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# Participation in Associations Leads to Political Involvement

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Fundació Escolta  
**JOSEP CAROL**

Collection

“Reflections  
out loud”

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Associations  
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Involvement

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# Prologue

## A Test for Government Leaders

The text that accompanies this prologue is a small time bomb placed within the aged and atrophied heart of our political system. It boldly diagnoses some of our most serious ailments and also offers a possible treatment.

The health of our democratic system in general and the strength of political action in particular have an artery problem: the channels for public participation are severely blocked, which has a negative effect on the intensity and quality of this participation. This profound constraint on the level of citizen participation is what leads the authors to diagnosis two "coronary diseases" of the polis: the problem of democratic legitimacy and the problem of educating citizens.

The way this diagnosis is reached is impeccable and can be summarized in four questions. (And I should say that at a time when a good many electoral promises are being made, this questionnaire would be an excellent entrance exam for government leaders).

1. What different forms of social participation are available? The authors present three: volunteer help

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groups, social-services entities and the participatory association movement.

2. How can we evaluate each form of participation's contribution to the health of our democratic system and strengthening citizen education? In other words, what public values or virtues arise from each group's impact on society and what level of intensity of civic involvement does each generate?

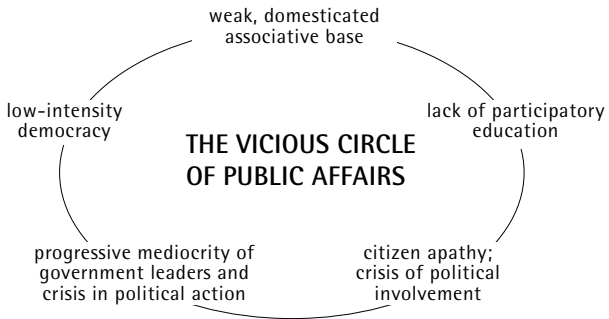
3. What specific contribution does the participatory youth association movement make to strengthening democratic civic participation?

4. In light of the answers given to questions 2 and 3, what forms of citizen participation should public actions and government decisions favour or give preference to? The ones that are the most submissive to the administration's orders? The easiest ones to mobilize or convince at any given time (sporadic volunteers)? The most efficient and beneficial ones over the short term (because they provide occasional resources without criticism and do not generate expenses, problems or a need for explanations)? Or those that are trained in the methods of negotiation, discussion, democratic internal operations, and the coordination and management of processes capable of producing public goods?

The answers to these four questions are fundamental because they provide an indication of what our model of representative democracy is like and how we are able to take advantage of the complex network of public players and interactions in the country or fail to do so.

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Therefore, this text's merit does not consist of carrying out or being yet another study on the virtues of the participatory youth association movement, but of linking the crisis of political action among our government leaders with the crisis of political involvement among citizens (non-participation, apathy, distancing). In short, there is a vicious or, as stated above, a "pathologic" circle that reciprocally and temporarily connects the fate and vitality of civil society with the fate and vitality of the democratic system.



The authors believe (and I have to agree with them) that the only way to break the circle and get out of this dead-end is to return to the deeper meaning of the Aristotelian vision of the polis: showing that educating people about politics is nothing more than promoting civic education; and the most authentic form of civic education involves personally assuming and sharing social responsibilities.

These commitments to the community may certainly manifest themselves in different forms: through

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professional associations, trade unions, political parties, foundations, sporadic volunteers, etc. The final virtue of Eduard and David's essay is that it allows us to see that while all these forms are valid, a country that aspires to democratic excellence and social cohesion should also be demanding when selecting the "best".

For a nation like Catalonia, with its own delegated government and competences interfered with and glossed over, the emphasis on top-quality social capital is not in vain. In this regard, the participatory youth association movement in Catalonia has not had its final say.

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# Participatory Democracy in Organizations





In recent years, some of the people from Escoltes Catalans have been prompted to rethink the discourse of the association movement within the frameworks of youth councils (ranging from local councils to the European Youth Forum) and other platforms. We have had to explore a number of discourses that were unacceptable because they did not fit our model, such as the volunteer-activities discourse, the corporate discourse, the third-sector discourse and the leisure-time services discourse as supposed developments in the educational association movement.

After many discussions on these issues, in mid-2000 we decided to write an essay together articulating the arguments supporting the potential and social value of the Escoltes Catalans model as an association for educating young people with its three defining conditions: an educational association with democratic participation and the involvement of young people. We feel the article we wrote at that time<sup>1</sup>, with minor changes, still expresses our belief

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1. This essay is based on the article "L'associacionisme juvenil de participació i la crisi de la implicació política" ["The Participatory Youth Association Movement and the Crisis of Political Involvement"], published in *Idees, revista de temes contemporanis*, no. 9. Barcelona, January/March 2001.

that, at a time of widespread disorientation, participatory youth associations such as Escoltes Catalans, a 4000-person-strong association in which the average age of Board members is 28, is a valuable tool for promoting participatory transformational politics.

## Political participation and public awareness

In the last 150 years, the different kinds of non-democratic political regimes throughout the world have gradually been replaced by democratic systems in which the main collective decision-making processes are carried out by representatives who are lawfully elected for a specific period of time by means of free, universal elections. Of 147 countries with data, 121 (with 68% of the world's people) had one or all of the elements of formal democracy in 2000. This compares with only 54 countries (with 46% of the world's people) in 1980<sup>2</sup>. And given that democracy is now perceived as a basic condition of political legitimacy, the trend is for the number of democracies to continue increasing.

Most of the features of the representative-democracy model have been progressively modified in keeping with the changes that have occurred in different democratic societies. But social behaviour and its rules have often evolved before the many

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2. UNDP: *Human Development Report 2002: Deepening Democracy in a Fragmented World*, United Nations. New York, 2002 (pp 14-15).

modifications to the democratic model's decision-making mechanisms have actually been implemented, which has led to periods of discussion and controversy. It is very probable that the debate raging today regarding the ways citizens can get involved and participate in politics indicates that we are currently in one of those transition periods and heading toward a more participatory model of democracy.

Participatory democracy does not involve working from the premise that people's representatives should be given *carte blanche* to handle any issue on their own as they see fit. This is the wrong attitude and somehow perverts the logic of the system itself. The complexity of democratic societies increasingly calls for a permanent network of relations between the people who govern and the many groups that make up today's society. Following are some of the arguments that justify this statement.

Like all other citizens, political representatives and government leaders are immersed in a society of growing complexity, where major changes occur at dizzying speeds. This makes it very difficult for them to make correct, timely decisions. Technical reports and sociology statistics (which are good tools for analysing the current state of affairs) are necessary but not sufficient to help them make good decisions. It is also necessary for them to understand people's opinions, which are difficult to express qualitatively as statistics, mainly because of the impossibility of articulating them in simple terms.

But it is also important for governments to know if people are happy with the decisions that have been made or have to be made, especially because these government leaders will all be up for election at some point. This public acceptance can either come as a result of information the government releases about its political decisions, where it highlights primarily its positive achievements, although this is unfortunately often done by adding heavy makeup to hide the negative features; or by giving people an active role in the process of analysis, evaluation and even decision-making itself.

Both methods can be complementary if used correctly, but the latter, which is more participatory, may appear to be more laborious, slower and also full of risks. It certainly involves a great deal of coordination and the need to generate communication systems. Moreover, it is usually slow because people need to get organized and set up internal consultation mechanisms. And it may ultimately give rise to approaches far removed from those initially proposed. However, it has the overwhelming advantage of ensuring that the decision made is supported by the majority and that people as a whole feel responsible for it. And, as stated above, it will also be the decision with the most points in its favour to become the best possible decision.

People's participation in decision-making processes other than elections increases the democratic political system's level of legitimacy and even the legitimacy of institutional leaders. Participation gives people a more accurate view of political reality,

broadens society's political culture and encourages greater joint responsibility.

In fact, the major boost given to people's awareness that they are citizens is what may lead to more fluid participation in politics, and even to greater participation in elections. As we all know, the ever-rising non-participation figures (40.8% in the 1999 Parliamentary elections) show that many citizens either think collective agreements are not important or feel their individual participation can have no real effect on general decisions<sup>3</sup>. A society built on these two premises runs a serious risk of losing its group awareness, social cohesion and even the cultural values it is based on. And, what is more, the spread of these attitudes is a direct affront to the principle of popular sovereignty the democratic model stands for.

For today's citizens, simply voting in elections is not enough to feel that our participation in politics has an effect on government decision-making processes. Nor is it sufficient to convince us that our government leaders are doing a good job. Taking on one's share of group responsibilities and making a commitment to the community are essential parts of what make a society democratic in today's world. In this regard, as we have stated in other writings<sup>4</sup>, it has

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3. We shall not discuss non-participation based on other reasons, be they non-democratic ideological considerations or approaches that use not participating in elections as a tool for demanding radical change regarding the way the democratic system and citizen participation should be conceived. At any rate, these and other non-participatory stances are currently minority viewpoints in Catalonia.

4. VALLORY I SUBIRÀ, Eduard (ed.): *Educar en la política. Dotze raons per a la participació en la vida pública [To educate people about politics. Twelve reasons for participation in public life]*. Pòrtic, col·lecció Visions, 10. Barcelona, 2003.

become fundamental for people not to be on the outside looking in when it comes to political action, but to feel the political system belongs to them, and not only at election time. For that to be feasible, politicians must be predisposed to the idea and we also need to structure and facilitate the development of social tools that express this need and the possibility of participating in the responsibilities and decisions that affect us all. These tools make up what is known as participatory democracy.

## The double role of participatory youth associations

Assuming one's own condition as a citizen is no easy task, nor can it be resolved in a short period of time: it requires an ongoing process of interaction. In fact, government leaders and the people responsible for political parties are also citizens who, in principle, are concerned about the well-being and happiness of the group, and have a vocation for public affairs that has gradually developed from the moment they accepted the idea that they lived in society.

A training process is required to foster a predisposition to democratic participation, which is an essential requirement for overcoming the crisis of political involvement. And participatory youth associations are one of the best places to train young people to become responsible, critical, committed citizens. We understand participatory youth

associations to be those made up primarily of young, unpaid volunteer members who play an active part in all the organization's decision-making processes and actions. In these associations, members express opinions, evaluate, put forward proposals, make agreements, plan, modify, take on responsibilities, define the meaning of the organization, its lines of action and budgetary priorities, decide on the positions of responsibility that will represent the group and get as involved in the project as they can or want to.

The participatory youth association movement has become one of the best places for young people to interact, where they can develop projects of mutual interest with the greatest freedom and where they have to take on the greatest amount of responsibility to carry out these projects. At the same time, because such associations involve shared group interests, they encourage processes of debate and negotiation to reach agreements that satisfy all the parties participating in the project. Moreover, the fact that they are youth organizations means that the turnover of members is relatively fast and constant, which makes it necessary to have continuous training programmes for new members. This situation allows the most veteran members to reaffirm the system of shared values and identification with the group project when they transmit these ideas to new members.

It should be pointed out that, following the distinction mentioned by Carles Boix in his introduction to Putnam, we are referring to associations that produce public goods and not ones

that generate private ones. «Everyone in the community can enjoy public goods, regardless of whether or not they participate in the group that makes them (...), whereas only the people who participate in the creation of private goods have the right to enjoy them.» We therefore refer to those associations that produce public goods and that have the added problem whereby «because it is so easy for people to consume certain public goods, even if they do not contribute to their supply, it is only logical for individuals to let others take charge of supplying these goods and to enjoy the fruits of others' work at no charge»<sup>5</sup>.

Besides the altruistic social function, this kind of participatory association movement is a real school for democratic participation and not only with regard to the aspects mentioned thus far. It also provides for contact between citizens and government institutions and other agents, either through their spokespeople or the legitimate platforms set up for this purpose.

In general, this contact with participatory associations should also be of interest to government institutions, given that it provides a valuable chance to make contact with the social agents that represent a group of involved citizens, especially in the case of the participatory youth association movement, which, despite age differences, has proven to be a

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5. BOIX, Carles: "El concepte de capital social i les seves implicacions econòmiques" ["The Concept of Social Capital and its Economic Implications"], in: PUTNAM, Robert D.: *Per a fer que la democràcia funcioni. La importància del capital social [Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Italy]*. Princeton University Press, 1993]. Proa, Col·lecció Temes Contemporanis, 11. Barcelona, 2000 (pp. 22-23).



suitable vehicle for this contact, given its dynamic characteristics and democratic internal operations.

Obviously, true youth associations have characteristics that can make this dialogue difficult, such as the rapid turnover of members – a direct result of being youth organizations. These characteristics make it hard to maintain the continuity of personal relations and call for more intense leader training to continue with the institutional relationships already established without having to begin all over again. However, at the same time, these characteristics can contribute vitality and an extraordinary capacity for adaptation and innovation.

Moreover, these associations often come up with proposals of general interest to citizens that are comparable to or better than those proposed by government institutions. It is important to bear in mind that these associations often support proposals that are in the interest of young people in general.

One example of this is the exceptional role played by the National Youth Council of Catalonia (CNJC), which represents a unique participatory model in Catalonia. The wide range of organizations that form part of this platform is an extraordinary example of a real school for the participation of young people: the educational association movement (including the *laïque* and the denominational Scouting/Guiding), student unions and organizations, youth groups based on culture, social activities, outdoor activities, exchanges and cooperation, and the youth groups of political parties and trade unions. The CNJC is

currently the permanent platform of associations in Catalonia that groups together the most organizations and the greatest variety of people.

The CNJC's wide range of members reflects the double role of the participatory youth association movement as a training ground in civic-political values and a tool for citizens' participation in public affairs. It is this double role that makes it so important and which should make it an object of greater social renown and promotion among the general public.

Its ability to generate proposals that go far beyond the interests of the group itself is reflected in the document *CNJC's Salient Points on Youth Policy*<sup>6</sup>, which contains proposals for political action for a societal model (on three levels: the formation of personality, citizenship and building a common future) and a model for planning youth policies.

In August 2000, in their speeches at the plenary assembly of the World Scout Parliamentary Union (WSPU) in Warsaw, both the then-director of the United Nations Youth Unit, the American Bill Angel, and the coordinator of UNESCO's Youth Coordination Unit, Maria Helena Henriques-Mueller from Brazil, cited this document as the most innovative text on youth policies they were familiar with in the world. In November 2000 the Catalan Government passed the National Youth Plan for Catalonia, which reflected the framework of the CNJC document and led to a

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6. NATIONAL YOUTH COUNCIL OF CATALONIA: *Salient Points on Youth Policy [Línies de política juvenil]*. Barcelona, 1999.

new concept of coordinated youth policy on the local and national level.

Given initiatives of this kind, it is ridiculous for some administrations to argue that, since not all young people are members of associations, these organizations actually represent a relatively low percentage of all young people. What seems to have slipped through the selective memory of these administrations is the fact that, as described in the study *Joves i participació a Catalunya*<sup>7</sup>, there are still a number of obstacles that hinder participation – often thanks to the public administration itself – and make it surprising that the participatory association movement even exists at all.

## Confusion with other models of non-profit organizations

Although young people's political and democratic participation frequently occurs as a result of their involvement in participatory youth associations, public institutions often tend to promote another kind of social involvement that is quite different (in terms of participation) from what we have described thus far.

Without providing an exhaustive list, in the area of non-profit entities there are three main kinds of

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7. FUNDACIÓ FRANCESC FERRER I GUÀRDIA: *Joves i participació a Catalunya [Young People and Participation in Catalonia]*. Secretaria General de Joventut de la Generalitat de Catalunya (General Youth Secretariat of the Catalan Government), Col·lecció Estudis, 2. Barcelona, 1999 (pp. 157-162).

organizations. The first includes volunteer help organizations based on an evolved charity model. These groups detect a social problem and use the organization to coordinate social-welfare work. The people who do this work do not have to be members of the organization, but agree to get involved for a specific period of time.

A second kind of entities, which is growing in importance, includes non-profit service organizations, the structure of which is not based on volunteers, but on a considerable number of paid professionals who work for the organization. These entities are usually social-initiative or social-services organizations or companies with a foundation format that do very important social tasks and employ a full-time staff. These organizations often handle such large amounts of money that public administrations consider them to be the main people to talk to when it comes to dealing with "associations".

The dividing line between these two kinds of entities (volunteer help organizations and non-profit service organizations) is not always clear because they often have similar characteristics.

A third kind of non-profit organization is participatory associations, which includes the participatory youth association movement, as mentioned above. The members of these organizations have a permanent commitment to the association and participate in decision-making processes. The number of paid professionals is much lower and their job is to provide members with support. Their legal status as an association is not

irrelevant. By definition, a foundation does not work in a democratic fashion because its board makes the final decisions on its organizational policies and how to manage its assets.

The differences between these three kinds of non-profit entities are often not clear from the outside, and the media and government institutions tend to lump them all together. Therefore, passing legislation in favour of social-initiative organizations to give them tax advantages on their services or employees, or to provide legal or media resources to encourage people to get involved in low-intensity, part-time volunteer work may seem like actions that promote the participatory association movement. But this is not actually the case because participatory associations do not have the high percentage of paid professionals that services organizations do and they do not need part-time volunteers to pitch in to do their permanent work. However, in spite of this, the action taken by the public administration supposedly "in favour of the participatory association movement" is generally limited to the type of entities mentioned.

It is not the purpose of this text to haggle over society's interest in the projects sponsored by volunteer organizations and entities providing social services. On some other occasion we *would* like to have a say in the crucial debate on how our theoretical welfare society works and who assumes what social responsibilities pertaining to the public sphere. What we would like to address here is the error involved in placing the same value on the contribution the association movement makes to

participatory democracy and citizenship training (which is of great intensity) and the contribution made by volunteer and services organizations. As Putnam says, "identifying trends regarding the size of the non-profit sector and comparing them with the trends in the social sector would be a fundamental conceptual error"<sup>8</sup>.

Participation in associations calls for ongoing commitment and an effort to do group work with short-, medium- and long-term goals at the same time. In the recent study *Projecte Internet Catalunya*, Manuel Castells and Imma Tubella make an important point. In Catalonia «the most active citizens participate in campaigns but not in organizations. They are moved by the content of their actions, but do not join organizational structures»<sup>9</sup>. In other words, they work on a short-term basis on specific projects, but tend not to be the ones who organize actions.

In terms of financing, association-based organizations very often depend on public grants, which has been known to weaken them. Grants with strings attached have frequently been used to open the door to political back-scratching and a total lack of transparency in relations between citizens' organizations and government institutions.

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8. PUTNAM, Robert: "Jugant a bitlles sol. La decadència del capital social nord-americà", in: *Idees. Revista de temes contemporanis*, no. 3. Barcelona, July/September 1999 (p. 25). ("Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital," *Journal of Democracy*, no. 6, January 1995).

9. CASTELLS, Manuel and Imma TUBELLA: *Projecte Internet Catalunya [Internet Catalonia Project]*, IN3-UOC. Barcelona, 2002 (p. 422).

At this point, we feel it is necessary to provide a clearer picture of the relationship between associations and public administrations. From our perspective, participatory associations should receive economic support from the government so they can successfully carry out their associative tasks. This support should be granted based on objective criteria related to the size of the association's project, the organizational structure required and the social impact of the action. Financial agreements rather than grants are a good tool for ensuring the stability of associations if they include immediate payment so the organization is not suffocated.

On the other hand, social services rendered and managed by non-profit organizations and financed by public administrations should be controlled using criteria linked exclusively to the solvency of the project and the organization that proposes it, based on tools that guarantee the complete transparency of the process. Public tenders are probably the best manner of doing so. Only in this way will it be possible to differentiate between the support given to participatory associations and the grants for social projects awarded to the applicants offering the best conditions. This would avoid the kind of confusion that unfortunately continues to exist today.

In summary, we believe that to encourage people to participate in politics, to help them comprehend and assume democratic values and even to strengthen civil society, the permanent, active involvement of a participatory association cannot be compared with the sporadic involvement of a "participant" without a voice or a vote in a volunteer help organization or a

user of a social-initiative service, and much less with someone who helps out at a TV marathon. It is clear that these other options are much more convenient and some would even say they are more efficient when it comes to management. But this hypothetical greater short-term profitability gets turned around if the aim is to get people to think, learn to decide for themselves and become involved in matters of general interest.

If we understand that it is necessary to differentiate in the public sphere between the public administration (i.e., the machinery that guarantees day-to-day management) and the government (which is made up of the people who direct this administration), we can see that political action is the responsibility of government leaders, who also have to be good at managing the administration. Likewise, then, it is necessary in the non-profit world to differentiate between social-initiative services and organizations, which aim to jointly manage services in the public interest, and citizen movements, which seek to have an effect on public policy and even a voice in decision-making, without forgetting that their work in and of itself is a public good. Participatory associations fall into this second category and the initiatives they promote to transform the current state of affairs are therefore complemented by dialogue and negotiation with the public authorities to influence their government action.

Let's digress for a moment, in light of this function, which we could refer to as the *political function* of associations, to make a distinction between the



functions of association networks and political parties so as to avoid the confusion between these two spheres. In modern democracies, political parties are structures into which citizens organize themselves to exercise their political power. These parties have the responsibility of channelling citizens' interests and concerns into government action. On the other hand, association networks, which should maintain a critical distance from management of this public power, reinforce democracy by voicing citizens' contributions to the organization of society. They are not interested in and therefore cannot replace the current responsibilities of political parties. However, based on the logic that democracy involves citizens' rights to disagree with the legitimate government leaders, and to promote their own model of society, they promote initiatives to improve people's living conditions and quality of life.

Paradoxically, political parties tend to respond to people's immediate interests within a kind of *commercial* logic, whereas associations and social movements can focus more on people's principles and values to offer more long-term proposals. The deficit in moral legitimacy of political parties can be offset by the moral legitimacy of the proposals of organized citizens, while the deficit in representative legitimacy of the non-governmental world can be offset if enough public institutions are open and willing to work with this world.

In summary, rather than evaluate the work of organizations whose function is not social transformation, what should be done is to clarify the functions of each kind of organization. Some groups

deal with the consequences of inequality, while others work on changing the causes. But it is the latter that prompts participatory political involvement.

## Associations and social movements

Besides participatory associations, it is also important to bear in mind the growing relevance throughout the world of all manner of platforms that often take action through international networks<sup>10</sup>, and lead mobilizations in response to the current model of globalization, a model based largely on the market's dominance over political power. We stress the fact that they are *platforms of all kinds* because there coexists social-movement groups and governing political parties (with very different positions, but with a certain cause in common), NGOs and trade unions, not to mention committed intellectuals and academics and participatory associations, such as, in the Catalan case, Scouting/Guiding.

This is a new way of getting organized in a network and its success has a great deal to do with the

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10. We are not referring to the expanded role played by networks of associations and platforms for coordinating international associations and NGOs, such as CIVICUS, or, on another level, UBUNTU, the World Forum of Networks, a subject that has already been discussed in VALLORY (2003), *op. cit.* (pp. 158-173). The argument defended there is that cross-border networks of associations and what is being configured under the name of *global civil society* are, to some extent, beginning to make up for the lack of a global governance structure by defining a political agenda, thus overcoming the national limits that still constrain political parties.

immediacy provided by information and communication technologies. Although this new method generates certain inconveniences for structured associations, it has also made them more dynamic. The public demonstrations on 15 February 2003 against military intervention in Iraq (which were historic because the participation of people all over the world made them the first global demonstrations in history) involved the actions of many networks of associations and political bodies, but were particularly marked by the participation of other groups and their forms of organization.

These forms of organization are characterized by, among other aspects, being fully participatory (the people involved define the organization's proposals and put them into action) and are different from participatory associations in that they lack representative bodies and often do not have any kind of legal personality. They also differ from participatory associations in the intermittent involvement of participants, in that they do not take on a commitment with the organization, but with the cause that mobilizes the organization, which can lead to moments of intense action followed by periods of total inactivity.

The continuity and clear organizational structure of participatory associations contrast with the greater flexibility and dynamism at certain times of these new social movements. But each kind of organization can learn things from the other, given that one of the main objectives of both models is to encourage people to get involved, even though this is done from different perspectives. Moreover, to have a greater

effect on public affairs, it is better to join forces than to divide them. Participatory associations are much better at setting up a dialogue with public institutions. They represent a considerable number of people and can mobilize all their members and sympathizers for action. At the same time, these new social movements contribute new and innovative ideas, respond rapidly to challenges and therefore have a considerable capacity to mobilize the population.

Shared spaces such as social forums and temporary platforms such as the one against armed intervention in Iraq, provide an opportunity for both kinds of organizations to work on joint projects. The potential of these networks for generating new forms of response leads to innovative ways of operating, massive involvement by the general population and a revamped discourse. But we should also be aware that these shared spaces can produce disputes in the context of collectivist-democratic dynamics between organizations with representatives and people working on an individual level who are often from these new social movements but do not represent them. Despite these difficulties, we need to find formulas that create connections between the different ways involved citizens can organize themselves.

It is not surprising that some of the most active people in these social movements and major civic-social networks often are or have been leaders in associations. This is clear proof that participatory youth associations contribute to enriching the participatory culture, regardless of the perspective

from which it is approached. Given the need to generate the dynamics to prompt citizens' greater awareness and joint responsibility in public affairs, the demonstrations for a different model of globalization in the last few years and, particularly, the most recent demonstrations against the war in Iraq represent a turning point in the history of this awareness.

## The crisis of political involvement

Today's societies are affected by different circumstances that have resulted in political scepticism. Two examples of this should suffice. The first is the distrust people feel toward government institutions. If the original idea of national sovereignty was for the nation to be constituted as a State equipped with an administration at the service of the group, what has actually happened is that an image has been created of an imposed administration that always abuses its powers, wastes resources and does not try to understand the people who use its services. Tax fraud may be a representative demonstration of this distrust, but it is not the only one; there is also a corporate perspective, which sees politics and governments as either manipulators or outright crooks, and the public administration as a bunch of bungling bureaucrats. This is the thesis behind an approach used by civil society that places more value on the private sector (which is seen as pure and good) than on the public (which is scorned

as impure and bad). While constantly accusing government institutions, the people who defend this approach overlook the scandalous social inequality created by a business world where ethics has been replaced by a desperate scrambling to get as rich as possible.

A second circumstance is the result of economic globalization. If the State was the context where government institutions could regulate markets and even redistribute wealth and provide security when developing the social State, in the globalized world, markets turn this context on its head and governments lose their ability to control it. While major multinationals merge, States fearfully watch the spectacle from the wings, apparently able to do no more than act as servants to these job-creating companies. As pointed out by the much-refuted Fukuyama, from this perspective political parties seek the middle path without being able to find alternatives that allow them to swim against the seething current created by the world economy.

Seen from this perspective, and given the lack of participatory training, the limited involvement in politics, especially among young people, should not be overly surprising. One consequence of this lack of involvement in politics is that very few people are interested in going into careers in public affairs, which results in a drop in the quality of political leaders and a final consequence consisting of the increased mediocrity of political action. The deterioration of the ideals that were once the basis of political action has led politics to be concerned more about managing the present than planning for the

medium or long term. It has also created a great deal of dependence on election cycles without understanding that the lack of a horizon must also involve disrepute because the role of manager, though necessary, can never replace the role of politician, i.e., the person who pinpoints the government's priorities. Management that takes priority over politics and electioneering that takes the place of long-term planning are two of the primary enemies of the inner workings of political action taken by governments.

If we focus on the association movement, recent studies<sup>11</sup> have shown that people in Western societies are participating less in civic and association activities and that this has led to major societal disintegration, which is just the opposite of the increased social trust and the encouragement of mutual reciprocity generated by the existence of a dynamic associative life.

However, the fact that people are not participating in civic activities does not mean they are participating more in trade unions or political parties. In fact, just the opposite is occurring. This drop is in favour of individual reclusion, though it may sometimes be a kind of "network-based individualism"<sup>12</sup>. Association members are much more prone than non-members to participate in politics, to deal with other people or to express their trust in society. This drop in participation is therefore an extension to the growing scepticism regarding the political system, as the study by Castells and Tubella also points out.

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11. PUTNAM (1999), *op. cit.*

12. CASTELLS and TUBELLA (2002), *op. cit.* (p. 286).

Both traditional institutional politics and civil society are going through a crisis of legitimacy. And this increased scepticism toward the political system and institutions is very worrisome because it effectively separates government decision-makers from their source of legitimacy. As soon as word gets out that it does not really matter who our government leaders are because major policies are ultimately dictated by the unquestioned trends of economic globalization, the seeds are sown for even greater passivity and further removal of people from involvement in politics. And if we can no longer go to the agora to discuss the government of the polis, what other options are left to us?

## Breaking the vicious circle

Dealing with the legitimacy crisis public institutions are going through is no easy task. It will probably require delving much deeper into certain issues, such as deciding what level of administration should be responsible for specific functions or competences (with major economic decisions being moved to the European or world level and many other issues decentralized) or finding better solutions for the disjointed public or private management of certain public-interest services (and, in the latter case, deciding whether or not such management should be for profit).

As pointed out at the beginning of this essay, it is also just as relevant (if not more so) to be able to move from a representative democracy to a much more



participatory one so that citizens can regain their responsibility in public affairs and place their full trust in institutions.

For these reasons, we believe the participatory association movement is one of the best allies of today's politicians interested in overcoming the current lack of trust people feel and breaking the hegemony of the economic network, which leaves no room for government institutions to take action, i.e., the politicians who really believe democracy is possible and have not bought into the idea that economics alone determines government action.

In this large-scale struggle between legitimate government institutions and constituted economic powers, if transformational political action is not backed by the people, it will never succeed. And if people's backing generally begins when they assume democratic values, it makes complete sense to point out that participatory youth associations are one of the spaces with the highest level of training in public participation and the most heightened awareness of democracy.

This is why we insist that when measuring the part played by citizens in the construction of society, the number of people in committed participatory associations is more relevant than the number of people in volunteer organizations, the number of users of social services for young people and the number of members of sports federations. Based on the premise that government institutions have the obligation of governing and that it is certainly not the role of the association movement to replace

them, it should also be stressed that if the democratic model chosen is one involving greater citizen participation, these institutions will have to encourage people to get organized in participatory democratic networks and make it easy for them to do so, while respecting the limits of civil society and allowing public opinion to have its say on matters that affect it.

Needless to say, support for this association model is an essential requirement when it comes to strengthening democracy, but it is not enough. Moving toward a more participatory democracy also involves making information on decision-making processes available to citizens, allowing them to intervene in discussions and encouraging them to get involved. Many such initiatives are progressively moving forward, but making sure association networks have their say is clearly an important measure.

In general, government institutions do not realize that they are actually prejudicing future allies when they fail to promote participatory associations, besides the fact that they tend to be even more dependent on economic interests and give society a push toward being much less participatory. This has already happened to the political organizations that have given up their transformational role and resigned themselves to being responsible for managing the unquestioned status quo. What happens, for example, when a company blackmails the government by threatening to move its factories to another country? Are not consumers, i.e., organized citizens, the only ones who can organize campaigns and actually have some effect?

The paradox is that public institutions' lack of receptivity to participatory associations (and their fawning on sporadic volunteer activities while being very slow to promote participatory associations) is also one of the reasons young people are so turned off by participating in politics. And even why so many political leaders are becoming so blatantly mediocre. Some political leaders interested in finding ways to improve their number have trouble seeing how this is related to the fact that they are not at all concerned about promoting participatory associations and instead do just the opposite, even though such associations are a privileged tool for political education.

The concept of real political involvement inherent to participatory youth associations makes them a good way of breaking the vicious circle. Participatory associations create a habit that is difficult to break: the responsibility of having a say in decisions. When people get used to being responsible for making decisions, they have to be very well informed to let others decide for them, which is why participatory associations are the ideal school for citizens involved in democracy.

In fact, many people who participate in public affairs do so based on values gained in the learning period they went through in the association movement, where group problems are viewed as one's own problems. For this reason, the barrier between "politicians" and "civic leaders" will gradually be broken down because their basic objectives are one and the same: improving the group. And the body that should take action will vary each time: an

association or movement, the university, the parliament or the government.

## Some conclusions

The crisis of political involvement has coincided with the crisis of political action. As the gap widens between government leaders and the people, the distance between the growing power of markets and the waning authority of governments is also becoming more pronounced. Both crises endanger the tenets of democracy and therefore the method of government that allows people to participate in the decisions that affect them and that ensures access to such participation is never hindered. We must move from a representative democracy to a more participatory one, which will involve new ways of getting people involved in the management of public affairs. In this context, given the crisis of political involvement, we insist that participatory youth associations are a corrective tool.

We have presented the outstanding contribution made by the participatory youth association movement toward generating an active awareness of citizenship, though we have neither said it is the only way to resolve the crisis of political involvement nor that it should be the only non-profit organizational model available to people. Quite the contrary; its internal operating dynamics make it an unsuitable forum for successfully developing certain essential social projects. However, we can affirm with no reservations that the contributions made by these

associations toward strengthening democracy are much more important than those of many other methods available to civil society, both with regard to their effect on people as a school for participatory democracy and as a highly representative gauge of the attitudes of people who are committed to improving public affairs. Based on the World Values Survey, Putnam states that "the close correlation between trust in society and membership in associations is not only the same throughout time and for all individuals, it is also true for all countries (...). Trust and commitment are two facets of the same underlying factor: social capital" .

And yet social trends are moving in the opposite direction to these associations, so if we want to promote them, we will have to improve their reputation among the general public, minimize the bureaucratic and tax problems they face, reinforce the means they have for taking action and ensure they receive special attention and protection from public institutions. This need for support must particularly be borne in mind at a time when our societies are witnessing the growing importance of non-profit service organizations, the so-called "third sector", led primarily by foundations and social-economy entities. While looking out for their own legitimate but partial interests, these groups will have to make it easier to distinguish between what they are (services) and participatory associations. Otherwise, they could end up contributing to the disintegration of participatory-association networks and weakening our debilitated democracy even more.