

An experimental democratic theory?

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Noortje Marres' rich and stimulating book deals with political participation and its relationships with material objects. Marres' objective is to account for what non-humans do and what their normative capacities are, in order to avoid a tension between a call to extend democracy to non-human and the fear that this extension may destabilize key concepts of democratic thinking, such as "autonomy" and "self-determination". The book is built on sophisticated theoretical developments, which propose an approach for the study of the public that combines the reflections of American pragmatists with insights for science studies. The conjunction of these works allows Noortje Marres to speak of a "material participation", which she locates in various empirical fieldworks related to sustainable housing.

While situating her inquiry in the broad domain of "public participation" – an area that has attracted considerable interest among political scientists and students of science and technology - Marres also introduces a productive displacement, by not circumscribing *a priori* the domain of "participation", and staying away from any categorization or evaluation imperative. The ambitions of the book are high. Marres

seeks to achieve no less than a reframing of the vocabulary of political theory, suggesting that terms such as “participation”, “democracy” and “public” ought to be opened up and reconceptualized. These terms, consequently, are not defined from the start but explored throughout the book, which gives the enterprise an exploratory, if not always self-evident, flavor.

Conventional democratic theory, Marres argues, often comes in the shape of abstract citizens. Marres’ “material publics”, by contrast, come fully embodied, engaged in concrete tasks, and attached to various objects – teapots, carbon emission signs, “eco-house”... Yet the route Marres follows to make material publics come to life in the book is, above all, theoretical. The terrain of work, for Marres, is political theory, and she proceeds in the examination of theoretical arguments one after another, using empirical examples as cases expected to sustain her reflection. This choice comes at the risk of (somewhat ironically) contradicting Marres’ own call to avoid the risk of engaging “theoretically” with questions of political theory (p.111). But it also provides her with the possibility of successively examining the components of the alternative, material political theory she proposes, and its relations with scholarly traditions in political science and science studies.

Problem of relevance

The starting point of Marres’ analysis of the connection between materiality and participation is to define a “problem of relevance” at the heart of the formation of “material publics”.

The characterization of the problem of relevance is progressive in the book, and builds on different traditions of thought in political theory and social science. Marres distances her analysis from perspectives that separate “procedures” from “contents” (e.g. the position of the liberal theorists), and from those that give too much agency and power to material arrangements, as “material theorists” do (e.g. by studying the formation of collectives around flows of matter). Although she is much more sympathetic to the work of the Latourian “post-instrumentalists”, who point to the uncertain ontology of both publics and objects, she argues that these latter scholars share a common limitation with the previous ones: they “all presuppose the existence of a framework or space in which things acquire the capacity to engage participants in political process” (p.36). This idea is important, and recurrent throughout the book: the dichotomy between a “political space” and the actors engaged on it does not work in the cases Marres is interested in. As actors redefine their “eco home” or engage in new “sustainable” ways of living, we should consider that the space of engagement is itself problematic.

The “problem of relevance” that Marres identifies with the help of John Dewey and Walter Lippman helps her to go beyond this limitation. Both Dewey and Lippman worked on the “communities of the affected” but helped rethink their meaning, by connecting the emergence of publics to “problems”. “Publics”, according to the American pragmatists and despite their differences, emerge out of “inherently problematic configurations” (p.46). They face an inherent tension, as “it consists of actors who are intimately affected by an issue, but who are not part of a community that might address them” (p.49). This tension makes the constitution of publics, in this pragmatist view, something that depends on “problems”, in a non-instrumental way:

“the public’s problems, (...) are precisely not the kind of detectable, analyzable, controllable effects that are associated with an instrumental notion of problem-solving” (p.45)

Problems of relevance resemble that of “affectedness”, according to which publics emerge from those that are “affected” by a given trouble. Yet while the “problem of affectedness” might be framed in terms of representations (do publics correspond to the issue at stake?), the problem of relevance revolves around ontological matters: of the issues being discussed, of the nature of the assemblage rendering their explication possible, of the identities of the concerned publics. “Here, the composition of the public, which entities and relations it is made up of, must be understood as partly the outcome of, and as something that is at stake in, the process of issue articulation.” (p.53)

What material participation is made of

The core chapters of the book discuss the components of Marres’ “material participation”. It is “device-centered”, “experimental”, and it deals with “ontologies”.

A device-centered perspective

Considering everyday objects such as tea-pots or everyday accounting techniques of carbon emission, Marres insists on the “co-articulation” that they make possible, by aligning actions in different registers, and connecting technological innovation, economic concerns and the engagement of individuals expected to behave in sustainable ways. “Co-articulation”, in Marres’ account, points to both the embeddedness of these devices in everyday life, and to a particular politics. A “politics of co-articulation” directs attention to the connections that devices draw between heterogeneous domains, and to

their potential redistribution. Thus, these devices not only materialize participation and make it effective, but they also have the virtue of flexibility. They can either fuel an engagement in sustainability that should be made “easy” or even “transparent”, or enact environmental participation as active work, by rendering visible the costs of sustainable living, and the potential redistribution of problems it entails.

Experiments

The second dimension of Noortje Marres’ material participation, and, arguably, of her political theory, is the notion of “experiment”. The discussion of experiments provided in the book is very welcome, and helps clarify a notion that has become widely used in the social science. Having discussed epistemic understandings of experiments as devices expected to convince publics, and discursive accounts of experiments as components of liberal democracies, Marres is particularly attentive to studies that, in the tradition of Actor-Network Theory (ANT), have described experiments as moments during which social and technical identities are at stake, and potentially reconfigured. She aims to go beyond ANT accounts of experiment by considering, as the “sociology of demonstration” does, public experiments as “devices of participation in their own right” (p.88)

One of the particular experiments that she focuses on is the “living experiment”, through which individuals attempt to test particular modes of living in sustainable ways, while documenting the challenges they face and the choices they make. Experiments in living, Marres argues, “dismantle everyday ways of doing things according to a basic experimental protocol” (p.91). By focusing on material habits, they make the fabric of day-to-day living visible. In experiments in living, “material participation becomes an object of performance itself”, while the “normative powers of material entities” (p.99) are exposed by the experiment. This has implications for the role of the social scientist,

since he or she is not the only one trying to locate these normative powers, but merely provides an additional voice in a world where “devices, actors and settings under scrutiny may equally play a role” (p.100) in the enactment of material politics.

The public dimension is central in Marres’ discussions of experiments. Indeed it is *publicity* that makes the sustainable living experiments “capable of investing objects with a whole range of different ‘powers of engagement’, from a materialist fascination with ‘stuff’ to a critical engagement with materialism, from a green ‘consumer culture’ to an activist politics of climate change mitigation” (p.97). Marres’ co-articulation then seems to find its very possibility in these public experiments, where the components of the world – its very reality – are at stake, discussed, and redefined, and where “the process of the reconfiguring of socio-material relations” (p.102) is publicized.

Ontologies

Noortje Marres’ account of participation aims to deal with the very existence of objects, people and problems. The example of the demonstrational ecohome is for her useful to point to variations in the ontologies of the entities she is interested in. Demonstrational ecohomes can be many things at once. For instance, “the eco-refurbishment of social housing” may enable at the same time “public engagement, technological innovation, economic governance, as well as the enrolment of social science in these projects” (p.117). How are these ecohomes political then? Marres is not satisfied with perspectives that endow material objects (buildings, in the cases that interest her here) with political “perspectives” or “objectives”. She finds more value in works that have tried to point to the many variations in the enactment of the things themselves – which can be subsumed in the fashionable, if not entirely explicit, “ontological politics” label (Mol, 1998) – and in ANT-like studies, which “defined experiments as crucial theaters of

politics and democracy insofar as they are capable of effecting ontological change, by adding entities and shifting relations in ways that modify the composition of the world” (p.123). But Marres aims to go one step further: in the example of the ecohome, ontological change occurs in public, “within the limit of what is empirically demonstrated” (p.125), and the demonstration is part of the ontological work. As anecdotal as it may sound, the example of the demonstrational ecohome is crucial for Marres, since it raises no less than “the question of whether ontological change may also figure as an object of public politics” (p.125).

“Politics” then is about “variations”, and “democracy” is connected to the possibility of increased variation, in order to render ontology intrinsically normative. This is why the ecohome is, for Marres, particularly interesting: “what is crucial to the enactment of material democracy, in this instance, are the *experimental variations* in the normative powers of things, something that is, at least in part, facilitated by the empirical equipment of the ecohome.” (p.113) The adaptability of the ecohome then “contributes not only to its normative capacities, but also to its ‘participatory’ potential”, in that “it can fairly easily be modified to enact alternative forms of participation, innovation and change by experimental means”. (p.127)

Mapping new participatory spaces

After having explored the complex landscape of material participation, the reader of Noorje Marres’ book, caught in the multiplicity of “variations” and “adaptability”, might feel a bit dizzy as she tries to make her way in the concepts Marres mobilizes to tear down any remaining dichotomy, any hint at a stable frame that would not be questioned

by the experiments in sustainable living. Struggling a bit through the detailed and steep discussions of ontology, she might try to find a bit of comfort by finding definitions of terms that, since the beginning of the book, had remained ambivalent (and necessarily so, according to the argument the book attempts to make). “Participation”, for instance, is not directly defined at the beginning of the book. A definition is indirectly introduced on page 129, when we learn that what makes the ecohome a “participatory device” is that “a range of actors was able to adopt the device to perform their particular versions of innovation, participation and change” (p.129). Yet the reader cannot feel relieved for long, since, as “there is nothing given about the enactment of participation” (p.131), a “version of innovation, participation and change” must also be subjected to variability, and potentially transformed during experiments. The potentially infinite course of variability that, in this account, apparently constitutes the substance of participation, politics and democracy itself, does not escape Marres. Indeed, if the ecohome becomes too indeterminate, it “would then end up generating a space in which it is impossible to establish any stable normative connection between participation, innovation and change” (p.129).

How then to find one’s way amidst the ontological variations? The last chapter of the book suggests some way forward. But first, it is necessary to get rid of the “problem of extension”, according to which participation is a matter of delimiting the extent of participation about a problem considered as a given. The problem of extension relates to the selection, by an external authority, of the relevant public for collective discussions. The alternative problem of relevance, which Marres has defined with the help of the American pragmatists, does not adopt the standpoint of the “external authority which aims to regulate (and contain) political process” (p.149). Instead, it is attentive to the ontological constructions performed in experiments, and “locate capacities of

“relevancing” in devices of participation and variously “devised” actors” (p.145). The idea of a common political space, be it a public debate, a hybrid forum, or a deliberative arena, has then to be given up: politics, for Marres, is not about discussions in a contextual neutral space, but is about the complex arranging of spaces, people, objects, devices, issues... How then to get rid of the “assumption that spheres of relevance are fixed or given”? How to “focus on the space-making capacities of devices”? Through these questions, which Marres directly raises, one might be led to examine the formation of **collectives, which are notably absent from the core chapters of the book**: how are connections drawn between isolated experiments (ecohomes, luminous teapots or living experiments) and social groups arguing for a cause (something that political science, in all its ingenuity, might call a public)?

Material participation ends with some perspectives on these topics, most of them based on online analysis. For instance, the tag cloud of “green home blogs”, which prominently features issues, such as peak oil or fair trade, that are not the main point of governmental problems related to climate change, suggests that the “relevant issues” are not given, but might well be re-articulated according to local experiments. Other examples of “issue clouding” are used by Marres to show how “a space of publicity may be conjured up through a device of empirical display (...) rather than by metaphors of the static projection of debate” (p.152).

As she finishes *Material participation* by entering virtual worlds, the reader may guess that “issue space” methods are useful for identifying web-based social concerns, but she might remain skeptical about their value for the study of “material publics”. As virtual issue spaces might be places where new forms of democratic actions might occur (or so it is suggested in Marres’ final chapter), one has to wonder what constitutes, in here,

their democratic character: what ontologies do they make it possible to explore? How is the social scientist involved in their enactment? Part of the interrogations one might have about the final sections of the book has to do with the somewhat allusive tone of these final examples (something Marres herself recognizes). But I think it is also, and more fundamentally, the last manifestation of a tension that runs across the entire book, and to which I finally turn.

Toward an experimental democratic theory?

The displacement Marres proposes to political theory is extremely stimulating, in that it forces one to rethink the very way in which political analysis could and should be conducted. A new, Marres-ian, political theory is attached to things and people themselves, does not *a priori* distinguish the contribution of the social scientist and that of the actors she studies, and, above all, is attentive to the multiple possible articulations of the ontological and the normative. It locates the devices that publicize, and make publicization itself the core of political engagement. This new political theory is not embarrassed by many of the questions that students of “public participation” have been interested in, such as the evaluation of the efficiency of particular participatory procedures (e.g. Rowe and Frewer, 2000), since it rephrases the very grounds of the study of participation: instead of looking at ready-made procedures stuck in the debate form, social scientists should attend to the multiple experiments, where devices and people make ontologies (including that of the space of engagement) variable.

Yet for all its richness, Marres’ political theory as it emerges from *Material Participation* also comes short of answering crucial questions, most notably that of the validity of the

experiments. How is an experiment valid? What difference does it make in the world? They are different ways of considering these questions. One is to consider the attachments (Gomart and Hennion, 1998) making people (be they eco-friendly Londoners or social scientists looking at them) care about living sustainable lives or using luminous teapots: through what process do these experiments matter to them and how can they, from them, organize new individual and collective identities? Another one is to reflect on the conditions making experiments transferable: how does an ecohome circulate? What infrastructure is needed to do so? Yet another one would be to attend to the effect of experiments on wider locations: what demonstrations are they supposed to provide and to whom? What arrangements do they contribute to stabilize? These questions all relate to the connections that make experiments potentially able to transform the social and technical world (Latour, 1993), but that also make them crucially dependent on the world outside the laboratory (or, for that matter, the ecohome itself). They force one to interrogate, among other things, the publicization work organized by private companies, be they industrial firms aiming to experiment on future products with potential users (as it is currently the case in the automobile sector) or supermarkets and consumers experimenting with carts and packages (Cochoy and Granclément, 2005). One might wonder whether these experiments make the same type of differences for the enactment of contemporary democracies (and public issues) as the experiments in sustainable living that Marres is interested in.

Answering these questions would lead the analysis to explore how certain experiments acquire (public and private) value and others do not, how they might redraw the boundaries of “political” or “economic” institutions, and how they eventually contribute to stabilizing or displacing the forms of citizenship and the channels of democratic legitimacy. It may ultimately reduce the local ontological multiplicity of “material

publics”, by displaying the processes through which certain ontologies/normativities hold and others do not (cf. Jasanoff, 2005). But it is through this very reduction that it might provide a deeper account of the making of democratic life, the essence of which is probably as much about elimination and choice as it is about multiplication and diversity. This is probably through more detailed empirical accounts of “material participation” – accounts that would follow the construction and circulation of experiments, as they also enact collective orders and forms of sociological inquiry – than what is found in the book that such questions might be explored. One could only hope, then, than Noortje Marres’ thought-provoking book will pave the way for further works able to pursue the development of an experimental democratic theory that is still in progress.

References

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