus-seeking. Armstrong (2023, p. 1004), for instance, argues that "the sharing of time", or "synchronicity" are "essential when developing an interpersonal relationship", where togetherness over time allows participants to be "absorbed in common experiences, from which further common experiences are shared." Gigante (2024, p. 10) refers to "the slowness and fragility of these processes, as with all relational processes that require trust and relationship-building." But "the short-term nature of many participatory exercises", as Felt (2016, p. 192) argues, "excludes the formation of specific collectivities." In some cases, as Cardon *et al.* (2007, p. 239) point out, these longer periods of access and interaction allow for friendship relations to be built: "It has also been shown that, in the case of young people's commitments to civic organisations, a strong link associates friendship and activism. Civic, environmentalist, and feminist student mobilisations have always created friendship cliques built on deliberative democracy."

One particular example is the literature on contact zones—which is part of the field of peace and conflict studies—a notion which captures cross-cultural encounters "where the interaction allows people to learn more about each other, and produces first-hand

perspectives about a diversity of peoples" (Yüksek and Carpentier, 2018, p. 4). In Pratt's (1991, p. 34) words: Contact zones are "social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination like colonialism, slavery or their aftermaths." Later work resulted in the development of the concept of the participatory contact zone, defined as "sites where people representing radically different standpoints come together as research colleagues around a common inquiry" (Torre *et al.*, 2017, p. 496). Even though these discussions—unavoidably—tend to place more emphasis on space, time is considered important, with lack of time articulated as a barrier to "interethnic interaction" (Askins and Pain, 2011, p. 804) and these interactions seem to have the ability to "cross space, place, and time in unforeseeable ways" (Askins and Pain, 2011, p. 809). In a discussion on the temporality of contact zones, Avermaete and Nuijsink (2021, p. 356—emphasis in original) argue that:

> "*Longue durée* contact zones are especially appealing to investigate because they are contact zones that can be re-activated time and time again, allowing different actors to add new impulses and allow discussions or develop a specific research programme to develop over time."

3.2 Duration during the participatory process

With participation "defined as the equalisation of power relations between privileged and non-privileged actors in formal or informal decision-making processes" (Carpentier, 2016, p. 72), the notion of process—a series of related goal-oriented activities—allows clustering a series of activities that together impact on the power relations between actors, within the context of particular spaces and times.

As the structural inequality of power relations between privileged and non-privileged actors—which a participatory process aims to change—can weigh heavily on participatory processes, time is a significant element allowing to acknowledge the existence of these inequalities and their collective deconstruction. As Berman (2017, p. 144) writes, there is a need to "build social capital that fosters both the cohesion of the group and its functioning as a major stakeholder facing other stakeholders and decision-makers."

Moreover, participatory processes are political processes with diverse actors, which implies the need to establish an internal consensus on the goals of the participatory process, but also on its modi operandi, with its decision-making rules and communicative principles. This is further complicated by the need for what Johnson (2009) calls operative knowledge—or, in short, knowledge about heuristics—as it cannot be taken for granted that all participants possess operative knowledge (in the same degree); acquiring operative knowledge is a learning process which again takes time.

The political nature of participatory processes also implies that the decision-making itself, with its negotiations, creations of alliances, searches for compromises, frustrations and blockages, is time-consuming. Even though a consensus cannot always be reached in a participatory process, the attempts to reach this consensus (or compromise)—or to come to terms with existing disagreements—require time, for the

different voices to be heard, the different scenarios to be investigated, and eventually decisions to be taken (whether it is to agree or to disagree). Moreover, actor diversity implies a diversity in declarative—see Johnson (2009)—(or thematic) knowledges, where "variances in participants' knowledge" (Rocksén, 2016, p. 380) impact on both the participatory intensities and learning opportunities,[22] producing the risk of what Linell (2009, p. 196) calls asymmetrical participation, where "parties' contributions are asymmetrical in terms of content, quantity and interactional import." Unequal distributions of speaking time or time constraints then have potentially detrimental consequences, as, e.g. Parkinson (2006, p. 78) and Caluwaerts and Reuchamps (2015, p. 162) point out.

Acquiring additional knowledge is again time-consuming, especially when we keep Ludvigsen *et al.*'s (2011, p. 110) conceptualisation of learning in mind, where "learning occurs when you get stabilising out of flux or what we can label gap-closing. This conception of learning brings to the fore that time is a critical factor in interactional ordering of different types of knowledge and competencies for creation of new stabilities." Here, professional (or academic) knowledge plays a complex role, as participatory processes often rely on the confrontation with professional knowledge but simultaneously resist its hegemony (see Berman, 2017, p. 173). As Berman (2017, p. 21) writes, participatory processes require "a combination of professional knowledge and in-depth, local, experiential knowledge of those who live a given situation and know it from the inside,"[23] which prevents the juxtaposition of professional and local/lay knowledge that Kelty (2019, p. 42) warns against:

> "Do not oppose participation to expertise. Make participation enhance or extend expertise instead. There are countless cases where participation is understood to be a corrective to forms of expertise—and a general discourse in many scholarly disciplines of treating technical expertise and participation or politics as opposites."

Not only learning through the confrontation with professional knowledge requires time, but also the tapping into the pools of 'local' knowledge is not an immediate process. Even though non-professional knowledge is vital for participatory processes, integrating this non-professional knowledge into participatory processes is far from straightforward, as "it is necessary to adopt procedures and tools that will enable its revelation to be activated and documented" (Berman, 2017, p. 15; see also Grant, 2007).

3.3 Durability and outcomes of participation

Different authors list a significant number of (potential) outcomes of participatory processes, at individual and societal levels. For instance, Carpentier *et al.* (2019, p. 24) mention that

> "participatory theory and research would argue that in many cases, the outcomes of participatory processes are positive, at both the personal and

[22] Rocksén's (2016) article is a discussion on classroom participation.
[23] Berman (2017, p. 3) does point out that also professional knowledge is "a product of local and specific circumstances."

> societal level. The former includes increased self-esteem and self-confidence, skills and knowledge, but also status, while the latter includes increased societal involvement, social happiness and justice, as Huesca's (2008) research illustrates."

Similarly, Berman (2017) mentions a number of outcomes which centre around the construction of social capital, and the increase of the community's political power. One of Berman's (2017, p. 155) summaries reads as follows: "Build social capital that advances the accumulation of the community's civic and political power, which in turn establishes communal capacity to negotiate with external stakeholders." This also translates into the community's ability to have its discourse(s) circulate, and the validation of its capacity to contribute to particular issues. As Berman (2017, p. 200) writes: The participatory process "establishes the participants (the community) as a central stakeholder, in addition to the traditional stakeholders, and becomes a mediation and negotiation process among all powerful stakeholders."

Also other authors point to the ability of participatory processes to strengthen communities. In their discussion of public deliberation, Cooke (2000, p. 949) points to the community-generating abilities of these processes, where individuals can consolidate their "co-membership in a collective form of life" through the practices of collective reasoning with others. O'Neill and Doherty (2011, pp. 9-10) write that

> "[t]he significant conclusion for commissioning practice is that a durational approach to events and projects seems to allow for the formation, dispersal and reformation of temporary, active communities so as to avoid the pseudo-ethnographic parachuting of the curator or artist to work with a passive target group deprived of agency."

More critical analyses also demonstrate that projects with less intense durations do not necessary achieve these outcomes. Holm (2024, p. 13), for instance, concludes that "the competition for funding encourages the overstating of a project's scope of participatory engagement within the available timeframe. For participatory art projects, thus, time is always about to run out."

Finally, participatory processes offer learning opportunities to the participants (and other involved actors). As Pateman (1970, p. 105; see also Chapter 1) summarised this argument: "we do learn to participate by participating." Cooke (2000, p. 948) formulates a more extensive version of this argument: "[P]articipation improves the moral, practical or intellectual qualities of those who participate; it makes them not just better citizens—though clearly this is crucial—but also better individuals." These learning opportunities comprise a wide range of knowledges and skills, including operative knowledge—"learn about disputes together; compromise" (Berman, 2017, p. 148)—and declarative knowledge, and communicative, organisational and political skills (Altschuler and Corrales, 2013, p. 51).

Time plays a different role in the discussions about the outcomes of participatory processes, as focus is placed on the durability and sustainability of the outcomes. For instance, when participatory processes are articulated as change processes—as is often the case in the field of development—then the durability of these changes is a key component, often linked to ownership (Henry, 2004, p. 141; 151). Altschuler and

Corrales (2013, p. 3) make this argument explicit, when they write that "more participation could create ownership among project beneficiaries, and, thus, greater sustainability." At the same time, durability connects to the many other outcomes, including the creation of individual, communal and societal social and political capital, and knowledge and skills enhancement. Finally, also the durability of (maximalist) participatory practices features in these discussions. For instance, Saad-Sulonen *et al.* (2018b, p. 7) point to the attempts aimed "at articulating a new temporality related to continuity and sustainability of participation beyond the project." This also explains Kelty's (2019, p. 260) plea:

> "By contrast, participation ought to be made more inertial—given more stability, mass, permanence in collectives that can persist over time and can incorporate expertise into their work and become more expert by virtue of that. One of the oldest truisms about participation in democracy is that it gives people an 'educative dividend'—by virtue of participating, one becomes more expert at the kinds of things one participates in."

4. The limits of (long) durational approaches

The previous sections might give the impression that long durational approaches to participatory processes automatically increase participatory intensities, and that the conditions of possibility and outcomes of participatory processes necessarily work in favour of these participatory intensities. Even though in many cases the relationship between long duration and maximalist participation turns out to be positive (see Berman, 2017) for each of the three layers (see Figure 4), arguments have been raised to nuance the idea that that long durational approaches necessarily increase participatory intensities.

In the case of access and interaction—key conditions of possibility of participation—there are several limitations at work. First, several authors point out that the long duration of a participatory process itself might prove to be an obstacle to access the participatory process. From a democratic-theory perspective, Linz (1998, p. 30) writes that "[o]ne of the assumptions of democratic politics is that the ordinary citizen […] would devote time to become an informed voter, perhaps do some volunteer work, ideally be an active party member," but as Felt (2016, p. 193) points out, "time as a resource that an individual can dispose of is unequally distributed in society." As a consequence, "the voice option can be seen as possibly discriminating against the less articulate, less confident and those with less time" (McLaverty, 1999, p. 27).

Also when it comes to interaction, long durations might work against participatory intensities, as, over time, personal dislikes and interpersonal conflicts may arise. The assumption that, for instance, trust will increase over time is not a necessity, as the "common experiences" mentioned by Armstrong (2023, p. 1004) might include events or actions that weaken mutual trust and the participants' willingness to collaborate. In contrast, too strong social coherence (and the formation of cliques through the articulation of long-term engagements and friendships) might produce exclusionary mechanisms towards newcomers (or those considered outsiders), might lead to cronyism (O'Neill and Doherty, 2011, p. 9) and might affect the ability to handle more intense conflicts, which "may be experienced as emotional betrayal" (Polletta, 2002,

p. 154). Cardon *et al.* (2007, p. 239) label this "the paradox of friendship" and add that this paradox "has often been seen as a threat for the destiny of young political groups and a reason why many of them have failed or have transformed themselves into hierarchical and professional organizations."

Secondly, long durations can also have a negative impact on the participatory process itself. One argument here is that participatory processes might still fail, despite the time investments that aim to support it. In particular establishing a balance between privileged and non-privileged actors might not be (sufficiently) translated into practice—also when it comes to the relationship between the representatives of professional and local knowledge, and the relationship between those who manage the process and those participants who are being managed— despite the time investment. Similarly, the knowledge appropriation processes might fail, for instance because of the complexities of the issues at stake, the lack of consensus within the field of professional and local knowledge, or the lack of consensus about its ethical evaluations and normative implications, again disregarding the time investment. Most importantly, the idea that consensus can be reached, as long as participants try 'long and hard enough', structurally underestimates the role of conflict and diversity in society. In some cases, different positions can remain irreconcilable, leading to the impossibility of a participatory process to reach agreement, whatever amount of time is spent on attempting to resolve these differences.

Long durations might also explicitly work against the participatory intensities. Tomba (2014, p. 355) uses the word slowness (and not duration) when referring to "the slowness of the participatory process of decision making," indicating that long durations might place a burden on participants, not only because of the above-discussed restrictions in time as a resource, but simply because of the frustrations caused by this slowness, and the (perceived) absence of timely progress in negotiations. In other—more Lacanian—terms, the fantasy of homogeneity, and the frustrations that its confrontation with the Real causes, might also work against participatory processes.

Thirdly, the outcomes of participatory processes might not be durable or sustainable. They might not even occur. In other words, the individual or collective empowerment, or the expected uptake of learning opportunities might not materialise, or may do so only minimally. Similarly, when participation is deployed to create change, this change might not take place, or may do so to a limited extent. One of the core critiques is that participatory processes are organised at micro-societal levels, while change is needed or desired at more structural levels. Mohan and Stokke (2000, p. 253), for instance, critique localism in participatory processes, in the following terms: "Practitioners of participatory research and development assume that local knowledge will reverse the previously damaging interventions which treated locals as passive recipients. However, the reversal has been almost complete, so that the individual agent has become the key political site."

Hickey and Mohan (2004, p. 12) make a similar point, when they write that "the locus of transformation must go beyond the individual and local and involve multi-scaled strategies that encompass the institutional and structural." This, for instance, also includes the role of the state and market, as also Mohan and Stokke (2000) point out. This brings us to the relationship between participatory processes and formal

(democratic) politics, as the outcomes of particular participatory processes might fall on deaf ears with (formal) political actors, who not only operate with a different regime of speed, but might also have other priorities and preferences. Moreover, market actors might not be capable, willing or interested in interacting with (the outcomes of) participatory processes. Here, also Tomba's (2014, p. 355) words about the speed of capital, often even too fast for formal democracy, matter: "The speed of formal democracy, with its parliamentarian discussions and search for consent, is too slow compared to the speed of capital."

Finally, Beech's (2011) analysis of the ideology of duration (in relation to arts and participation) defends the position that "[d]uration may not be a cure for social ills, but this does not mean that it is to be avoided at all costs" (Beech, 2011, p. 314), but he also critiques that "it is isolated and abstracted as something valuable in itself." Beech (2011, p. 317) pleads for a reconnection of "the affirmation of duration to the ensemble of particulars—the discourses, practices, rituals and institutions—from which it derives (i.e. the conjunctural)", which implies that "[d]ifferent conjunctures will call for different qualities as well as different quantities of time" (Beech, 2011, p. 325), which, in turn, arguably, also applies to different participatory intensities (and their limitations).

5. Beyond duration: The integration of Citizen Assemblies and PAR

The emphasis on the importance of duration, when it comes to participatory processes—despite the above-discussed limitations—remains valid, even though the concept of duration also black-boxes other temporal elements. For instance, duration risks being equated with a definition of time as linear, where the participatory process is approached as a linear progression of phases—each to be completed before the next phase can be initiated. In this subsection, we will look at one specific participatory mechanism, citizen assemblies[24]—which are considered a type of deliberative mini-public—and analyse how this mechanism privileges linear time.

Through a confrontation with the participatory action research approach, which is characterised by a cyclical approach, in this section we want to demonstrate the existence of alternative approaches to time and move away from the dominance of linear time, arguing for a 'PAR-ification' of citizen assemblies.

5.1 The phases of citizen assemblies

Vrydagh (2023, p. 3) defines a citizen assembly as "a generic term for all participatory institutions which brings together an inclusive group of lay citizens who deliberate together on a public issue so as to exert a public influence." Arguably, the citizen assembly belongs to the broader family of the deliberative mini-publics,[25] a concept

[24] There are some variations in labeling, for instance between the use of singular or plural for citizen(s), but also between citizen assemblies (see e.g., Vrydagh, 2023) and citizen parliaments (see, e.g., Pech, 2001). The discussion on these differences—for instance in relation to size or legal status—are beyond this text's objectives.

[25] At the same time, Vrydagh's (2023, p. 3) argument, that the notion of the deliberative mini-publics "projects the image of a mini-public as both a new institutional invention and a Western phenomenon,"

that has been derived from Dahl's (1989) concept of the minipopulus. It is worthwhile citing Dahl's (1989, p. 340) description of the minipopulus in full here:

> "Suppose an advanced democratic country were to create a 'minipopulus' consisting of perhaps a thousand citizens randomly selected out of the entire demos. Its task would be to deliberate, for a year perhaps, on an issue and then to announce its choices. The members of a minipopulus could 'meet' by telecommunications. One minipopulus could decide on the agenda of issues, while another might concern itself with a major issue. Thus one minipopulus could exist for each major issue on the agenda. A minipopulus could exist at any level of government—national, state, or local. It could be attended—again by telecommunications—by an advisory committee of scholars and specialists and by an administrative staff. It could hold hearings, commission research, and engage in debate and discussion."

Even though different formats and variations of mini-publics exist (see OECD, 2020, and its updated OECD Deliberative Democracy Database (OECD, 2023)), one of the important elements—which also features in Dahl's description of a 'minipopulus'—is duration. Warren and Gastil (2015, p. 568) summarise this idea as a requirement, in the following terms: "Although there is no exact formula, a mini-public should convene for an amount of time that allows members to learn and deliberate about an issue sufficiently to develop thoughtful, informed opinions." In other words, a citizen assembly is "a time-consuming public mission" (Vandamme, 2023, p. 41).

At the same time, citizen assemblies structure time in particular stages or phases. For instance, Caluwaerts and Reuchamps (2015, p. 154) refer to an input phase, a throughput phase and an output phase: "Whereas the input phase deals with the inclusion of participants and their ideas in the deliberation, the throughput phase focuses on the deliberative process itself." Output then refers to the decisions of the citizen assembly (e.g., its recommendations) and their dissemination.

Within the input phase, there are several preparatory subphases.[26] During the agenda-setting subphase, the theme of the citizen assembly is selected. Often, participation is limited, as—in the words of Lacelle-Webster and Warren (2023, p. 100)—citizen assemblies "have agendas set for them by political elites, and they are convened only when other institutions have the political will and capacity to do so." This is followed by a recruitment subphase. Citizen assemblies use a sampling logic, "since it is impossible in most cases to invite all the affected people to deliberate in small groups" (Curato *et al.*, 2021, p. 34). In their chapter on recruitment, Curato *et al.* (2021, p. 34ff) discuss four methods for selecting participants: "elections; corporatism or appointment by interest groups and NGOs; self-selection; and random sampling." The third subphase is what Lindell (2023, p. 264) calls the information (and learning) (sub)phase, and what Nielsen and Sørensen (2023, p. 137) simply call the learning (sub)phase, which they define as a subphase where "participants engage with all sides of an issue, and stakeholders and citizens are able to give testimony regarding their preferences through an open hearing invitation in the 'listening' phase." Lindell (2023,

is also important to highlight. More specifically, Vrydagh mentions the existence of (prototypes of) mini-publics in the cities of Syria-Mesopotamia and in India.

[26] We only discuss the most important ones here, while there are other preparatory subphases, e.g. the financing subphase and the staff selection/allocation subphase.

p. 264) stresses the importance of designing "the learning and information phase so that the information is balanced, learning takes place, and participants get a chance together to scrutinise the evidence presented to them" (see also Giraudet *et al.*, 2022). Rountree and Curato (2023, p. 78) add that a "public consultation" (sub)phase could be part of the input phase: "While not ubiquitous, some CAs have included a public consultation phase as part of the deliberative process. This shows that participants in CAs do not only hear from experts but also from lay citizens or the wider public."

The throughput phase is concerned with the "process of deliberation and decision-making itself" (Caluwaerts and Reuchamps, 2023, p. 245): Caluwaerts and Reuchamps (2023, p. 246) distinguish two subphases, a deliberative subphase and a voting subphase, as "a balance should be struck between talking and voting in the real world of deliberative [citizen assemblies]." First, there is a need for "deliberative time" as Baber and Bartlett (2015, p. 111) call it, but the legitimation for the existence of these two subphases can also be found in the need for a limitation of available time as "conflicts within a mini-public will inevitably continue to linger," and "[m]ost deliberative designs therefore rely on some aggregative mechanisms to come to some kind of final decision" (Caluwaerts and Reuchamps, 2023, p. 246).

Finally, the output phase takes into consideration that a citizen assembly "does not work in isolation but takes place in a broader public sphere and political system" (Caluwaerts and Reuchamps, 2023, p. 248). As Curato *et al.* (2021, p. 86) mention, there are two different types of output: "[F]irst, the conclusions of the mini-public in themselves; and, second, the manner in which those conclusions are presented to wider audiences." These two types of output are connected to two subphases, where the first subphase deals with the materialisation of the positions of the citizen assembly, at the end of their deliberations. These conclusions combine (in different ways) "answers or recommendations" with "explanations of the reasoning underpinning those answers or recommendations" (Curato *et al.*, 2021, p. 88). The second subphase deals with the dissemination (or promotion, as it is sometimes called) of the conclusions to a wider public and to relevant (political) actors, sometimes seeking their (potential) implementation. While in some cases, there is some overlap with earlier phases, and citizen assemblies "provide space for observers to watch proceedings, livestreams and recordings of expert presentations, and running information on the programme's agendas", in most cases "the deliberations among participants themselves [are kept] private to enable people to discuss matters openly without feeling that they are being watched" (Curato *et al.*, 2021, p. 91), which implies that the (sub)phases are kept separate.

Even though there is considerable variation in the nature of the dissemination subphase, "[f]or the more ambitious [deliberative mini-publics]—particularly citizens' assemblies—an effective communications strategy is thus likely to be an essential part" (Curato *et al.*, 2021, p. 92; see also Parkinson (2006, pp. 114-123)). This is why some authors argue for deliberative processes to have a long-tail, to capture the wider time horizon needed for the outputs or recommendations to have political impact, for instance, being implemented by government. This time horizon is always implicitly or explicitly present in deliberative processes, but researchers (Pilet *et al.*, 2023, p. 875; Rountree *et al.*, 2022, p. 159) have become increasingly interested in this long-tail impact and how deliberative mini-publics can influence political systems and policymaking.

5.2 The cycles of participatory action research

As the previous subsection demonstrated, citizen assemblies have a tendency for combining (relatively) long durations with a linear approach to time, even though this linearity is hardly ever absolute, and in some cases processes coincide and phases overlap. Still, other participatory mechanisms and models explicitly thematise a different approach to time, and implement more cyclical approaches in their theoretical-methodological designs. One example, which we already discussed in Chapter 1 (see also Chapter 6), is Participatory Action Research (PAR), which is defined by Reason and Bradbury (2006, p. 1) as:

> "a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes [...] It seeks 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."

PAR is, as its name indicates, still an approach to research, which brings together different strands of research and theoretical traditions from the social sciences and humanities. At the same time, PAR organises the generation of knowledge through the collective engagement of all actors (academic and non-academic), "to allow the common people to have sufficient control over the generation of new knowledge" (Fals-Borda, 1991, p. 146). All actors are involved in the different stages of knowledge production (Doudaki and Carpentier, 2021; Lang *et al.*, 2012; Pohl *et al.*, 2010; Voorberg *et al.*, 2015) and are seen "as competent and reflexive agents capable of participating in all aspects of the research process" (Kindon *et al.*, 2007, p. 14). Moreover, the situated and affective nature of knowledge is emphasised, which becomes the product of an "embodied and emotional intellectual practice" (Kindon *et al.*, 2007, p. 14). Still, even though PAR is change-oriented, at the same time it needs to be acknowledged that social problems are complex, multi-dimensional and often intractable, and that they "can only be partially addressed and partially resolved" (Kindon *et al.*, 2007, p. 14).

PAR has a particular approach to time, as it emphasises the cyclical, iterative or spiralling combination of its components, which can also be found in action research in general (Coghlan and Brydon-Miller, 2014, p. xxvi). Kemmis *et al.* (2014, p. 9) call this the "Lewinian view of action research", in reference to Lewin's (1948) seminal work on action research. There are different descriptions of this cyclical process, though (Drummond and Themessl-Huber, 2007, p. 432). In a more simplified version, this approach focusses on iterations between Action and Reflection, or Action and Research. Pant (2014, p. 585), for instance, writes that "PAR combines research and action through a cyclic or spiral process which alternates between action and critical reflection," while von Unger (2014, p. 51—translation by the authors) formulates this as follows: "Action and reflection can be performed several times in cyclical sequences." Kindon *et al.* (2007, p. 15), in a more detailed version, generate a cyclical model with nine stages, five of which are labelled Action, and four labelled Reflection.

Other authors use a four-component model of the PAR cycle. Pain *et al.* (2019, p. 3) mention Planning, Action, Reflection and Evaluation. In the *Action Research Planner*,

Kemmis *et al.* (2014, p. 19) use four components, namely Planning, Acting, Observing and Reflecting. Yet another version is McIntyre's (2008, p. 7) model of the "Recursive Process of PAR", which uses "a spiral of [four] adaptable steps": "Questioning a particular issue"; "Reflecting upon and investigating the issue"; "Developing an action plan"; "Implementing and refining said plan" (McIntyre, 2008, p. 6) (See Figure 5).

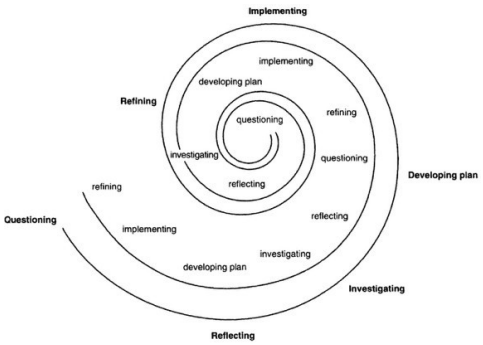

Figure 5: McIntyre's model of the "Recursive Process of PAR"
Source: McIntyre, 2008, p. 7

Kemmis *et al.* (2014) add to their description of this model that the stages of PAR (and action research in general) are more fluid than their (or other) models indicate. More specifically, they argue that:

> "In reality, action research is rarely as neat as this spiral of self-contained cycles of planning, acting and observing, and reflecting suggests. The stages overlap, and initial plans quickly become obsolete in the light of learning from experience. In reality, the process is likely to be more fluid, open and responsive" (Kemmis *et al.*, 2014, p. 18).

Still, when describing their approach in practice, we still find a cyclical approach in their work (Kemmis *et al.*, 2014, p. 89), moving from reconnaissance to planning, enacting the plan, observing "the conduct and consequences of our changes as we go", reflecting, re-planning, enacting, reflecting, re-planning, "and so on." This again shows the importance of the cyclical approach in PAR, partially because it facilitates learning: "[T]he participants in action research learn by doing, or connecting, rather than simply as detached investigators", as Drummond and Themessl-Huber (2007, p. 442) write. Moreover, the cyclical approach allows participants to reflect on the process of knowledge acquisition, and to make adjustments. Lawson (2015, p. 13) formulates this as follows: "Each cycle's knowledge contributions provide timely opportunities to reflect on where participants started, taking stock of all that they have learned and the knowledge and understanding they have produced along the way." What Tilakaratna (1991, p. 143) calls a self-review, "which evaluates the ongoing actions by the people themselves, enabling any corrections or adjustments therein as well as providing a base for the conception and planning of future actions," also "helps to improve people's actions, assert their autonomy and create conditions for the democratic functioning of people's organizations." This ability of participants to reflect about earlier parts of the process, and to collectively make adjustments on the basis

of what has been achieved before—in other words, to go back in time—is empowering, and deepens the participatory intensities.

5.3 The PAR-ification of citizen assemblies[27]

PAR's cyclical approach—which also has its limitations (as mentioned above)—still offers opportunities to strengthen the participatory intensities of citizen assemblies, with their phased-approach. What we would like to call the *PAR-ification of citizen assemblies* has been deployed in the European research project MeDeMAP ("Mapping Media for Future Democracies"), which organised citizen assemblies[28] in five different European countries (namely Austria, the Czech Republic, Ireland and Slovenia, and an online citizen assembly in Germany), on the theme of "Media and Democracy in Europe". In designing these citizen assemblies, which each lasted four full days, it was deemed "vital for the participants to be involved in the reflection, and to loop back into the planning" (Carpentier and Wimmer, 2024, p. 37). In the case of the Czech citizen assembly, this related to the design for the citizen assemblies, the agenda-setting, the prioritisations, the deliberations and the formulation of confirmatory and dissenting opinions:

- The design of the citizen assembly was discussed during each of the four meetings, as part of the collective process evaluation discussions, and participants were invited to give online feedback after each of the meetings, on an individual basis. In particular, the time allocated to discussions in the assemblies (before decisions were made) was increased as a result of these evaluations.
- In the case of agenda-setting, the MeDeMAP team decided on the main theme, and its three topics (media systems, media representation and media participation), but the participants then developed the subtopics for each of the three topics themselves. The participants first produced a list of subtopics during the first day, but then revisited these lists—and modified them—during the three other meetings, looping back into the first day outcomes.
- The time constraints—arising, among other factors, from financial limitations—also restricted how many subtopics could be discussed (and used to produce resolutions). The participants decided which subtopics would be developed first, through a mechanism of dot-voting.
- Within the throughput phase, with its deliberations about possible resolutions, their exact formulations, and decisions on accepting or rejecting these resolutions, resolutions were written in small groups (using a world café format), but participants could always offer so-called 'friendly amendments' in the plenary meetings that followed.
- The resolutions that were accepted by a two-thirds majority could still be critiqued afterwards, as all participants were invited to provide online comments on the accepted resolutions (on an individual basis), formulating confirmatory or dissenting opinions. Following an analysis of all comments, a representative sample of both confirmatory and dissenting opinions was included in the final report of recommendations.

[27] For a first literature review, see Hroch's (2024) working paper.
[28] The MeDeMAP project used the label Citizen Parliament, and not Citizen Assembly.

The academic literature that discusses this articulation of citizen assemblies (or deliberative mini-publics) and PAR is rare. The principle of 'looping' different projects and methodologies, including action research, to "generate meta-analytic insights and action-oriented agendas", is discussed by Trajber *et al.* (2019, p. 89). Babüroğlu *et al.* (2015) point to the epistemological similarities between action research and deliberative democracy, using the deployment of the search conference and the polling conference methodologies in Turkey as examples. They argue that the "epistemology of action research, which is iterative meaning-construction" "perfectly aligns" with deliberative democracy's acknowledgment that "preferences are made and remade through communication" (Babüroğlu *et al.*, 2015, p. 273). Turning to one of their examples—the search conference—they explicitly refer to cyclical time, when they describe the search conference as "a continuous loop between the generation of data, information, knowledge, understanding, and wisdom" (Babüroğlu *et al.*, 2015, p. 273).

A number of more specific articulations of deliberative mini-publics and PAR exist, but the time dimension of this articulation is hardly ever discussed. One example is Wakeford *et al.*'s (2015) discussion on 'refreshing' citizens' juries,[29] by drawing on PAR and using two specific citizens' juries as case studies. Their work focusses on avoiding a "legalistic, polarised model of consultation", and shifting "towards creative dialogue and the co-production of knowledge" (Wakeford *et al.*, 2015, p. 245) through the articulation of deliberative mini-publics and PAR. One—rather exceptional—example, where this articulation is more explicit, is Pimbert and Wakeford's (2003) process analysis of a *Prajateerpu* process—a word in the Telugu language, which means 'the people's verdict'. This articulation of a citizens' jury and PAR,[30] focused on the "future of farming and food security in the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh" (Pimbert and Wakeford, 2003, p. 185) and explicitly followed the reflection-action cycle of PAR, integrating the citizens' jury method in a broader PAR process. Even though the temporal elements of this articulation are not explicitly discussed, and the citizens' jury functions more as a module within the PAR process, Pimbert and Wakeford's work still shows the importance of iterations between action and reflection.

6. Conclusion

The discussion on the timescapes of participation is not straightforward, for a number of reasons. Time is one of the most elusive concepts, but even when we focus on timescapes, as materialisations of time, part of this elusiveness remains. Even when further narrowing down these discussions to duration, time evades clear theorisation and intellectual capture. Moreover, when the theoretical discussions about participatory intensities are confronted with questions about duration, there is no one-dimensional answer. There are good arguments in favour of the so-called durational approaches to participation, as learning, communicating and deciding takes time. But at the same time, the debate on optimal durations still remains very open, also considering that time as a resource produces considerable limitations. Furthermore, the counterarguments that show the limits of durational approaches—and the

[29] The citizens' jury is one of the types of deliberative mini-publics, where a particular issue is 'put on trial'.
[30] Telugu is a Dravidian language spoken in the Indian states of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana.

frustrations related to slowness—offer convincing contribution to these discussions, showing that long durations are not panaceas for the problems related to maximalist participation.

Durational approaches also tend to bypass the complexities of time, when longevity becomes translated as linearity. The example of the citizen assembly, as one particular participatory method, demonstrates this temptation, as the organisational practice of the citizen assembly easily privileges a phased approach. One of the key strengths of PAR is that its temporal epistemology allows to reconsider this linearity. In PAR, with its cyclical approach to time—at least in its basic conceptualisation—we find an argument to question the taken-for-grantedness of linearity in participatory processes, such as in the citizen assembly, and to argue for the need to be able to pause, to take steps back, to reflect and to adjust.

Finally, this discussion on durational approaches, linearity and cyclicity also shows the importance of knowledge acquisition. While the main focus of this chapter is on the relationship between participatory intensities and time, knowledge frequently comes up, showing how important knowledge is for participatory processes, when it comes to learning about particular phenomena, about participatory heuristics and about human interaction, but also when it comes to producing knowledge, as professional experts, as process facilitators and as always extraordinary ordinary people.

5
On play and playfulness, with Jeffrey Wimmer

1. Introduction

Play is an omnipresent social practice, which, over time, has attracted considerable attention, from a range of philosophers (see Nagel, 1996) to a multitude of everyday life signifying practices. And, of course, play is practiced endlessly. As one of the key theoreticians of play, Huizinga (1949, p. 3), writes: Play is "an absolutely primary category of life, familiar to everybody at a glance right down to the animal level." At the same time, play has been haunted by critical evaluations that used a series of dichotomies—Fink (1968, p. 19), for instance, mentions work-play and frivolity-seriousness—to discredit it. Through these dichotomisations, play became a secondary social activity, important, but only to some degree. Slowly but surely, these dichotomies have become deconstructed, and the contingencies that also constructed play received more attention. Play became seen as a site of political and discursive-material struggle over how it is (and has to be) free or regulated, outside-profit or monetised, secluded or spectacular, outside 'real life' or part of 'real life', and frivolous or serious. Moreover, play was complemented by playfulness, which allows to focus more on mood and disposition.

These reconfigurations facilitated the deployment of play(fulness) in other societal fields, including participatory practices, as is also witnessed by the development of the academic literature on what is sometimes called playful or ludic participation, in a variety of disciplines and fields. Here, the argument is that participatory processes are not only cognitive or procedural spaces: They are also playful arenas in which power, identity, affect, creativity, and embodied presence contribute to how political equality is thought, organised and enacted. Play(fulness) opens pathways for experimentation, cognitive flexibility, empathetic engagement, experiential insights, and alternative ways of knowing.

This chapter starts with a theoretical reflection on play and playfulness, grounded in the work of some of the key authors of play theory, to then highlight the contingencies that characterise play(fulness). In the next sections, we will discuss the articulation of play(fulness) and participation—captured by concepts such as playful participation and ludic participation—and how play(fulness) can strengthen these participatory processes. In this last section, we will also reflect on the risks produced by this articulation of play(fulness) and participation, moving away from the more celebratory approaches that still often characterise the literature on playful and ludic participation, without ignoring the democratic opportunities provided by this articulation.

2. Theorising play and playfulness

Play has long been theorised as a non-purposive activity, a deeply embodied practice that unfolds free from external necessities (Caillois, 2001; Suits, 2005) and stands in conceptual contrast to work, duty, and 'serious' pursuit (Huizinga, 1949). Huizinga's (1949) *Homo Ludens*—originally published in 1938—is considered a key starting point

for contemporary play theory, defining play through a series of characteristics. For Huizinga (1949, p. 7), play is "a voluntary activity" that is at the same time "superfluous" (p. 8), which renders it free. While Huizinga does not distinguish between the discursive and material components of these play activities, he does allude to the importance of play as an embodied practice, for instance, when he writes that "in play the beauty of the human body in motion reaches its zenith" (Huizinga, 1949, p. 7). Secondly, "play is not 'ordinary' or 'real' life", as play has an "'only pretending' quality", which brings in the paradox that play is characterised by "a consciousness of the inferiority of play compared with 'seriousness'," while this does not "prevent it from proceeding with the utmost seriousness, with an absorption, a devotion that passes into rapture and, temporarily at least, completely abolishes that troublesome 'only' feeling" (Huizinga, 1949, p. 8). As Huizinga continues, "[t]he contrast between play and seriousness is always fluid" (Huizinga, 1949, p. 8), but he also stresses that play is not "foolish": "It lies outside the antithesis of wisdom and folly" (Huizinga, 1949, p. 6). The third characteristic that Huizinga distinguishes is play's secludedness and limitedness, which refers to its limitations in relation to time and space, and the creation of a "magic circle" (Huizinga, 1949, p. 212). Play has a particular duration, but it is also a practice that can be repeated, and it has a "playground marked off beforehand either materially or ideally, deliberately or as a matter of course" (Huizinga, 1949, p. 10). The fourth characteristic is that play is regulated. As Huizinga (1949, p. 8—emphasis in original) writes, it "creates order, *is* order. Into an imperfect world and into the confusion of life it brings a temporary, a limited perfection. Play demands order absolute and supreme." Huizinga (1949, p. 10) connects this to "the noblest qualities we are capable of perceiving in things: rhythm and harmony". But he also relates the order of play with the creation of a "play-community", where "the feeling of being 'apart together' in an exceptional situation […] retains its magic beyond the duration of the individual game" (Huizinga, 1949, p. 12). This then becomes articulated with the secrecy of play: "The exceptional and special position of play is most tellingly illustrated by the fact that it loves to surround itself with an air of secrecy." Finally, the fifth characteristic–at least for Huizinga (1949, p. 13)–is that play is "connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it."

Huizinga's theorisation of play has been extensively discussed, with Caillois's (2001) critique from 1958 as another key moment in play theory. In this critique, Caillois (2001, p. 4) argues that play is "nearly always spectacular or ostentatious", which tends to counter the ideas of secrecy and mystery. Huizinga's fifth characteristic, the absence of material interest, is also contested, as Caillois (2001, p. 5) points to the existence of "bets and games of chance", which "for better or worse, occupy an important part in the economy and daily life of various cultures." But importantly, Caillois (2001, p. 6) aligns his definition of play with Huizinga's emphasis on the idea that play is voluntary and free: "There is also no doubt that play must be defined as a free and voluntary activity, a source of joy and amusement." Similarly, play's disconnection from the "rest of life", as "a separate occupation", the existence of "precise limits of time and place" and the often-central role of "precise, arbitrary, unexceptionable rules that must be accepted as such and that govern the correct playing of the game"—characteristics which also feature in Huizinga's work—are also confirmed in Caillois's (2001, p. 6 & 7) work. At the same time, Caillois (2001, p. 9—emphasis in original) brings in more contingency and nuance, when he writes that "games are not ruled and make-believe. Rather, they are ruled *or* make-believe." Play is thus "accompanied by a special awareness of a second reality or of a free unreality, as against real life" (Caillois, 2001,

p. 10). Moreover, the outcome of play is necessarily uncertain. Even when Caillois (2001, p. 9) points to the difficulties of capturing all types of play in one all-encompassing definition (e.g., "kite-flying and top-spinning, puzzles such as crossword puzzles, the game of patience, horsemanship, seesaws, and certain carnival attractions" are hard to grasp), he still distinguishes six key characteristics. For Caillois (2001, pp. 9-10), play is free, separate, uncertain, unproductive, governed by rules, and make-believe. Interestingly, the notion of seriousness hardly features in Caillois' discussion on the definition of play,[31] but only appears much later in *Man, Play and Games*, when he argues that "the question of knowing which preceded the other, play or the serious, is a vain one" (Caillois, 2001, p. 64). There, Caillois (2001, p. 64) argues against the position that play is insignificant, while still maintaining the distinction between "play and reality", as "they always take place in domains that are incompatible."

These first traces of play's contingency are highlighted further by later authors writing about play, with Sutton-Smith's (1997) *The Ambiguity of Play* as a case in point. In this book, Sutton-Smith starts by referring to a series of authors who all thematise the contingency of play, as can be illustrated by this summary of Turner's (1969) position who—according to Sutton-Smith (1997, p. 1)—"calls play 'liminal' or 'liminoid', meaning that it occupies a threshold between reality and unreality, as if, for example, it were on the beach between the land and the sea." Bauman (1995, p. 98) made a similar point, when writing that "the world of play is soft yet elusive." Sutton-Smith's solution to this contingency is discursive, as he identifies (and analyses) seven different rhetorics of play.[32] The last of these rhetorics, frivolity, is particularly important, as not only refers to the "activities of the idle or the foolish", but also forms the constitutive outside against which all other rhetorics position themselves: "it inverts the classic 'work ethic' view of play, against which all the other rhetorics exist as rhetorics of rebuttal" (Sutton-Smith, 1997, p. 11). Moreover, the rhetorics of play as frivolous not only deals with the "puritanic negative", but also opens spaces to acknowledge the (importance of) "trickster figures and fools", "who enacted playful protest against the orders of the ordained world" (Sutton-Smith, 1997, p. 11).

Play's contingencies are situated at a number of levels. First, the idea that play is free and voluntary is complicated through the complexity of play's rules (Hughes, 1983), the sometimes-high levels of disciplining that takes place in play-communities (see, for instance, Carpentier and Patyn, 2007), the social pressures that players are subjected to, and the regulation by the 'outside' world. Gruneau (1980, p. 68—emphasis removed) formulates this as a paradox, in the following terms: "Play gives the impression of being at once both an independent and spontaneous aspect of human action or agency and a dependent and regulated aspect of it." A second contingency was already addressed in the Huizinga-Caillois discussion, which is the contingent relationship between the absence of material interest and profit, on the one hand and play's monetisation, on the other. Arguably, the legitimacy of the profit-motive in play is object of a discursive-material struggle in its own right, with, for instance, digital games at the forefront of this struggle. Nielsen's (2025) analysis of *World of Warcraft*—a massively multiplayer online role-playing video game—shows how (some) games have developed token-based economies and displayed stronger

[31] Caillois (2001, p. 9) does refer there to the serious nature of the rules of play.
[32] These are (1) progress; (2) fate; (3) power; (4) identity; (5) imaginary; (6) self; and (7) frivolity.

levels of financialisation of play. At the same time, some play remains a location of non-monetisation, as Abulhawa (2016, p. 149) argues:

> "play in many forms is able to generate spaces of rhythmic synchronicity between people in the public built environment that is not primarily concerned with the flow of capital, the generation of profit, the productivity and efficiency of individuals, or the creation of an ideological community identity."

The secludedness and limitedness of play, its separation in time and space, is forced to co-exist with spectacle—as Caillois (2001, p. 4) mentioned, even when he still emphasises that play is separate—and with the digital opportunities to expand the spaces and—to some degree—times of play. More importantly, play is a social process embedded in everyday life (de Souza e Silva and Sutko, 2008), unable to create solid boundaries where ideologies and politics cannot enter. As Sutton-Smith (1997, p. 106, see also; Hughes, 1983) wrote: "Talking about the game independently of the life of the group playing it, is an abstraction […]. In sum, there are the rhetorics of the larger culture that have their own socializing influence, then there is the game-relevant rhetoric of the group that plays the game […], and then, within both of these, there is the game itself." One example is Intzidis and Prevedourakis's (2008, p. 211) analysis of otherness in first-person shooter video games, where the game set-up often "allows for the creation of an undifferentiated good 'us' confronting an equally undifferentiated evil 'them.'" At a more material level, Keever (2022—emphasis in original; see also Stallabrass, 1993) argues that video games offer particular player identity constructions through the materiality (or technicity, as Keever calls it) of play and their engagement with the "ontology of calculability":

> "Even if a player does not act in a way that internalizes a specific videogame's ideological structure, even if they play in a less-than-ideal way—even if they play *as mindlessly as possible*, with zero regard for what is happening onscreen—they are engaging with a system that is imposing rationality upon that action."

The last contingency to be addressed here is what is sometimes referred to as the separation between play and 'real life', while the borders between these two realms are porous and fluid, as also Huizinga (1949, p. 8) already argued. Play entails a suspension of what is constructed as reality, and at the same time confirms it, but play cannot escape from the Real. Fink (1968, p. 19) critiques the articulation of play "as an escape from unyielding reality to a dream-utopia", and the dichotomies that structure play discourses: "As long as we continue naively using the popular antitheses of 'work-play', 'frivolity-seriousness' and the like, we will never grasp the ontological meaning of play." Even when, according to Fink (1968, p. 22), play "interrupts the continuity and purposive structure of our lives", it simultaneously

> "relates to [our normal life] in a very meaningful way, namely in its mode of representation. If we define play in the usual manner by contrasting it with work, reality, seriousness and authenticity, we falsely juxtapose it with other existential phenomena. Play is a basic existential phenomenon, just as primordial and autonomous as death, love, work and struggle for power, but it is not bound to these phenomena in a common ultimate purpose. Play, so to speak, confronts them all—it absorbs them by representing them. We play at

> being serious, we play truth, we play reality, we play work and struggle, we play love and death—and we even play play itself."

Later, he adds that "each game is an attempt at existence, a vital experiment that encounters in the plaything the essence of unyielding reality" (Fink, 1968, p. 23). This align with Winnicott's (1991, p. 47) psychoanalytical approach—albeit with more emphasis on power and control—when he writes that "[t]he thing about playing is always the precariousness of the interplay of personal psychic reality and the experience of control of actual objects."

One important mechanism to police the separation between play and 'real life' functions through the denial of play's seriousness and the articulation of play as frivolous (see also Sutton-Smith, 1997). It is a dichotomisation that has been resisted, as early as Hegel's work—as Nagel (1996) argues[33] (see also Fink, 1968, p. 25)—for instance, in Hegel's *Philosophy of Religion*, where he writes about the cultus that it is "a serious playing and a playful seriousness, a gravity that is gay" (Hegel, 1987, p. 168, cited in Nagel, 1996, p. 155). Gadamer (2013, pp. 106-107) argues that "[p]lay has a special relation to what is serious": "[P]lay itself contains its own, even sacred, seriousness" but "in playing, all those purposive relations that determine active and caring existence have not simply disappeared, but are curiously suspended." Also later authors have emphasised the contingent relation between the serious and frivolous components of play, in some cases by emphasising the seriousness of play, as Hansen (2009, p. 637) does, when writing about skateboarding, which is "a highly creative form of serious play that has had a huge influence on contemporary culture." War games are another example of the seriousness of play, with, for instance, Stacy (2009, p. 779) arguing that "[t]oday, there is still that real-world application, and the line between games played as entertainment and those played for a serious purpose is not always clear, especially in terms of sophistication." Still, this does not imply that the relationship of play with seriousness is univocal and unproblematic. Leandro (2009, p. 708) points to the frequent absence of what he calls "serious consequences", when writing about team play: "Most of the time, play is a serious activity without serious consequences for the playing agent, in terms of the results of mistakes and failures when committed." Play can also be considered inappropriate, because of its lack of seriousness. For instance, Eichberg (2016, p. 39) describes his indignant response to seeing "dioramas of thousands of tin soldiers" during a military history museum visit: "For me, this was deeply unserious—it reduced war to being 'just play'. Certainly, war is not 'just play'—but also play is not 'just' play." These significatory contingencies bring Dombrowski (2016)—as summarised by MacLean, Russell and Ryall (2016, p. 7)—to think about play as "serious-nonseriousness", in order to capture this fluidity.

One signifier that allows overcoming the dichotomies of play and 'real life', and of seriousness and frivolity, is the notion of playfulness. In their introduction to *Applied Playfulness*, Wimmer *et al.* (2012, pp. 9–10) describe playfulness as "creative, joyful, lively or even childish," and as deeply rooted in traditions emphasising the autonomy and non-instrumentality of play. However, they also point out that playfulness transcends the act of playing, as it is a reflective, exploratory disposition marked by

[33] Nagel (1996) also discusses the perspectives of Plato, Aristotle, Kant and Schiller on play, amongst others.

cognitive openness, experimentation, and the temporary suspension of normative expectations. This aligns well with Hautopp and Nørgaard's (2017, p. 3, while referring to Bateson and Martin, 2013) description of playfulness (and articulation with creativity—see also Chapter 6): "Playfulness can be identified as a particular positive mood state, which drives creativity and innovation, and helps people escape conventional thinking." In this sense, playfulness constitutes a flexible and transformative attitude that enables individuals and groups to reinterpret rules, explore possibilities, and negotiate meaning in ways that exceed predetermined goals. Because playful engagement extends "beyond the screen into our everyday and cultural lives" (Wimmer *et al.*, 2012, p. 10), it actively shapes how people interact, perceive, and participate in collective settings. Importantly, playfulness also operates as an epistemic practice: It generates provisional hypotheses, enables imaginative exploration, and surfaces tacit or embodied forms of knowing that may remain inaccessible in strictly rational-linguistic settings.

This broad approach can also be found in other fields, for instance, in reversal theory in psychology, a theoretical framework that emphasises a diversity of dynamic motivational states (Smith and Apter, 1975). Apter (2001, p. 3) labels reversal theory "a structural-phenomenological theory of motivation, emotion, and personality", which distinguishes four domains of experience: Telic/Paratelic, Conformist/Negativistic, Master/Sympathy, and Autic/Alloic.[34] It is the first domain—Telic/Paratelic—which connects to playfulness, as it refers to the structuring of mental life in terms of means-and-ends. This implies, as Apter (2009, p. 597) explains, that there is "a frequent alternation between a play mode and a serious mode (known technically as the paratelic and telic states, respectively). […] In the serious state, the basic motivation is that of achievement, or progress toward achievement, in the future." In contrast, "In the playful state, the basic motivation is that of enjoyment and fun, preferably in the present moment" (Apter, 2009, p. 598). Although reversal theory has been critiqued—see, for example, Rowan (1981, p. 245) whose harshest critique was launched at the theory's "black-and-white terms"—still, its relevance here lies in demonstrating how playfulness can transcend play, and how the arousal in the paratelic state can render "incongruities, dissonances, ambiguities, stupidities, and illogicalities […] so enjoyable that we seek out and construct them" (Apter, 2001, p. 23).

Finally, the increased attention for play and playfulness is arguably not coincidental. Already in the mid-nineties, Bauman (1995, p. 99—emphasis removed) wrote that "[t]he mark of postmodern adulthood is the willingness to embrace the game whole-heartedly, as children do." Minnema (1998, pp. 21-22) added that "[a]lmost anything in postmodern culture can be described in terms of play; even culture itself is described in terms of play. […] The phenomenon of play, nowadays, is recognised as part and parcel of Western culture, and indeed, of culture and life as such." The increased presence of, and attention for, play is captured through notions such as gamification and ludification. Gamification is a narrower concept, which refers to "the use (rather than the extension) of design (rather than game-based technology or other game-related practices) elements (rather than full-fledged games) characteristic for games (rather than play or playfulness) in non-game contexts (regardless of specific usage intentions, contexts, or media of implementation)" (Deterding *et al.*, 2011, p. 13).

[34] Conformist/Negativistic refers to the position towards rules, Master/Sympathy to transactions, and Autic/Alloic (or concerned with the self/concerned with others) to relationships.

Ludification (Raessens, 2006) is a broader notion—a "socio-cultural trend" as Deterding *et al.* (2011, p. 13) call it—which includes the increased presence of "playful interaction" (Deterding *et al.*, 2011, p. 13), and—as we shall discuss below—playful participation. Frissen *et al.* (2015, p. 9) point to the "immense popularity of computer games", but add that ludification "seems to penetrate every cultural domain." They illustrate this in the following terms:

> "In our present experience economy, for example, playfulness not only characterizes leisure time (fun shopping, game shows on television, amusement parks, playful computer, Internet, and smartphone use), but also those domains that used to be serious, such as work (which should above all be fun nowadays), education (serious gaming), politics (ludic campaigning), and even warfare (computer games like war simulators and interfaces)" (Frissen *et al.*, 2015, p. 9).

3. Articulating play(fulness) and participation

As part of the growing presence of, and attention to, play(fulness), it has also entered the political realm, even though its introduction to politics may appear paradoxical. Politics, and participation in particular, is frequently discursively and materially structured through institutional expectations, procedural constraints, and normative frameworks that appear at odds with the openness of play, and its still-present articulation as frivolous and non-serious. Yet, as Wimmer *et al.* (2012, p. 10) remind us, "the serious is not everywhere isolated from the playful", suggesting that playfulness can in fact unsettle rigid forms of participation and cultivate more exploratory, imaginative, and embodied modes of engagement.

These opportunities to introduce playfulness in political, democratic and participatory theory have also materialised, as is witnessed by the academic literature—in a variety of fields that articulate play and participation, including the arts (Stott, 2015), game studies (Blomé, 2025; Markussen and Knutz, 2017), health studies (Etchells and Tonkin, 2019), urban planning (Poplin, 2012), education (Lester, 2014; Parnell and Patsarika, 2014; Sullivan and Wilson, 2015), activism (Cervi and Divon, 2023; Shephard, 2011) and institutionalised politics (Bunz, 2019; Glas *et al.*, 2019a). This widespread interest has also resulted in the development of a series of concepts, e.g., ludic participation (Stott, 2015), gamified participation (Blomé, 2025) and game-based participation (Ampatzidou *et al.*, 2015), but also playful citizenship (Glas *et al.*, 2019a) and silly citizenship (Hartley, 2010).

This diversity of approaches also brings in different perspectives on participation, some of which we would prefer to label interaction, and not participation (in the *sharing power*-definition of participation that we use here). For instance, most of the chapters of Tonkin and Whitaker's (2019) edited book *Play and Playfulness for Public Health and Wellbeing* that refer to participation articulate it as *taking part* in particular social practices. One example from this book is Etchells and Tonkin's (2019 p. 115) chapter, which focusses on what they call "participation through informed choice", while we would prefer to consider informedness and literacy as conditions of possibility for participation, following, for instance, Türkoğlu's (2011) argumentation (see also Carpentier and Wimmer, 2025, p. 25). Another example is Markussen and Knutz's (2017, p. 3) study on a research project which aimed to "design social games to be

played during visiting hours in top-security Danish prisons in order to help children and teenagers cope with some of the problems they experience due to parental incarceration." Most of the eight game prototypes that they then study deal with what we would call interactive processes, while only a few prototypes can be considered participatory, focussing on the co-creation of the game content, where—in other words—these "games use co-design in a playful way to socially engage the players" (Markussen and Knutz, 2017, p. 17).

The literature about play(fulness) and participation also has different fields as object. Here Carpentier's (2011b) distinction between participation in/through the media is helpful, as it allows us to differentiate between participation in/through play. The above-mentioned examples of co-design in Markussen and Knutz's (2017) study are examples of participation *in* play. Participatory practices in the field of play sometimes lean more towards a more minimalist participatory intensity: In his *Critical Play* book, Flanagan (2009, p. 226) mentions that "[p]layers of popular games may reskin, redesign, and indeed, reissue scenarios in online game environments such as Second Life." Jenkins (2006a, p. 163) makes a similar point about modding in his *Convergence Culture* book:

> "We might see modding as a special case where participatory culture seeks to reprogram the code so as to enable new kinds of interactions with the game. Yet, it is also a special case where the commercial producer continues to exert constraints on use even as the work gets appropriated by the grassroots community."

These limitations are sometimes transcended, both in genre and intensity. Jenkins' (1992, p. 5; see also 2006b) work on participatory culture and textual poaching shows how audiences can playfully reappropriate popular culture, by engaging in participatory fan cultures, where they create new narratives, perform their favourite characters, and organise their fan communities, which allows them, in other words, to "play with textual materials", where co-creation (see Prax, 2012; 2016) and player activism remain possible. Noveck (2006, p. 267) describes an older example of the latter: "In *Second Life*, in fact, residents formed a group to protest the use of flying or 'teleporting' (*Star Trek*-style) from one location to another and insisted that all subscribers should have to walk from place to place to promote social encounters."

But we also need to acknowledge the importance of participation *through* play(fulness). In this type of participation—which Carpentier (2017, p. 90) calls trans-field participation—a "particular process in one field facilitates participation in another." Participation through play(fulness) potentially affects a wide variety of societal fields. Markussen and Knutz (2017, p. 3), for instance, refer to institutionalised politics and urban planning: "[G]ames can also be used as means for increasing citizen participation in the solving of conflicts and policy-making (e.g. Intel's *Water Wars*) or the democratization of urban planning." Neys and Jansz's (2019, p. 48) research into political video gaming concludes that "[p]laying games in general, and political games in particular, does seem to facilitate some form of engagement and participation," even though, in practice, this study focusses more on engagement than on participation as power-sharing. Also some of the work on playful activism refers to the activation of play(fulness) in order to intervene—and thus participate—in public debates about a variety of topics. One Indian example is Vijay and Gekker's (2021, p. 722) article on

the Mary Sweety spoofs,[35] which "use humorous formats like parody and mimicry to make fun of her attempt to enter Sabarimala and its televised coverage," supporting (hyper)conservative gender politics. Similarly, Cervi and Divon's (2023, p. 10) analysis of #gazaunderattack TikTok videos argue that "playful activism can trigger emotional responses, elicit feelings of community, and mobilise affective publics for playful participation." But it is especially Shepard's (2011) book *Play, Creativity, and Social Movements* that not only contains a multitude of examples of playful activism, but that also highlights their articulation with creativity (see Chapter 6).

4. The articulation of play(fulness) and participation as a strength?

The articulation of play(fulness) and participation is in many cases seen as beneficial, where play(fulness) is seen to support participation through the generation of pleasure, rendering participation more attractive and fulfilling. This argument is summarised by Poplin (2012, p. 204), when she writes that "Playful Public Participation (PPP) aims to bring satisfaction and pleasure to the process of interaction between citizens and planning experts." The attractiveness of play—through the pleasure it generates—also extends an invitation to citizens to become involved, evoking the "interest of citizens previously not engaged in e-participation", as it renders the "participation process a more engaging experience" (Blomé, 2025, p. 29). As Cervi and Divon (2023, p. 10) write about TikTok, play and activism, it is "the platform's vernaculars of playfulness that make activism relatable, tangible, and accessible to broader audiences." Here, Stott (2015, p. 1) argues that the appeal of ludic participation (in the artistic field) originates from play being "understood to be a voluntary, intense, and exploratory activity that cedes agency from artist to participant," and is "unquestionably valuable" as it "functions as a domain of fictive sociability" (Stott, 2015, p. 71).

A second set of arguments supporting the articulation of play(fulness) and participation focusses on the enhancement of citizens' communicative capacities, where playfulness can contribute to the redistribution of voice, the widening of the repertoire of legitimate political expressions, and the enrichment of democratic reasoning. In short, play has the capacity to activate citizens to "engage more actively in debating and understanding" (Hautopp and Nørgaard, 2017, p. 10). Writing about the educational field, Parnell and Patsarika (2014, p. 105) argue that "[t]hrough their playful—seemingly 'innocent'—comments, participating students made a strong case for their right to assert control, thus revealing their political voice." Similarly, Lester (2014, p. 200) writes that

> "the distinctive features of playing—spontaneity, unpredictability and the ways in which children collectively maintain control of being out of control—represent moments in which children can appropriate time/space for their own collective desires, not as a child becoming adult, but as children becoming different."

Playfulness also fosters perspective-taking and empathy. Through role shifts, narrative experimentation, or embodied encounters, participants may inhabit alternative viewpoints, challenge entrenched assumptions, and explore emotional and

[35] Mary Sweety is an Indian activist, who repeatedly tried to gain access to the Sabarimala temple—located in the South Indian state of Kerala—after a 2018 Supreme Court ruling that women of all ages should be allowed to enter the temple (Vijay and Gekker, 2021, p. 719).

experiential dimensions of political issues (Nussbaum, 1997). Play(fulness) also contributes to the creation of "an energetic and relaxed atmosphere" (Hautopp and Nørgaard, 2017, p. 10), which is also a safe(r) space, where "risk is removed, so learners can practise the skills they need to develop, without worrying about failure" (Walsh, 2016).

Thirdly—and relatedly—there are the deliberative-argumentative reasons in favour of the articulation of play(fulness) and participation, as play(fulness) allows to explore alternative scenarios, generate unconventional solutions, and break free from habitual interpretive frames (Sicart, 2014). Its non-instrumental character helps participants momentarily detach from fixed positions and enter modes of imaginative inquiry, where otherwise unarticulated possibilities can surface. Stott (2015, p. 121) here refers to Pottage's (1998) phrase of the "art of contingency", where "[p]lay emerges out of its own contingency within a relaxed field" and where ludic participation needs to be seen as "open, complex, and informal systems" (Stott, 2015, p. 11). To use Markussen and Knutz's (2017, p. 7) words on gaming: "Social games often use fictionalization rather than simulation. In fictional game worlds there is a larger degree of freedom for experimenting with power structures, identities, and control." This also opens up opportunities for subversion, which bring Parnell and Patsarika (2014, p. 101) to refer to Bhabha's (1994) third space, and MacLean *et al.* (2016, p. 2) to Bey's temporary autonomous zones. The following citation illustrates the latter:

> "Or, to put it slightly differently, the mimicry and mockery of our current worlds within a frame that allows for temporary respite from both the dull and alienating routines of daily life and the ontological anxieties of an uncertain world (Sutton-Smith, 1999). From here, it is a mere hop, skip and a jump to Hakim Bey's (1985) notion of a Temporary Autonomous Zone (TAZ), with its attendant meanings of, inter alia, fleetingness; territory, borders, liminality and interstices; disorder, resistance and freedom." (MacLean *et al.*, 2016, p. 2)

Fourthly, there are also representational arguments in favour of the articulation of play(fulness) and participation. Sullivan and Wilson (2015, p. 9) point to the opportunities of "playful talk" to negotiate subjectivity (and subject positions), as "[p]layful talk creates an imaginary space where the institutional strictures of one's positional identity may be loosened," and allows participants to "experiment with different roles—roles they select for themselves. In this way, children are able to imagine and play at possible selves." Also the representation of the political is affected, as playful participation (in this case playful activism) can "normalize the idea that political engagement can be an everyday activity or even a play" (Cervi and Divon, 2023, p. 10). Relatedly, as Stott (2015, p. 71) argues, ludic participation allows to represent the role of power structures: "Ludic participation might even show that order as such is unavoidable, however improbable its forms," while it can also represent the opportunities to undermine these power structures, and represent (the empowering opportunities) of contingency:

> "a work of ludic participation, which invites participation in response to the question 'Other—but how?' takes play to be a form of sociability from which contingency can be eradicated only momentarily and provisionally. Play is a productive response to a question which admits of no absolute answer" (Stott, 2015, p. 48).

Finally, there is a series of epistemic arguments to support the articulation of play(fulness) and participation. One starting point is that play itself is a source of knowledge, or, as Clancy (2024, p. 13) formulates it: "Games have been a powerful generator of knowledge," yielding "profound mathematical insights". Earlier, Clancy (2024, p. 9) wrote that "games have shaped how we generate knowledge and reason about the unknown," explaining that "[g]ames have endured because they represent a model of how our minds work" (Clancy, 2024, p. 13). This argument can be extended to a more cultural-participatory dimension, where play is a cultural knowledge reservoir, activated through its endless performances and enactments. In a more focussed meaning, play also allows for learning, as Ampatzidou *et al.* (2015, p. 9) write: "While it would be naïve to assume that game-based participation can address systemic social conflicts and the unavoidable domination of powerful interest groups, it can be used to improve citizen's knowledge about the institutions involved in planning and their ability to articulate their proposals."

When we focus more on the role between play, participation and science, we can start with Glas *et al.*'s (2019b, p. 159) argument in the introduction of the second part of *The Playful Citizen*, entitled *Ludo-epistemologies*, where they write that play can "overcome the asymmetry between the 'bastions' where knowledge is produced and daily life." In the same book, Glas and Lammes (2019, p. 218) argue that

> "not just play, but also playing with rules offers new venues of critical engagement for the production of knowledge. Play can be a powerful means for opening up scientific endeavors to 'amateurs,' and the directly related activities of rule breaking/bending opens up new perspectives for designing alternative citizen science games."

But playfulness can do more: It allows participants to test ideas, negotiate norms, generate tentative insights and alternative interpretations, access experiential or affective forms of understanding, and confront uncertainty without the fear of failure or judgement. Error-tolerant environments are also epistemically productive, as they allow participants to revise assumptions, articulate uncertainties, and collectively refine their understanding. This echoes the emphasis on playfulness as a transformative practice that encourages experimentation and collective learning, opening pathways to recognising the plurality of knowledges present in a group, including those rooted in lived experience, identity, or affect.

Yet, the articulation of play(fulness) and participation also entails risks, which the literature on ludic participation tends to downplay. As Poplin (2012, p. 204) argues, in relation to games, the practice of articulating both play and participation is far from easy: "The design of an online serious, non-competitive and public participatory game turned out to be a challenging task for the game designers." These difficulties might eventually work against the participatory process (and against its more maximalist intensities), but other problems might occur. One starting point here is the discussion on the contingencies of play, whose existence does not nullify the mainstream forces that might work against the deployment of play in participatory processes. Rules continue to play an important role in playful (participatory) formats, which might be incompatible with, or weaken the power-sharing logics of these processes. Moreover, play's relations with power inequalities are complex, as in some cases play might hide

the existence of, or even exacerbate, existing power inequalities, while "playful participation is constrained by certain hierarchical orders and asymmetrical distributions of control" (Markussen and Knutz, 2017, p. 7). And as the case of the Mary Sweety spoofs (Vijay and Gekker, 2021) illustrates, play can also become activated by discriminatory, exclusionary or oppressive forces, which again works against the basic power-sharing principles of participation. As Parnell and Patsarika (2014, p. 108) write—in relation to children's participation: "Children's voice, participation and play […] are also vulnerable to appropriation by adults for their own means."

Finally, the still-present articulation of play as frivolous might contradict the seriousness expected from participatory processes. Playful formats thus risk trivialising political issues and infantilising participants. In epistemic terms, ludic participation can distort the knowledge dynamics of deliberation by rewarding quick or amusing contributions rather than reflective or experience-based ones. In participatory processes, this may result in playful exercises that distract from substantive deliberation, reinforce dominant voices, or privilege those comfortable with creative expression. Such risks align with critiques of superficial gamification strategies (Deterding, 2015; Fuchs *et al.*, 2014), which may prioritise reward logics over genuine engagement, or aestheticised 'fun' that masks power imbalances rather than addressing them. This echoes concerns in deliberative theory (Parkinson, 2012; Sanders, 1997) about procedural distortion and in agonistic theory (Mouffe, 2000; Rancière, 2004) about the co-optation of dissensus into spectacle.

Despite these risks, play(fulness) still often emerges not as an ancillary aesthetic supplement to participation but as a generative mode of engagement that disrupts, enriches, and reorients participatory practices. It allows participants to challenge rigid norms, expose power structures, inhabit alternative spatial and political identities, and explore diverse possibilities of collective action. By mediating between deliberative ideals and agonistic disruptions, and by unfolding across a variety of terrains, play(fulness) offers a distinct lens for understanding how participation can be imaginative and critical, embodied and performative, structured and open-ended, and productive (and sometimes destructive).

5. Conclusion

The broad claim of what Raessens (2006) has called the ludification of culture can be observed in the recent attention for the articulation of play(fulness) and participation in the academic literature in a variety of academic fields and disciplines. Even when some of this literature tends to conflate interaction and participation—as these authors articulate participation as taking-part—the "Turn to Play" (Zimna, 2014, p. 136ff) is clearly present in participatory theory (and research). Arguably, this is long overdue, given the societal importance of play and its emancipatory potential.

Play(fulness) first of all allows emphasising the importance of pleasure in/of participation. Mouffe (2005, p. 6) has argued for the (re)validation of passion in politics, with the (re)validation of democratic pleasure forming a crucial part of this agenda. In the introduction of the special issue on *Rescuing Participation*, Carpentier, Melo, and Ribeiro (2019) make this point more explicitly, stressing the importance of

participation's enjoyment: Even "[s]ituations of maximalist participation are utopian non-places (or better, "never-to-be places"), which will always be unattainable and empty, but their approximation still generates the enjoyment of empowerment" (Carpentier, Melo, and Ribeiro, 2019, p. 29). Play(fulness) opens up crucial spaces for this validation of pleasure, paying attention to a diversity of embodied practices, sometimes fleeting, sometimes structural, ironically supporting deeply serious (political) processes and moving away from the dichotomies between seriousness and frivolity, and between politics and play. It allows acknowledging that politics can be playful and pleasurable, that there is ample space for laughter in politics, but also that play is deeply political.

But the importance of play(fulness) for participation is not limited to the pleasure it generates. Play(fulness) offers communicative, argumentative-deliberative, representational and epistemic opportunities to deepen participatory processes, which—taken together—offers a compelling case for its importance. At the same time, caution is needed to avoid becoming trapped in an unadulterated celebration of play(fulness). Play's presence, visibility and respectability may have increased, but also the seriousness of non-play remains important in participatory processes, given its societal importance. Moreover, as the haunting example of the Mary Sweety spoofs illustrates, play(fulness) can easily be activated to silence and oppress, thus working *against* participation's logic of power-sharing. Arguably, ludic participation's opportunities still outweigh these threats, as creating more space for laughter, smiles and grins, facilitates creativity and constructive collaboration.

6
On creativity

1. Introduction

Creativity is—as Ulibarri *et al*. (2019, p. 3) write—a "nebulous construct (kind of a 'you know it when you see it' thing)." At the same time, creativity has a strong (positive) normative value—who would not want to be regarded as creative, one may even ask. The concept features prominently in different societal fields, with the arts and the economy as two significant examples, each of which produces an impactful, albeit very different, ground for how creativity shall be perceived. As a consequence, creativity is sometimes defined exclusively through novelty and originality, while in other cases utility becomes a nodal point. These discursive grounds can sometimes be slightly absorbing, obscuring the importance of creativity in other societal fields, e.g., politics, communication and civil society. This is why the discussion of the intersection of creativity with participatory processes and knowledge production becomes important: It allows bringing in less visible forms of creativity, notably political and civic creativity.

This kind of conceptual set-up merits an in-depth analysis of the discursive struggles over the meaning of creativity, but also its relationship to affect and intuition. Such an analysis can show how different societal fields articulate creativity in distinct ways, which will then allow us to examine how creativity features in participatory processes, beyond the arts and the culture/creative industry, in fields such as politics, activism, communication and academia. This will, in turn, allow us to adopt a less restrictive perspective and transcend the field-driven approaches, also validating everyday creativity and the role of affect. Simultaneously, this analysis will facilitate a more critical reflection on the limitations of creativity, highlighting the need to articulate it with the nodal point of wisdom.

2. Defining creativity, affect and intuition

Creativity is yet another concept which is hard to define, as it does not escape from political struggle either. This significatory complexity is, for instance, captured by Bohm and Peat (2000, p. 226) when they write that "[s]omething relevant may be said about creativity, provided it is realised that whatever we say it is, there is also something more and something different," or by Green *et al*. (2024, p. 544), who write—with a touch of drama—that the "definitional question" has "persistently clouded scientific progress." The concept itself has also been vehemently critiqued, e.g., by Goldsmith (2011, p. 9) who labels creativity "the most trite, overused, and ill-defined concept in a writer's training" and "the thing to flee from", as it creates artificial distinctions and triggers an impossible search for novelty; after all, "the suppression of self-expression is impossible." And yet another position claims that (much of) creativity has been lost through its incorporation into a capitalist system, as Mould (2018, p. 3) argues in his *Against Creativity*: "Being creative in today's society has only one meaning: to carry on producing the status quo."

The notion of novelty—and some of its related concepts, such as originality—are central to a considerable number of definitions of creativity. Weisberg (2015, p. 113)

goes even so far as to write: "All researchers accept the criterion of novelty as a defining characteristic of creativity." Mould's (2018, p. 4—emphasis removed) short definition of creativity, as "power to create something from nothing", is a helpful starting point, also because he—when he explains his choice for 'power' in his definition—connects creativity with knowledge, agency and desire. He writes: "Creativity is a *power* because it blends knowledge (from the institutional and mechanistic level to the pre-cognitive), agency, and importantly desire to create something that does not yet exist" (Mould, 2018, p. 4—emphasis in original). Among those who have articulated creativity with novelty, Glăveanu and Beghetto (2020, p. 75) argued that "creative experience […] involves principled engagement with the unfamiliar and a willingness to approach the familiar in unfamiliar ways." If we go back further in time, we find Stein's (1953, p. 311) definition of a "creative work" as "a novel work that is accepted as tenable or useful by a group in some point in time", and Barron's (1955, p. 484) definition of creativity as the "capacity for producing adaptive responses which are unusual." More recently, Weisberg (2015, p. 119) defended the definition of creativity as "the production of goal-directed or intentional novelty" and Brandt (2021, p. 89) mentioned "the synergy of imagination, intention, and action that produces a novel result" in a list of possible definitions.

The notion of novelty might not be as uncontested as Weisberg (2015, p. 113) claims, though. One point of departure for this position may be found in Barthes' (1977, p. 146) essay *The Death of the Author*, in which he writes:

> "We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture. Similar to Bouvard and Pecuchet, those eternal copyists, at once sublime and comic and whose profound ridiculousness indicates precisely the truth of writing, the writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original. His only power is to mix writings, to counter the ones with the others, in such a way as never to rest on any one of them."

Importantly, Barthes creates a link between creativity and signifying practices—in his case, a 'text' with 'words'—while at the same time arguing against 'pure' originality and novelty. As Baron (2020, p. 342) remarks, Barthes (1981, p. 39) activates Kristeva's notion of intertextuality, to make a similar argument: "Any text is an intertext; other texts are present in it, at varying levels, in more or less recognisable forms: the texts of the previous and surrounding culture. Any text is a new tissue of past citations." This then brings us back to Goldsmith's (2011, p. 149) work, who—in his analysis of Andy Warhol's oeuvre—argues that Barthes' position is "a shorthand defense for the waves of appropriative, 'unoriginal,' and 'uncreative' artworks […]." In that work, Goldsmith (2011, p. 8) describes the design of his '*Uncreative Writing*' course, and how students "thrive" when they "are rewarded for plagiarism, identity theft, repurposing papers, patchwriting, sampling, plundering, and stealing", or, in other words, deconstructing novelty and originality.

This brings us to a second area of the discursive struggle over creativity, which focusses on validation as a necessary condition for creativity (see Glăveanu, 2014; Kasof, 1995). For instance, Csikszentmihalyi (1988) argues for a systems approach

to creativity, explaining that creativity is the "result of the three way interaction of a person with a domain of knowledge and a field that makes decision about that domain of knowledge" (McIntyre, 2007, p. 4). Brandt and Eagleman (2017, p. 115) point to the "negotiation between creative impulse and the community that is going to receive it," while Glăveanu (2014, p. 20) contends that "the most important part of creativity" is

> "the reconstruction of this work, symbolic and material, when perceived and used by others. Without this ability to make existing things new by reworking our understanding of them and relation to them, the Mona Lisa would simply be today an old, well-crafted painting."

As creativity is deployed across a variety of societal fields, this implies the existence of different validation structures, institutions and mechanisms. It also highlights the role of hegemonic forces in determining what counts as creativity and which outcomes are recognised as creative. For instance, Hemlin, Allwood and Martin (2004, p. 1) focus on research, and use the term of creative knowledge environments, to describe

> "those environments, contexts and surroundings the characteristics of which are such that they exert a positive influence on human beings engaged in creative work aiming to produce new knowledge or innovations, whether they work individually or in teams, within a single organization or in collaboration with others."

In the same edited volume, Kaiser (2004), and Wallgren and Hägglund (2004) pay attention to the role of environments and organisational settings in stimulating or obstructing creative work in science, in academia and in the industry. In the arts, Becker's (1982, p. x) notion of the art world, which refers to "the network of people whose cooperative activity, organized via their joint knowledge of conventional means of doing things, produces the kind of art works that art world is noted for", allows bringing in more societal (and sociological) perspectives on creativity. For Becker (1982, p. 4—emphasis in original), there is a need for the presence of "[s]omeone" who "must respond to the work once it is done", with an "event which consists of a work being made *and* appreciated."

In contrast, authors such as Runco (2015, p. 24), while acknowledging that creativity is related to social processes and contexts and has social ramifications, distance themselves from the 'social view of creativity', arguing that creativity "does not depend on social recognition." For these authors, creativity is primarily connected to life quality (Barron, 1995; Gruber, 1988), pleasure, but also to disruption. Creativity thus "gives us rich, meaningful experiences", both "in an aesthetic way, but also in the sense that creative things keep us mindful and engaged" (Runco, 2015, p. 27). As Runco (2015, p. 27) argues, "creativity allows each of us to create meaning" for ourselves and for the world, and "does not require a tangible product, nor an audience" (p. 28).

This brings us to the last area of discursive struggle over creativity, which deals with the articulation of creativity with effectiveness (and utility). Labelling this approach the "standard definition of creativity"—which in itself can be considered a post-political strategy—Runco and Jaeger (2012, p. 92) return to some of the older work on creativity—e.g., Stein (1953)— to argue that "[c]reativity requires both originality and effectiveness," and that "originality is not alone sufficient for creativity. Original things

must be effective to be creative." This is a strong position in the fields related to economy, management and marketing, and many other authors have expressed their agreement. For instance, Corazza (2016, p. 262), using a slightly more careful formulation, argues that creativity requires "potential originality and effectiveness." Similarly, Kharkhurin (2014, p. 338—our emphasis) refers to creativity's "attributes of novelty, *utility*, aesthetics, and authenticity." Florida's (2012, p. 7) book, *The Rise of the Creative Class*, is a key example of this articulation of capitalism, productivity and creativity, where he, for instance, writes that:

> "Capitalism has expanded its reach to capture the talents of heretofore excluded groups of eccentrics and nonconformists. In doing so, it has pulled off yet another astonishing mutation: taking people who would once have been viewed as bizarre mavericks operating at the bohemian fringe and placing them at the very heart of the process of innovation and economic growth. These changes in the economy and in the workplace have in turn helped to propagate and legitimize similar changes in society at large. The creative individual is no longer viewed as an iconoclast. He—or she—is the new mainstream."

This pivotal role of utility in the construction of creativity is not fully accepted, though, among scholars who focus on effectiveness. Runco, while still linking creativity to effectiveness, nevertheless argues that "creativity need not lead to implementation" (2015, p. 23). Moreover, Brandt (2021, p. 93) fully distances himself from the "standard definition" of creativity that emphasises effectiveness, as for him, it "risks under-representing the nonconformist, the marginalized, the amateur, and the child. On top of that, in an age without a common practice in the arts, a reliance on external judgment becomes even more tenuous." Instead, he argues that a definition of creativity is "more comprehensive and internally consistent when the making is distinguished from its reception, and utility, value, usefulness, appropriateness, and fitness are considered as secondary attributes rather than as primary ones" (Brandt, 2021, p. 93).

Some of these contestations are harsher, with authors arguing that these creative knowledge structures promote precarious and exploitative working conditions and relations, supported by the contemporary forms of the 'knowledge economy' under late capitalism (Morgan and Nelligan, 2018; Morgan, Wood and Nelligan, 2013). As McRobbie (2004, p. 186) writes, about the new creative economy in the UK: "Culture is being encouraged to look after itself, to 'entrepreneurialise' and thus to find its feet in the free market." As creators are immersed in this "dominant discourse on creative industries" (von Osten, 2007, p. 51), "creativity emerges as the democratic variant of genius: the ability to be creative is bestowed on everyone" (p. 54) which also implies that, in this scenario, creativity becomes a social obligation and that the "new [creative] labour subjects should be as contingent and flexible as the 'market' itself" (p. 54). In a language that is reminiscent of Horkheimer and Adorno's (2002) critiques on the culture industry, Mould (2018, p. 12) writes that "[t]he dominant narrative of creativity is one of creating more of the same. Contemporary capitalism has commandeered creativity to ensure its own growth and maintain the centralisation and monetisation of what it generates." These critiques do not only apply to the creative industry; they have also been launched at models such as the 'triple helix' interaction between universities, government and industry (see, e.g., Leydesdorff and Etzkowitz, 1998), which has been used to explain how innovations and new knowledge are created, arguing that the

focus on innovation reflects the push for the monetisation of science and the industrialisation of the university (Barry, 2011; Olssen and Peters, 2005).

These critical analyses demonstrate that spaces for resistance against the dominant articulation of capitalism and creativity exist. At the very beginning of his book, Mould (2018, p. 3) writes that "[c]reativity has been, and still is, a force for change in the world. It is a collective energy that has the potential to tackle capitalism's injustices rather than augment them." McRobbie (2004, p. 198) turns to Hardt and Negri's (2000) *Empire*, to argue that these processes of individualisation can offer opportunities for "new productive singularities" to arise, where the "working body" can "become a point of critical intersection with other working bodies" and where work "can become a site for re-socialisation at the heart of everyday life." At the same time, van Osten (2007, p. 58) complements these ideas with the argument that the precarisation of creative labour is—at least partially—accepted as a trade-off for the escape from hierarchical labour relations, "a choice for a particular lifestyle" driven by "a desire to be unstructured by others, rather than gain permanent employment."

3. Affect and intuition in creative practice

Creativity's above-mentioned relation to pleasure and life quality brings into focus its affective dimension. We do not aim to engage extensively with affect theory—with its key notions of affect, feeling and emotion—and the debates within this theoretical framework. There are many different definitions of affect (varying also on the basis of whether affect is a synonym for feeling, mood, emotion, …, or not) and approaches by psychologists and neuroscientists as to what triggers affect (e.g., a dominant neuroscience-based approach argues that affect is activated through valence and arousal; see e.g. Barrett, 2017; Rieber, 1980). Here, Shouse's (2005—emphasis removed) short set of definitions will suffice: "Feelings are personal and biographical, emotions are social, and affects are prepersonal" (see also Lewis, Haviland-Jones and Barrett, 2010; Schiller *et al*., 2024; Wilt and Revelle, 2015).

What is of relevance to this chapter, though, is that affect and emotions are integral components of the creative process. Scholars in the area of affect and creativity have been studying, for instance, "how varying emotional states enhance or inhibit creative thinking and behavior" (Smith, Pickering and Bhattacharya, 2022, p. 461), and how both positive and negative emotions may facilitate (Amabile *et al*., 2005; Ivcevic and Hoffmann, 2017) or obstruct various phases of the creative process. There is abundant research associating the engagement in creative activities "with increased positive emotions and enhanced subjective well-being" (Smith, Pickering and Bhattacharya, 2022, p. 460), pleasure and creation of meaning and purpose in life (Barron, 1995; Gruber, 1988; Runco, 2015). As Smith, Pickering and Bhattacharya (2022, p. 462) explain, "creativity contributes to well-being not only through its relationship with positive emotions, but it can enhance one's sense of flourishing or eudemonic well-being" which is related "with having meaning and purpose in one's life, feeling competent, and having positive relationships".

A component that is often associated with creativity and affect is intuition. Intuition is used as a concept to describe processes and practices where people's instinct and not reasoning or rational deliberation become (co)drivers of decision-making or praxis.

Early psychologists defined intuition in opposition to rationality. For instance, Freud rejected intuition as a tool for attaining knowledge. As he argued: "from what I have seen of intuition, it seems to me to be the product of a kind of impartiality" (Freud, 1961/1920, p. 53; see also Morf, 1965, p. 88). Jung (1976/1921, p. 453) regarded "intuition as a basic psychological function", as "the function that mediates perceptions in an unconscious way". For Jung, intuition, like sensation, is an "irrational" function, while thinking and feeling are "rational" functions: "As with sensation, its contents have the character of being 'given,' in contrast to the 'derived' or 'produced' character of thinking and feeling contents" (Jung, 1976/1921, p. 453; see also Pilard, 2018).

More contemporary approaches relate intuition to both cognitive and affective components (Adinolfi and Loia, 2022; Dane and Pratt, 2007; 2009; Hodgkinson, Langan-Fox and Sadler-Smith, 2008), moving away from definitions that construct intuition in opposition to rationality. For Dane and Pratt (2007, p. 40), "intuitions are affectively charged judgments which arise rapidly through non-conscious, holistic associations." These authors argue that intuition is closely linked to the affective dimensions of intelligence and knowledge (Gigerenzer, 2023), and that it is informed by experience, which creates a form of capital that is employed for rapid judgement and decision-making (Dane and Pratt, 2007; 2009) functioning as a shortcut to lengthy processes of conscious reasoning.

Among the types of intuition identified, 'creative intuition' has been defined as "[s]low-to-form affectively-charged judgment occurring in advance of an insight that combines knowledge in novel ways based on divergent associations, and which orients behavior in a direction that may lead to a creative outcome" (Gore and Sadler-Smith, 2011, p. 309). For Gore and Sadler-Smith (2011, p. 309), in creative intuitions "knowledge is combined in divergent, holistic, and novel ways" supporting "scientific discovery, technical invention, business venturing, and artistic endeavor" (see also Claxton, 2001; Dorfman, Shames and Kihlstrom, 1996; Miller and Ireland, 2005; Policastro, 1995, cited in Gore and Sadler-Smith, 2011, p. 309). As it becomes evident in the above-mentioned definition, creativity is linked to "cold intuitive processes or those […] that are contingent on an incubation period" (Adinolfi and Loia, 2022, p. 12), aligning with the view that creative processes also involve slow intuition (Dane and Pratt, 2009, p. 27) and that intuition is not limited to instinctive, momentary evaluation and judgement.

4. Creativity, affect and intuition in participation in institutionalised politics

Politics, understood as the processes through which societal problems are addressed, not only intervenes to legislate creativity (Kidd, 2010), but also constitutes a site of creativity, where novelty and originality—with all their contingencies—become activated.[36] This applies to institutionalised politics, with its creation of multitudes of signifying practices, condensing an equally large diversity of discourses, its engagement in discursive struggles, and its search for solutions, often through negotiation. Rhetoric, in its use of signifying practices to persuade, often deploys creative combinations of Aristotle's three modes of persuasion—logos, ethos and pathos (logic, credibility and emotion)—especially in the case of charismatic

[36] Some authors resist the use of political creativity, see, for instance, Smith, 2018.

leadership (Cao, 2023; Larson, 1992; Su, 2024). Creativity in politics can extend beyond the 'mere' production of language, as Gürsözlü's (2022, p. 97) definition of "creative political practices" illustrates: they "refer to unconventional and innovative ways of constructing and expressing a political viewpoint." One example is the so-called 'Standing Man' during the Gezi protests in Turkey, who "stood still in the middle of Taksim square, the most popular square in Istanbul, for more than six hours in order to express his support […]" (Gürsözlü, 2022, p. 98) for the protest movement's claims. Political creativity also operates at the societal level, generating novel processes or outcomes. Riemer (1996, p. 5) argues that "[t]he creative is constructive; and it is usually[37] distinctive, novel, unique", using the creation of the USA as example: "the American federal republic—at its inception in 1787—is something new under the sun; it is a bold effort to build a different kind of political community."

Political creativity, and the resonance it generates, intersects with affect and intuition. Scholarly work on the topic has focused on the politics of affect, affective (and creative) politics (Bargetz, 2015; Boler and Davis, 2018; Boone, Secci and Gallant, 2018; Hoggett and Thompson, 2012; Mouffe, 2022), and affective (and creative) publics (Hautea *et al*., 2021; Mahoney, Lesage and Zuurbier, 2021; Papacharissi, 2015; Papacharissi and Trevey, 2018). The concepts of affective politics and the politics of affect have been used to describe the central role of emotions in political communication, and of strategies that carry strong emotional weight. For example, there is extensive research on how (mostly right-wing, but also left-wing) populist politicians attempt to activate anger, fear and anxiety (Breeze, 2018; Wodak, 2015; Wodak, KhosraviNik and Mral, 2013). Arguments in favour of left-wing politics that embrace passion and affect to rebalance reason and emotions, as a way to reconnect with the people, have also been addressed (Mouffe, 2022). In particular, affects have received ample attention in the study of institutionalised forms of political participation (such as voter turnout). Gianolla (2025, p. 1), for instance, highlights the importance of affects in "shaping political culture, revealing how they influence voter mobilisation and the broader democratic process." Other researchers have focussed on affective polarisation, showing that it can influence participation in institutional politics, although findings regarding the modes of participation and their outcomes are mixed (Bettarelli, Close and van Haute, 2022; Harteveld and Wagner, 2023; Lubej, Dolezal and Kirbiš, 2025; Phillips, 2024).

But political creativity (with its affective dimension) is not limited to institutional or professional actors; it also plays a role in citizen engagement and participation, motivating "citizens to at times break out of 'cold' individual utility calculation and engage in politics" (Groenendyk, 2011, p. 455). What McFarland (2012, p. 22) calls creative participation "springs from the lack of established political institutions; social movement behavior by definition employs non-institutional tactics and might itself create new institutions in opposition to the established institutions." Political creativity thus transcends the (rather restrictive) approaches to affect and institutional settings, suggesting that it has a place in civic culture (Dahlgren, 2005; 2009), where the notion of the civic carries "the implication of engagement in public life—a cornerstone of democracy" (Dahlgren, 2009 p. 58). This brings us to what some have called civic

[37] Riemer (1996, p. 5—emphasis in original) integrates the effectiveness nodal point of creativity in his analysis of creative political breakthroughs, when he writes: "By *creative* I mean fruitful, productive of significant results."

creativity (Gordon, Haas and Michelson, 2017; Edmondson and Fernie, 2018), which operates across a wide variety of societal fields.

In the next section, we will focus on communication and self-expression (including participation in public debates), but many other relevant fields exist. Jenkins, Peters-Lazaro and Shresthova (2020, p. 13) refer to the (overlapping) field of popular culture, when they write that "creative engagements with popular culture can support [people turning] to the imaginary and even fantastical to reenergize their civic lives." Similarly, activism deploys political and civic creativity. As Berk, Galvan and Hattam (2014, p. 3) note, "we find actors who constantly mess with the score in unexpected and unauthorized ways, rearranging it with each performance. The creativity of situated action is a kind of recomposition." Kraidy (2016, p. 5), in *The Naked Blogger of Cairo*, uses the notion of creative insurgency to "explore the mixture of activism and artistry characteristic of revolutionary expression" in the Arab world, capturing the practices of how "creative insurgents […] execute daring physical performances, catchy slogans, memorable graffiti, and witty videos." Yet another example is Bennett and Segerberg's (2013, p. 40) account of the 2009 G20 Meltdown "Storm the Banks" march on the Bank of England, which "involved an elaborate theatrical ritual with carnivalesque opportunities for creative expression as costumed demonstrators marched behind the four horsemen of the economic apocalypse."

5. Communication, politics and self-expression

One societal field where creativity is deployed in participatory processes—and on which we want to focus here—is the field of (offline and online) spaces and practices of communication. It has been argued that online communication technologies and environments have created increased opportunities for the expression of opinion—a creative process in its own right—and thus for participation in public discussion about issues of shared concern (García-Avilés, 2010; 2012; van Zoonen, Farida and Sabina, 2010). As Dahlgren (2002, p. 11) argues: "The looseness, open-endedness of everyday talk, its creativity, potential for empathy and affective elements, are indispensable for the vitality of democratic politics." In practice, the online spaces of communication have facilitated novel, grassroots ways of mobilisation and organisation, and knowledge creation and dissemination, some of which have been supportive of democratic social transformation while some of these mechanisms have supported racist and authoritarian discourses.

On the one hand, critical assessments of the participatory affordances of the digital have highlighted the commercialisation of online spaces, as well as the increasing toxicity, filter bubbles, polarisation and extremism online (Cammaerts, 2009; Makhortykh and Wijermars, 2023; Paz, Montero-Díaz and Moreno-Delgado, 2020), which do not foster democratic public debate. Moreover, the proliferation of filter bubbles, echo chambers and polarisation online is sustained to a large extent through creative-affective modes of communication (Berg, 2023). As Doudaki *et al.* (2023, p. 13) note, "these echo chambers seem to be functioning as communities of trust covering the lack of trust towards the institutions", including science and the media (see also French and Monahan, 2020; Marwick and Lewis, 2017). By creating and sharing disinformation and conspiracy theories (Bleakley, 2021; Booth, 2025), and by engaging in science scepticism and denialism, these groups and communities use

creativity to reject established or institutionalised frameworks of knowledge and to offer alternative ones.

On the other hand, a considerable number of grassroots initiatives online do address social justice and articulate broader democratic social transformation claims. Bennett and Segerberg (2012; 2013) argue that these efforts are organised around a logic of connective action, which is different from the logics of collective action, typically met in social movement organisation. Connective action is characterised by "far more individualized and technologically organized sets of processes that result in action without the requirement of collective identity framing or the levels of organizational resources required to respond effectively to opportunities" (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012, p. 750). As a creative-activist practice, it has been critiqued for its limited impact and the risk of so-called clicktivism, but in some cases "the connective action of social media-based movements develop[s] into a more organized, concerted form of collective action" (Leong *et al*., 2020, p. 15). For instance, Sloam's (2014) study on the role of digital communication affordances, in youth-oriented movements in Spain, Portugal, Italy and Germany, analysed modes of civic engagement through connective action, finding that "'digitally networked action' has enabled a 'quickening' of youth participation—an intensification of participation in institutionalised politics amongst young, highly educated citizens in search of a mouthpiece for their 'indignation'" (Sloam, 2014, p. 217).

It is important to note that these forms of connective action allow for the activation of creativity, through a variety of communicative practices, for instance, by the use of memes, hashtag campaigns, digital storytelling, livestreaming protests, online petitions, crowdfunding, and subverting algorithms and hacking (Bennett and Segerberg, 2013; Siapera and Dahlberg, 2007; Winocur and Dussel, 2021). Through such practices, protesters communicate their claims to broader publics using humour, satire, or music, engaging in affective ways of communication, combining "education and advocacy" (Banks, 2010, p. 29). As McIntyre (2017) notes addressing the principles of creative activism (offline and online), "[h]umour, 'out-of-the-box' thinking and creativity can make civil disobedience and disruptive direct-action fun rather than a grim exercise in bearing witness to horrible acts". It is this kind of creative activism that also connects with playfulness (see Cervi and Divon, 2023, and Chapter 5).

Moreover, creativity in these cases often functions as a process of education for civic participation both for the movements' members and networks, but also for the broader public. Furthermore, the intertextual and multimodal affordances of online spaces facilitate the circulation of multilayered messages that communicate affective, implicit, or coded forms of critique and disobedience. These affordances enable protesters to engage in non-violent practices of protest and mobilisation. Such practices invoke wisdom insofar as acquired knowledge is applied to stimulate social change, with creativity functioning not merely as a stylistic or aesthetic device but as a set of resources for articulating meaning in impactful ways, without exposing the protesters to the risks of physically violent confrontations.

6. Knowledge construction through creative, affective and intuitive participation

One particular strand of participatory processes focusses on the explicit (co-)creation of knowledge, thereby opening up space for reflection on the role of creativity within such processes. These practices allow for enhanced forms of engagement and participation by involving different communities and publics in knowledge production processes, tapping into the various reservoirs of situated knowledges and affects. These horizontally structured networks of knowledge creation support (team) creativity, by functioning as affective communities of trust, enhancing confidence in one's skills and in learning through exchange and interaction. This type of creative engagement does not purely relate to co-creation; it intersects with learning and knowledge acquisition, in formal (Craft, Chappell and Twining, 2008) and informal educational settings. In the fields of education and social transformation, for instance, Freire's critical pedagogy (2018/1970), links learning with empowerment, organising community-led processes that engage people in their own knowledge trajectories, also—as Connolly (2013) argues—incorporating components of creativity.

In this section, we will have a closer look at the role of creativity in participatory knowledge production processes, in two fields, namely the arts and (academic) research. The first field—the arts—is a key site of knowledge production, which includes "discursive practices, artistic research, practice-based research, educational research, and the idea of 'non–'/'un–'/'not yet' knowledge" (Nelund, 2021, p. 138). While the artistic field's relationship with creativity—and affect (Freeman, 2012; Matravers, 1998)—is less contested, the relationship between the arts and the more hegemonic centres of knowledge production is not straightforward, which is why, for instance, Maharaj (2002) refers to the concept of xeno-epistemics, in order to capture the complex and hybrid relationships between (visual) arts and knowledge production, and between knowledge and non-knowledge.

Within the broad field of the arts and artistic movements, of particular relevance here is the community arts movement (Binns, 1991; Jeffers and Moriarty, 2017), which "was concerned with giving people access to the production of all forms of creative expression" (Jeffers, 2017, p. 1). Such endeavours embraced collaborative forms of knowledge creation, democratising the use of artistic repertoires and opening the artistic field to non-artistic actors, as a form of 'cultural democracy' (Graves, 2005). Examples can be found also in art activism—or artivism—which addresses social and political issues through interventions in the public sphere—often in public space—and the engagement of broad publics (see, e.g., Bertrand-Höttcke and Kettner, 2022; Groys, 2014; Serafini, 2018). Such initiatives create visibility around issues of societal concern and can sensitise publics by engaging them in processes of co-creation or interaction with the artistic artefacts or artworks, thereby rendering these publics 'accomplices' in the critique and the demands for social change. The created knowledge, as in several forms of participation and co-creation, concerns the articulation and communication of the specific demands using artistic means of expression, but also the sensitisation of the publics to forms of citizen performance that synthesise the bodily and the intellectual, the tangible and the intangible, the aesthetic and the political.

The participatory strand of arts-based research further offers examples of creative forms of knowledge production, as it integrates artistic components in academic research, throughout the research circle, process and outcomes (see Carpentier and Sumiala, 2021; Finley, 2008; Foster, 2015; Leavy, 2015). Arts-based research provides creative ways to engage with the intuitive and affective aspects of knowledge in a research context, and to address the connections of the personal experience with broader issues, debates and knowledges, thus, giving meaning to both the personal and the individual, and the social and the collective, through processes of empathic creation and communication (Bertling, 2015; Drummond, 2022; Goralnik *et al*., 2017). In particular, some authors writing about arts-based research argue that participation is key to this approach as well, emphasising the opportunities for joint knowledge production: "At the heart of arts-based inquiry is a radical, politically grounded statement about social justice and control over the production and dissemination of knowledge" (Finley, 2008, p. 72).

The second field where knowledge production, creativity and participation sometimes intersect is (academic) research. Here, the knowledge production component is less contested, while the presence of creativity and affect is less straightforward. Still, authors such as Ulibarri *et al.* (2019) and Alnor and Degn (2024) make a convincing case for the role of creativity in (academic) research. For instance, Ulibarri *et al.* (2019, p. 4) write:

> "Creativity is the heart of research. No matter your field, scholarly work prizes novelty and innovation: identifying new problems worth solving, explaining unexplained phenomena, solving problems that haven't been solved before, producing new interpretations of important cultural or historical events, or developing new methods to study the world."

A similar argument can be made for the presence (and importance) of affect, emotion and feeling, but also intuition in (academic) research. These elements, for instance, play a structuring role in paradigmatic and methodological preferences, the development of specific research interests, (non-)critical positions towards the academic field and society, relationships with research subjects, and even writing styles (see Mouslim, Baro and de Jong, 2025, p. 6). Still, the role of affect remains undervalued, which brings Mouslim, Baro and de Jong (2025, p. 6) to conclude: "Whether one wants to centre affect, stay with affect in the field, or use affect as an analytical tool, turning toward affect allows for a different, relational form of knowledge production, one that can be at once intimate and impersonal."

When examining the intersection of creativity, academic knowledge production and participation, participatory research becomes particularly important (see also Chapter 1), with its different configurations (i.e., participatory research, action research or participatory action research), which are often aimed at social transformation involving local communities. Participatory research allows for the production of situated knowledge through novel and imaginative formats and practices. One of these research types, participatory action research (PAR) is described—as we already mentioned in Chapter 1, in the discussion on the revalidation of knowledge and wisdom—as

> "a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes [...] It seeks 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" (Reason and Bradbury, 2006, p. 1).

(Participatory) action research undertakes a critical, engaged and change-oriented approach to academic research, but also to knowledge production. The participatory component does not concern only the 'traditional' engagement in research-related activities, but also in knowledge production (Lang *et al*., 2012; Voorberg, Bekkers and Tummers, 2015), through the synergies of academic and non-academic, of more and less privileged actors in the participatory processes, nurturing "democratic and inclusive practices of knowledge production" (Doudaki and Carpentier, 2021, p. 7). As part of PAR's change-oriented focus, knowledge is evaluated on the basis of "whether the resulting action solves problems for the people involved and increases community self-determination" (Kindon, Pain and Kesby, 2010, p. 14; see also Borda, 2006; Borda and Rahman, 1991). For Reason and Bradbury (2006, p. 7), participatory action research "asks us to be both situated and reflexive, to be explicit about the perspective from which knowledge is created, to see inquiry as a process of coming to know, serving the democratic, practical ethos of action research." This highlights PAR's approach to knowledge as a collective process "of coming to know" and points to its embeddedness in a democratic ethic of participation, catering for the equalisation of power imbalances (by democratising participation in research-related activities and in knowledge production).

7. Conclusion

Creativity is connected–through a variation of mechanisms—to participation and knowledge production. In this context, creativity contributes to (more equalised) decision-making processes by offering novel ways of articulating political identities, opportunities to diversify discursive structures and their interpellations, and support for the development of political solutions that draw on the intellectual reservoir of diversity within the social. Creativity also offers opportunities for the development of knowledge itself, shaping the different ways knowledge can be exchanged and/or communicated, and contributing to the societal dialogues about truth that form the foundation of knowledge production processes.

The implication of this articulation of creativity, participation and knowledge production is that creativity can more easily transcend the many limitations which are imposed on it. This articulation supports a broad approach to creativity, where the importance of civic creativity can be acknowledged. In other words, creativity is seen as not being owned or controlled by particular elites, or dominated by its articulation in a particular societal field. Creativity is more than how Florida's (2012) creative class performs it, or how the culture/creative industry wishes it to become incorporated in a capitalist framework. Creativity is also more than how artists—with their desire for creative excellence, with its high-entry threshold—perform it, where the aura of the artwork not only produces uniqueness but also stifles more everyday forms of creativity. Creativity thus not only becomes an accessible power—as Mould (2018, p. 4) defines

creativity—but also a phenomenon that transgresses the frontiers of the different societal fields which all aim to (re)articulate it in particular ways, rendering it political, communicative, social, cultural and economic at the same time.

Simultaneously, the notion of creativity demonstrates the existence of other limitations, in particular when it comes to hegemonic knowledge. Creativity, also through its close connection with affect and intuition, shows the limits of a purely rationalist and elitist approach to knowledge. Instead, knowledge's affective and situated components become more visible. Moreover, in particular the arts' capacity to problematise (hegemonic) knowledge through creativity, opens up opportunities for reflection about not-knowledge and counter-knowledge, and about the constructed nature and contingencies of (hegemonic) knowledge. As Maharaj (2002, p. 79) reminds us, "[n]on-knowledge, at any rate, is not at all the same as 'ignorance.' It refers to the knowledge system's 'other,' that indeterminate, xeno-zone between 'knowledge/ignorance.'"

This does not imply that we have to shift toward an unadulterated celebration of creativity. either. Even if we question the assumption that creativity must necessarily be articulated with utility, and is in need of societal validation, its strong emphasis on novelty, originality and uniqueness risks disarticulating creative practices from their historical and discursive context. Creative practices may surprise but their uniqueness still hides repetition and rearticulation, and modesty remains a necessary component in this equation. Moreover—and relatedly—we should acknowledge that the creativity signifier can be deployed as a discursive weapon, where the alleged absence of creativity becomes a tool to delegitimate repetition and routine, and to critique the everyday, which harms (the acknowledgement of) the dynamics of the ordinary and the sublime. Finally, we would argue for the need to articulate creativity with wisdom (see Chapter 1). Not all creativity produces knowledge, as is evidenced by the intense creativity of conspiracy theories. Creativity can be used for many different causes, some of which might be truthful, but some of which might be—to create a link to our Chapter 2, and use a slightly excessive term—simply stupid.

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