

On the “Participatory” Part of “Participatory Fascism”

When I use “participatory fascism”—for me a technical term in political economy, not an ideological or rhetorical cudgel—most people react to the “fascism” part and disregard the “participatory” part. Yet that part is critical to one’s understanding of how this system of rule proves so durable and resilient.

In the modern world, many people demand a voice in how they are ruled. In reality, however, every actual system of rule in a large society is and must be an oligarchy. Neither democracy in the simple sense nor autocracy in the sense of strict dictatorship or monarchy is workable. But oligarchy, a system in which a relatively small group of cooperating rulers (though it may have a nominal head ostensibly in charge) and their key financial supporters applies the nuts and bolts of rule is workable, indeed, indispensable. So, whether by design or by piecemeal pushing and pulling, this is the form that all modern governments take.

When most people think of political participation, they immediately think of voting in elections to fill political offices or to adopt certain overarching rules (e.g., in substantive referenda submitted to the electorate). But given the pervasive character of the state’s involvement in modern life, an equally if not more important form of participation involves people’s engagement with the legislature’s day-to-day business or the enforcement actions of administrative and regulatory bodies. In the USA, for example, the Administrative Procedure Act provides that new rules, before taking effect, must have been given notice and hearings and public comments been received and considered. Likewise, bills proposed in the legislature must be registered, scheduled for hearings before appropriate committees, approved by those committees for further consideration, and make their way past a variety of potential obstacles that legislators may place in the way of their becoming the law of the land.

In both areas of rule-making, the opportunities for delaying, crippling, or derailing proposed statutes or administrative rules are numerous, and those who operate the machinery know well how to keep a rule from going forward regardless of how popular it may be with the electorate or the public at large. Hence, one way in which the oligarchs preserve their positions is to use their command of the machinery of public participation to wear down dissidents or others who seek to overturn oppressive, predatory, or destructive government rules. The bureaucracy is notorious for “hunkering down” in order to thwart even the president’s wishes. The bureaucrats have plenty of time; their terms of office are not limited; they can afford to be patient and wait for today’s passions to cool or the public’s interests to be diverted into other channels. (This diversion is a principal function served by the government’s continual engagement in new foreign wars, which capture the

public's attention and tend to unify quarreling people in support of the government, at least for a while.)

So, viewed in a functional sense, the public's ostensible participation in the government's rulemaking may be seen as not so much a genuine determinant of how the rules will bind them as a snare and a delusion, a trick, as it were, to focus people's time and effort on hacking through the complex thicket of procedural briers, often losing sight of the original, foremost objective, wearing themselves out and using up their money in an endless struggle to get past all the barriers. Nevertheless, at the end of the day, the month, the years spent with little to show for their efforts, they will be told that the system is open, that they have had their "day in court," and indeed that they "are the government."