Everyday Experts: How people’s knowledge can transform the food system

The People’s Knowledge Editorial Collective
The Reclaiming Diversity and Citizenship Series seeks to encourage debate outside mainstream policy and conceptual frameworks on the future of food, farming, land use and human well-being. The opportunities and constraints to regenerating local food systems and economies based on social and ecological diversity, justice, human rights, inclusive democracy, and active forms of citizenship are explored in this Series. Contributors to the Reclaiming Diversity and Citizenship Series are encouraged to reflect deeply on their ways of working and outcomes of their research, highlighting implications for policy, knowledge, organisations, and practice.

The Reclaiming Diversity and Citizenship Series was published by the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) between 2006 and 2013. The Series is now published by the Centre for Agroecology, Water and Resilience, at Coventry University.

Everyday Experts explains how knowledge built up through first-hand experience can help solve the crisis in the food system. It brings together fifty-seven activists, farmers, practitioners, researchers and community organisers from around the world to take a critical look at attempts to improve the dialogue between people whose knowledge has been marginalised in the past and others who are recognised as professional experts. Using a combination of stories, poems, photos and videos, the contributors demonstrate how people’s knowledge can transform the food system towards greater social and environmental justice. Many of the chapters also explore the challenges of using action and participatory approaches to research.

The chapters share new insights, analysis and stories that can expand our imagination of a future that encompasses:

- making dialogue among people with different ways of understanding the world central to all decision-making
- the re-affirmation of Indigenous, local, traditional and other knowledge systems
- a blurring of the divide between professional expertise and expertise that is derived from experience
- transformed relationships amongst ourselves and with the Earth to confront inequality and the environmental crisis

To read any of the 28 chapters in this book freely available to download, please visit:

www.coventry.ac.uk/everyday-experts

ISBN: 978-1-84600-075-1
Everyday Experts: How people’s knowledge can transform the food system
Cover photos:

(left): Field teaching by Farmer Research Team members about planting methods, Lobi area. Photo taken by C. Hickey, December 2014. Used with the permission of project participants.

(right): The Coventry Men's Shed participatory video project exploring “What’s Eating Coventry’ and unpacks social justice issues related to food in the city of Coventry. More information at www.peoplesknowledge.org
Everyday Experts: How people’s knowledge can transform the food system

The People’s Knowledge Editorial Collective*:
Colin Anderson
Christabel Buchanan
Marina Chang
Javier Sanchez Rodriguez
Tom Wakeford

*Listed in alphabetical order. This book was a collective endeavour and work and responsibility was shared evenly amongst the editorial team. All chapters have been peer reviewed by a minimum of two reviewers and revised accordingly as a part of a non-blind open peer review process.
Published by the Centre for Agroecology, Water and Resilience (CAWR) at Coventry University

The Centre for Agroecology, Water and Resilience (CAWR) is driving innovative, transdisciplinary research on the understanding and development of socially just and resilient food and water systems internationally. Unique to this University Research Centre is the incorporation of citizen-generated knowledge - the participation of farmers, water users and other citizens in transdisciplinary research, using holistic approaches which cross many disciplinary boundaries among the humanities as well as the natural and social sciences.

The Centre for Agroecology, Water and Resilience (CAWR)
Coventry University
Ryton Gardens, Wolston Lane
Coventry, CV8 3LG
United Kingdom

E-mail: CAWROffice@coventry.ac.uk
Tel: +44 (0) 2477 651 601
Web: http://www.coventry.ac.uk/research/areas-of-research/agroecology-water-resilience/

To cite this publication: People’s Knowledge Editorial Collective (Eds). (2017). Everyday Experts: How people’s knowledge can transform the food system. Reclaiming Diversity and Citizenship Series. Coventry: Coventry University. Available at: www.coventry.ac.uk/everyday-experts.

The Reclaiming Diversity and Citizenship Series seeks to encourage debate outside mainstream policy and conceptual frameworks on the future of food, farming, land use and human well-being. The opportunities and constraints to regenerating local food systems and economies based on social and ecological diversity, justice, human rights, inclusive democracy, and active forms of citizenship are explored in this Series. Contributors to the Reclaiming Diversity and Citizenship Series are encouraged to reflect deeply on their ways of working and outcomes of their research, highlighting implications for policy, knowledge, organisations, and practice.

The Reclaiming Diversity and Citizenship Series was published by the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) between 2006 and 2013. The Series is now published by the Centre for Agroecology, Water and Resilience, at Coventry University.

Professor Michel Pimbert is the coordinator and editor in chief of the Reclaiming Diversity and Citizenship Series.

Disclaimer: The views expressed in this volume are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Centre for Agroecology, Water and Resilience, its partners and donors.
Participatory workers: from tyrants to critical thinkers

Tom Wakeford

Geographical location: Various

Chapter highlights:

The use of participatory processes to provide legitimacy for political decisions raises issues of transparency and the need for safeguards against their misuse.

The ‘facilitators’ in such processes can wield significant influence that is only rarely the subject of systematic self-critical reflection.

This chapter includes reflection by the author on his personal experience as a co-performative witness in participatory work.

He concludes that those who wield influence over participatory workers need to be exposed, along with power these workers exert over participatory processes, particularly with regard to issues of white male privilege.

Keywords: Participation, facilitation, engagement, cognitive justice, epistemic injustice.

1 Although I name myself as the author of this paper, I see myself as a ‘co-performative witness’ in the initiatives in which I have been involved. This term was introduced by Dwight Conquergood in order to unsettle the conventional hierarchies of naming that are performed in processes of research (Donkor 2007). I owe many of any insights this paper provides to a number of people who have also been co-performative witnesses in the scores of participatory processes in which I have played a role over the last twenty-five years. These include, in no particular order, Jasber Singh, Fiona Hale, Jacqui Lovell, Hugh Kelly, Colin Anderson, Elizabeth Bragg, Graciela Romero Vasquez, David Archer, Kate Newman, Sara Cottingham, Sue Weldon, Ruth Hayward, Paul Nowak, Pauline Wilson, Patrick Mulvany, Jean Blaylock, Mama D, Michel Pimbert, Ijaba Ahmed, Ismail Mohamed, Iman Farah, Hinda Mohamed Smith, Fiona Macbeth, Fatma Mohamed, Asha Mohamed, Javier Sanchez Rodriguez, Sagari Ramdas, N.Madhusudhan, P.V.Satheesh, Kavitha Kuruganti, Vinod Pavarala, Andrea Cornwall, Jethro Pettit, Maria de la Pava Cataño, Dee Woods, Argane Fayisa Ibsa, Ros Norton, Rachel Pain, Peter Bryant, Maggie O’Neil, Bano Murtuja, Si Donnelly, Lucy Pearson, Tom Crompton and Rachael Taylor. There have been others over the years whose names I might have added. All mistakes remain my own.
5.1 Participation and the food system

Largely ignored by the mainstream media, a set of practices have become commonplace in some political systems that are moving towards democracy. Their supporters use the generic term ‘participation’ to refer to a range of approaches that attempt to include a wide range of people in making power more accountable (Cornwall 2011), including in the food system (e.g. Andrée et al. 2016).

Inspired by popular education initiatives in Latin America, led by figures such as Paulo Freire and Orlando Fals Borda, some, including several contributors to chapters in this book, have attempted to use participatory approaches to challenge the power of transnational corporations to continue the industrialisation of our food system (see also Wakeford 2016).

In parts of the Global South – particularly in Latin America - social movements using participatory approaches have helped provide a space for voice for millions experiencing oppression under more-or-less dictatorial regimes. Yet, to their critics, such approaches risk new forms of tyranny and oppression (Cooke and Kothari 2001).

If those of us working with social movements are to make use of participatory processes, it is vital that we have the tools to distinguish those that are capable of supporting liberation from those that are likely to advance tyranny. It is particularly important that those of us who take up specific roles in such processes are aware of the power we have over what takes place during and after them.

Though often hidden from scrutiny, those of us who carry out these participatory processes – the participatory workers – act as hidden power brokers within them.

---

**Box 5.1: Some examples of participatory work in which the author, along with some of those listed in Footnote 1, has been involved**

- **Prajateerpu** – a participatory action research process initiated by the Deccan Development Society, and other civil society organisations in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, India (Kuruganti et al., 2008 and Figures 5.1-5.5). Mostly funded by the Netherlands government international development agency (DGIS).
- **UK trade unions** – a participatory research project looking at how to improve communication between union representatives and union management. Funded by the Trades Union Congress.
- **The Centre for Agroecology, Water and Resilience** – using participatory tools to explore the challenges of participatory action research with professionally trained researchers from various disciplines in social and ecological research (Wakeford 2016). Mostly funded by Coventry University.
- **Web of Connections** – developing participatory action research with young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds across the UK (Guzman et al., 2016; Pearson et al., 2016). Funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council.
We are central to such processes, but invisible, and rarely held to account. As co-performative witnesses of these processes, we need to acknowledge the influence we wield over them. We need to learn how to avoid being co-opted by institutionalised patriarchy, racism and scientism. We can do this if we work with, and learn alongside, established grassroots-led initiatives in order to jointly design participatory processes that contribute to social movements that are accountable to their members.

Here, I draw on my experiences as a participatory worker over 25 years, including various attempts to document the role of power in participation, in both the academic and public sphere (Box 5.1). The lessons throw light on those participatory action research initiatives that have the aim of transforming our food systems.

5.2 From civil rights to the World Bank

In the late 1980s, United States civil rights educator Myles Horton spent a few weeks with Paulo Freire comparing notes on their work during previous decades (Horton et al. 1990). It was then that Horton realised that many of the activities undertaken by him and his colleagues at the Highlander Center constituted what others were now calling participation (Horton 1998 p.208; Horton et al. 1990 p.116). While some may think the US civil rights movement was either spontaneous or the product of the charisma of leaders such as Martin Luther King, the reality is that it was shaped by a range of activities, and informed by participatory research undertaken over many decades. Meetings at Highlander included some of those who were, or who went on to be, key activists, such as Rosa Parks and King himself.

Horton and his many colleagues, female and male, of diverse ethno-cultural heritage, supported a process of action and reflection that allowed the movement to grow.
The media picked out the leaders, but behind them were people like Ella Baker, who supported a more collectivist model of leadership over the “prevailing messianic style of the period” (quoted in Abu-Jamal, 2004). She argued against the civil rights movement mirroring the organisation model of the Black church that, at the time, had largely female membership and male leadership. “Strong people”, Baker famously said, “don’t need strong leaders” (Mueller 2004; Lewis et al. 2016).

Ella Baker outlined three ingredients of participatory democracy that she believed were vital for social movements to gain strength:

1. Grassroots involvement of people throughout society in the decisions that control their lives.
2. Minimisation of hierarchy and the associated emphasis on expertise and professionalism as a basis for leadership.
3. Direct action as an answer to fear, alienation and intellectual detachment.

The participatory wing of the US civil rights movement was not as politically active in the Reagan-Thatcher era of the 1980s and 1990s. Yet their language and techniques have survived to be taken up afresh today by new movements such as #blacklivesmatter and the food sovereignty movement.

I first encountered the term participation in 1999 when visiting the Participation Group at the Institute for Development Studies at the University of Sussex, UK. Its champion there was Robert Chambers, whose participatory rural appraisal (PRA) had become central to the stated missions of many non-governmental organisations, such as ActionAid, and government-funded aid, such as that directed through the UK Department for International Development.

However, his approach eschewed the third of Ella Baker’s three ingredients. Being used in the context of top-down interventions in countries whose populations were
largely rural and poverty-stricken, it also had little of her second ingredient and was unable to supply the first ingredient either. Participatory workers who rely on PRA alone are unlikely to be able to build stronger processes of participatory democracy, without which it is hard to build a long-lasting social movement.

By the end of the 1990s, those critical of the power of international agencies, such as the World Bank and the UK’s Department for International Development, documented how PRA and other similar approaches had been co-opted by the very powers that were meant to be held to account (e.g. Cooke and Kothari 2001). Against this overall trend, some social movements established bottom-up participatory learning and action initiatives, often as a counterweight to the power of discriminatory use of funding and research.

Among these, two of the most prominent were the international movement of women living with HIV (ICW, 2008) and the movements attempting to democratise agricultural research and development (Pimbert et al. 2017). However, these efforts have often been drowned out by an ever-increasing trend for major donors and commercial facilitators to co-opt the language of participation for initiatives that were nothing of the sort.

A decade later, the ‘doing’ of participation has become professionalised (Bherer et al. 2017). Across the Western world participation is now a profession with trade associations, such as the International Association for Public Participation, which will recognise a practitioner as a Licensed Trainer if they pass a test and pay a fee. The majority of its activities, some suggest, are beholden to a scientific-industrial-government complex (c.f. Calhoun 2015; Kapoor 2008).

The participation industry collaborates with patrons within government in order to enable them to create an illusion of public consent through a range of processes – from online surveys to citizens’ juries – that enable them to claim popular legitimacy for policies they had already formulated (Lee 2014).

5.3 Facilitation

Within both the commercial participation industry and among civil society organisations, the people who actually convene and run participatory processes have become known – at least in the English-speaking world – as ‘facilitators’.

Increasingly some of my co-workers and I have found this word to be problematic. As I have studied other participatory workers in action, interviewed them, reflected on my own practice and reviewed the literature, I have found the range of work undertaken by people who ‘facilitate’ varies widely.

Take two sets of people with whom I have worked in recent years. One is a group of scientists of white European ethno-cultural heritage trained in a laboratory. The other is a group of young people of colour with refugee and migrant backgrounds who have
often been unable to pursue courses in higher education. If the term ‘facilitation’ means anything to individuals in either group, most would understand it in the context of being told what to do by people who do not share their background or identity. They would imagine a top-down process that they suspect will be driven by the interests of others.

In normal English usage, ‘to facilitate’ means ‘to make easy’. The nouns facilitation and facilitator are not listed in most dictionaries. Despite the growth of interest in participatory approaches across the globe, the use of the term facilitation is generally limited to a small community of Anglphone practitioners whose values lie on a spectrum from the idealistic participatory democrats at one end to those in the commercial participation industry at the other (Lee 2014, p.75). The rise of participatory research has also become fashionable in many academic disciplines and research institutes in Australia, Canada, UK and US.

Those who consider themselves professional facilitators, along with those who have studied them, have developed a complex pseudo-technical vocabulary. They operate in a range of academic, commercial and educational settings (e.g. King 2016). For example, different interpretations of the term ‘facilitator’ often involve the use of terms that would appear obscure to the non-specialist. To all those uninitiated in the relevant jargon, words like facilitation and facilitator are already incomprehensible, as is the term participation itself, along with the associated terms ‘public engagement’, ‘patient involvement’, ‘co-production’ and ‘deliberative democracy’.

The jargon that surrounds participation is particularly problematic for people from outside the profession who want to have their voice heard, but who are prevented from doing so by this language. It is ironic that an approach which often draws on the writings of the great proponent of popular education, Paulo Freire, has created barriers to popular understanding of participation itself. I now regret falling into the trap of using unnecessary jargon in the past (e.g. Wakeford 2001).

In countries where English is not the main language, the term facilitator is rarely used. In Germany, the term moderator is common. In Francophone and Spanish-speaking countries the term socio-cultural animateur (animateur/animadores) often refers to the same thing. Across the UK, particularly in Scotland, the term convener can be heard. The idea of meetings having a chairperson, chairwoman, chairman or simply chair occurs in a range of settings in many parts of the world.

5.4 A participatory proposal

Whatever we call our practice in our particular sector or culture, my proposal is that, when discussing the people who are resourced to work with participatory processes, we adopt the title ‘participatory worker’. It refers to anyone who instigates or leads a participatory process. While jettisoning the term facilitator removes one confusing term, the adoption of participatory worker forces us to be clearer about what we mean by the term participation (see Box 5.2).
Everyday Experts: How people’s knowledge can transform the food system

Figure 5.4. Participants in Prajateerpu watch one of three specially-commissioned newscasts, set in the year 2025

Figure 5.5. Participants in Prajateerpu give their vision for the future of rural development in the state of Andhra Pradesh

The need for such clarity was made plain to me during a two-year project involving around 30 grassroots-based activists in a process they were told was ‘participatory’. It was a hard lesson for us participatory workers to learn that we had developed a shared understanding of what it means to be participatory with only one or two of them. The frustration of the other 28 activists was palpable.

Box 5.2: Divergent perceptions of the word ‘participation’: a personal reflection

My colleague Jan (not their real name) and I agree on many things, such as the need to challenge unaccountable processes of policy making about scientific research and technology development. Where we have never reached agreement, however, is in our understanding of the word ‘participation.’ Jan’s understanding of the word is just the straightforward meaning as used in everyday English – allowing individuals and groups to have the opportunity to take part in a meeting or perhaps become involved in a larger project or programme. My understanding has always been different, as it has been inspired by politically-engaged traditions of research and action in Europe, North America and the Global South. I use the term because I can trace it back to grassroots-led movements for civil rights and democratic reform in these places (Freire 1972, Horton 1998; Fals Borda and Rahman 1991).

For me, effective participation means redistributing power in relation to the creation, validation and use of knowledge. It formed an important part, not only of social movements related to agri-food issues, but also of some of the most radical movements of the late 20th century, such as the US civil rights movement (Horton 1998; Mueller 2004) and the collective struggles organised by people living with HIV/AIDS (ICW 2008; Susser 2015). Jan, by contrast, does not identify with these struggles, regarding them as purely political, and thus would not use the word participation to describe them.

To those with certain socio-cultural and family backgrounds, particularly those from families with experience of working in solidarity with others in their community as equals, the term participatory can often be understood. To others, especially those
who had backgrounds as scientists, engineers and people from hierarchical societies, the term could just be another piece of meaningless jargon (Guzman et al. 2016; Wakeford 2016).

5.5 Participatory workers and ‘facilitators’

From an historical perspective and defining the term broadly, the role of the participatory worker has existed for as long as people have met in groups to research or decide things. A term taken from the French facile (easy) makes for an easy process of decision-making. If written records existed, the distinctive role of participatory workers could be traced through many different civilisations over thousands of years, such as the Gotti in Adivasi areas of India (see Madhusudhan 2017).

Although records are absent in many cultures, there is evidence that ‘benefit societies’, which were organisations or voluntary associations formed to provide insurance relief from difficulty, have existed throughout recorded history. The European trade union movement has been traced back to these societies for mutual aid. Other examples include secret societies during the Tang dynasty in China and among African-Americans during the post-revolutionary US, such as those who organized the Free African Society of Philadelphia. Given their defining characteristic of members having equal opportunities to make decisions in the organisation, it seems likely that some sort of participatory process would have been necessary to ensure this.

Unlike many words that are used in similar contexts, such as involvement, consultation and deliberation, the origin of the word participation leads us to the participatory democracy movements of the 1960s (Adelman 1993; Cornwall 2011; Pateman 2012; Torres 2014). However, many academics see participation without any link to a set of emancipatory values (see Box 5.2). Following the rise of the participation industry, its workers have all too often been co-opted by people who do not subscribe to these values (Cooke and Kothari 2001; Kapoor 2008; Channel 4 News, cited in Wakeford and Singh 2008).

Whatever the methodologies used and however skilled the participatory worker, there is no escaping the role played by power in participatory processes. Yet, compared to the number of papers published on participatory methodologies or their ethical principles, discussions of the actual practices of participatory workers are very rare. This messy and often controversial zone of action makes up only a tiny fraction of the literature (see Box 5.3; Cooke and Kothari 2001; Wakeford and Singh 2008; People's Knowledge Editorial Collective 2016).

The risk that funders with laudable intentions can generate participatory processes that create new forms of oppression is higher than ever before. This study should teach us the lesson that processes aimed at ‘giving people a voice’, however well-funded and linked to policy-makers, can actually weaken the voice of the groups that already have the least say in decisions (see also Kashefi and Keene 2008; Haq 2008; Singh 2008).
5.6 Buying participatory work

Studies following the money flowing through participatory processes are rare, but vital, in understanding the power at work on and within them. To find out in whose interests the process is being run, we need to know who pays both the participatory workers and potentially each participant in the process, as well as the amount of money that changes hands. The failure of those who sponsor participatory processes to reflect on the motives and influence of themselves and other individuals and groups who fund participatory processes has weakened our ability to see how power pervades participatory work (Hildyard et al. 2001).

Rare exceptions to this general lack of reflection can occur when the political stakes are high. Examples I have encountered include a UK government-funded consultation on the future of nuclear power investigated by the UK’s Channel 4 News (Wakeford and Singh 2008), an Indian grassroots-led Prajateerpu (people’s verdict) on the future of rural Andhra Pradesh (Kuruganti et al. 2008 and Figures 5.1-5.5) and a citizens’ jury on the future of food and farming in the UK (Wakeford 2016).

Participatory work deals with issues of power and privilege. To be a participatory worker is to be a power broker. Much participatory research also has roots in the company boardroom, particularly in the market intelligence that public relations corporations offer to their clients. The philosophy of market research (see Box 5.4) has played a role in creating the suspicion about participation that exists among many of those with whom we work.

Even if participatory research was purely a product of bottom-up social movements, then there would be issues of power, privilege and voice. Here, the exercise of power...
Everyday Experts: How people’s knowledge can transform the food system

might have been even more hidden than those we see in commercial participatory research (see Box 5.4). The corruption of the original ideals of participation by development agencies and some academics prompted a critical response from some analysts, most famously the provocatively titled ‘Participation: The new tyranny?’ (Cooke and Kothari 2001). A range of contributors outlined the way in which participatory projects and, by implication, their workers, were complicit in disempowering people. Published in the same year as the September 11 attacks and the rise of the US-led War on Terror, the book was received in a political atmosphere in the UK and US that was increasingly hostile to participatory democracy.

Hijacked by neoliberal market researchers and under attack from the political left (Kapoor 2008), the first wave of post-Cold War participation has largely lost its credibility among many (c.f. Cornwall 2011).

5.7 Alternative visions

Work by sociologist Shiv Visvanathan and philosopher Miranda Fricker helps clarify an alternative vision for participatory work to the one that comes from the participation industry. Visvanathan has proposed the concept of cognitive justice, based on the recognition of the plurality of knowledge and expresses the right of the different forms of knowledge to co-exist (Visvanathan 1997). The failure of the European system of ‘post-enlightenment’ science to recognise the knowledge of people outside its systems of control has clearly, to use Visvanathan’s term, been a case of cognitive injustice. Fricker (2007) is also concerned about professional expertise being supported at the expense of other forms of knowledge, which she calls epistemic injustice. Historically, expertise derived through life experience rather than professional training has typically been side-lined (which Fricker labels ‘testimonial injustice’), while marginalised groups have also been repeatedly denied opportunities to develop greater knowledge (‘heuristic injustice’).

Fricker’s distinction between heuristic and testimonial injustice is particularly useful for us as we think about our motivations for our participatory work. Many participatory research projects run by academics in the field of ‘development’ prioritise providing their participants with education about an issue – new ways of detecting a health risk, for example. This is the provision of heuristic justice. However, there may be a trade-off whereby development programmes do this educational work at the expense of, rather than promoting, spaces in which people without professional training can share the expertise they have gained through their life experience. In denying them this space, the participatory worker is thus in danger of doing them a testimonial injustice.

Fricker’s binary is also useful to critique many academic and commercial researchers who claim to use participatory approaches, but who prioritise the extraction of views of their participants – for example via focus groups – without allowing them to build their knowledge. Anyone who denies those with whom they work the capacity to build their knowledge are doing them an heuristic injustice.
Box 5.4: The commercial participation industry

“We believe in the power of participation: It is our ambition to supply … insight into what people are thinking and doing … so that companies, governments and institutions can better serve the people...” Mission statement of a UK opinion polling company (YouGov 2016).

Influenced by pioneers of public relations from the 1920s, such as Edward Bernays, the prevailing view among many large corporations in the mid-20th century was that the creation of irrational consumer desires was good. In short, stimulating people to find fulfilment through consumption and then supplying them with consumer products to satisfy their perceived need, even if the items were unnecessary, unhealthy or bad for the environment, was core to business success. People’s consumption of mass-produced goods not only made the economy work, but also made them politically compliant, thus creating a stable society. Beginning in the 1950s, research with focus groups became key to designing advertising slogans – from the ‘tiger in your tank’ for gasoline, to the curves of a Barbie doll in the toy industry. The rise to power of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan was intimately linked to focus group research. Their job was to find out what their key voters wanted and then sell it to them. This tradition of participation worked in direct opposition to attempts by others at popular education.

US President Bill Clinton and UK Prime Minister Tony Blair formulated many of their policies, through the use of YouGov-style focus groups that allowed them to discover how to sell already formulated policies to a politically uninformed electorate. To political strategists such as Stan Greenberg (pollster to Clinton and Blair’s close ally, Philip Gould), policies could be sold in the same way as a new brand of car (Gould 1999; Greenberg 1996; Kavanagh 2012).

Instead, either leader could have used processes of popular education and critical reflection with voters, as took place in Brazil a generation before. Robert Reich, a member of Clinton’s cabinet, believes that “Fundamentally here we have two different views of human nature and of democracy”. One the one hand, “you have the view that people are irrational, that they are bundles of unconscious emotion… that’s what marketing really is all about – what are the symbols, the images, the music, the words that will appeal to these unconscious feelings”. But on the other hand, continues Reich, “politics must be more than that. Politics and leadership are about engaging the public in a rational discussion and deliberation about what is best and treating people with respect in terms of their rational abilities to debate what is best” (quoted in Curtis 2002). Politicians can use privately commissioned focus groups with the aim of shaping their policies or merely as a means whereby they are marketed to voters. Neither objective makes the policy-formulation process any more open or, therefore, democratic.

A key aspect of the participation industry that enabled Clinton–Blair populist electoral politics was the part played by academic researchers. Focus groups allowed the extraction of people’s views in a social setting. This got closer to their political perceptions than if they were interviewed individually. Drawing on the work of Kurt Lewin and others, management schools had embraced focus groups as a marketing tool by the 1960s (Adelman 1993, Curtis 2002). Academics used the focus group approach to gain qualitative insights into how people think, not only to help political parties win elections, but also to further their own research.

While often calling their work participatory, many have carried out their research with no attempt to allow people an independent voice (Wakeford 2001; 2002; c.f. Caretta and Vacchelli, 2015). Their views only became public through the interpretative lens of a researcher, whose sole accountability has been to their academic peers.

Participatory workers were vital in helping corporate managers enter a dialogue with two groups essential to their success – their workers, to understand how to reach their corporate goals, and their consumers, to create a mass market for their products.
During the 20th century, few governments of any political persuasion supported participatory democracy or participatory research. Yet some people’s movements and researchers struggling for social justice in several countries in Africa, Europe, India, Latin America and North America embraced these variations in approaches from the 1960s onwards. Key to their flourishing were the writings and practical work of Paulo Freire and those inspired by his work.

Freirean approaches underpinned a range of social movements that emerged as a response to oppression over the past four decades. In Latin America, these often focused on acquiring rights for landless peasants and building democratic alternatives to dictatorship (Branford and Rocha, 2002). In North America, the UK and now internationally, movements of people who have survived the mental health system (e.g. Wallcraft et al., 2009) or are living with HIV/AIDS (e.g. Susser, 2009) have used participatory research to ensure that resources used in their name are deployed effectively.

Those following Paulo Freire’s legacy of critical pedagogy often have motivations that are linked to those of liberation struggles. These workers may have an intuitive grasp of what this kind of justice means without having to comprehend the jargon that accompanies action research and participatory research in the academy (Coghlan and Brydon-Miller, 2014).

For emancipatory social movements, the motivation for participatory work – of being heard and gaining basic rights – is often clear. Even then, attempts to use participation for emancipation involve many challenges (Vadjunec, 2017). By contrast, those of us based in research institutions may find it difficult – sometimes dangerous – to separate our personal motivations to join forces with oppressed people from our collective liberation from the institutional pressures we are under to meet our corporate income or publication targets (Morris, 2016).

5.9 Participatory work in practice

Reflections of a co-performative witness

OK, if you want we can jump straight to agenda item 12: Diversity.
So The background.

The facilitation group - All of us - Wanted to tackle How white and middle class we are.

Guys, show me those jazz hands… Yes, that's right. It's all of us white folks… You don't know this hand signal?
That’s the signal that means we agree...
Sorry. It’s a facilitation tool...
Yeah, yeah it's jargon.
But you’ll pick it up.

So, anyway, there we were, white and mostly middle class.
And Hamish, here -
Yes, Scottish Hamish -
From a very normal background.

Very every-day,
Almost working class,
Wouldn’t you say Hamish?
But a bit less so since you got your PhD!

Hamish wanted to do something about the consensus
We reached it at our last Gathering....
Yes, but we say, ‘Gathering’.
It’s just the jargon.

Everyone who spoke agreed that it was
High time
That we had some
Diversity.

We were so pleased to hear about...
You...
Sorry, I still can’t
Pronounce your name!

Expenses, childcare, all sorted.
You asked to bring your friend.
And we thought
Great.

Double diversity!
But as soon as you joined our group
On the very first Skype call
You seemed angry -

Resentful -
That you were being made a spokesperson
For black people.
Well you are black.

Isn’t that what diversity is all about?
Different voices.
Of course you can’t speak
For all black people...

Oh?
People of colour is a better term, is it?
Thanks.
You see, you’re helping already.

You said we were blind
To colonialism and slavery.
I think we all know that bad things
Happened in days gone by.

That’s right Hamish,
William Wilberforce ended it all.
Jazz hands!
That’s it … though I don’t quite see everyone’s hands.

We’re all Guardian readers here.
We were raised on Sesame Street!
You don’t see us as racist do you…?
Oh, I see. More complicated…

But Stephen Lawrence was the fault of
A racist police force.
Incidents of racism in schools and universities are decr…
Oh.

They’re increasing are they?
I guess they would be.
Given what’s happening
In the world.

But the point is you are here now,
Representing those people.
We’re more diverse, thanks to you.
That’s good, isn’t it…?

Sorry…? Tokenism?
Institutional racism?
You’re being unreasonable…
Look – you didn’t get any jazz hands.

So, we’re running out of time.
I really hope we can have another diverse chat soon…
Being patronising?
I don’t think that’s fair.

I’ve been on a facilitation training course.
And one of the trainers
Was a person of colour.
Maybe both.

You see,
Now I’m learning
Your jargon
Too.
This satire draws on the experiences white middle-class participatory workers in contexts where the privilege associated with our skin colour and relative economic security gives us power. It also reflects conversations with colleagues of colour who have been at the receiving end of such processes. Speaking personally, it took me around two decades of working in multicultural settings to really understand the power a white person has in the context of facilitating a process where people of colour are present. It took many mistakes and patient explanations from my co-workers for me to accept my responsibility to question the source of that power.

For years, myself and other white colleagues have used the language of anti-racism, but putting it into practice has demanded more of us than just being sensitive to questions raised by people of colour with whom we work. It required us to ask difficult questions of ourselves about our power in the context of participatory work. Our mistakes often expose our ignorance of the depth of the colonial legacy that can underlie processes of dialogue between people of different racial backgrounds.

My personal identity, and those of other white participatory workers, remains invisible because it is so all-pervasive. It is the norm. Many of us wish to address the patriarchal and structural violence that underlay European colonialism. Yet these oppressive processes continue to be perpetuated through male researchers of European origin. Our task is made more difficult because we are caught in the same white-walled labyrinth as that encountered by people of colour (People's Knowledge Editorial Collective 2016). Unless we make a special effort, white people will continue to talk to people who mainly look and sound like ourselves.

5.9 Conclusions

To resist co-option by the powerful and being drawn into tokenistic, or even tyrannical, projects, participatory workers must systematically reflect on the lessons of the history of participatory work. Critical accounts of participatory processes, particularly as seen from the perspective of those of those co-performative witnesses labelled ‘participants’, barely exist in the published literature (though see Box 3). I am part of a Collective committed to documenting and reflecting this history (e.g. People's Knowledge Editorial Collective, 2016). Whether we are undertaking action research to transform the food system or in any other area, we must make greater efforts to share control with non-dominant groups in processes whereby we develop safeguards against dominant groups, including academic researchers, perpetuating existing forms of oppression.

Other chapters in this volume emphasise efforts to help build the capacity of people working at the grassroots, particularly those without formal training, to become participatory workers in relation to the food system (e.g. Vadjunec, 2017; Madhusudhan, 2017; Sanchez Rodriguez and de la Pava Cataño, 2017). Such
Everyday Experts: How people’s knowledge can transform the food system

initiatives will help to ensure that they work on an equal footing with those of us based within institutions, some of whose larger motives may conflict with those of popular movements for social justice.

The pessimism of some who see participatory processes as inherently supportive of oppressive political systems should not give way to defeatism among the rest of us. The history of struggles in India, Latin America and the civil rights movement in the US shows that we can all be co-performative witnesses working together towards positive change. The rise of populist politics in the West, including the Brexit vote in the UK and the election of President Donald Trump in the US, are a product of those who might have shared the values and perhaps even been part of, earlier struggles for human rights. Lacking effective processes of participatory democracy that might have highlighted their concerns, they have gained a voice using the only means the current political system allows them. Attempts to bring about food justice must be seen within this fractured political context. Whatever the issue, the scale of current challenges should bring new urgency to all our efforts to work towards genuine participatory processes of change.

5.10 References and further reading


Horton, M et al. (1990) We make the road by walking: Conversations on education and social change. Temple University Press.


King, H (2016) Reflecting on facilitation for the future, Paper presented at Learning Research Agenda for Natural History Institutions, Natural History Museum, London. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yLg-1SBPax0


YouGov (2016) About YouGov. Available at: https://yougov.co.uk/about/