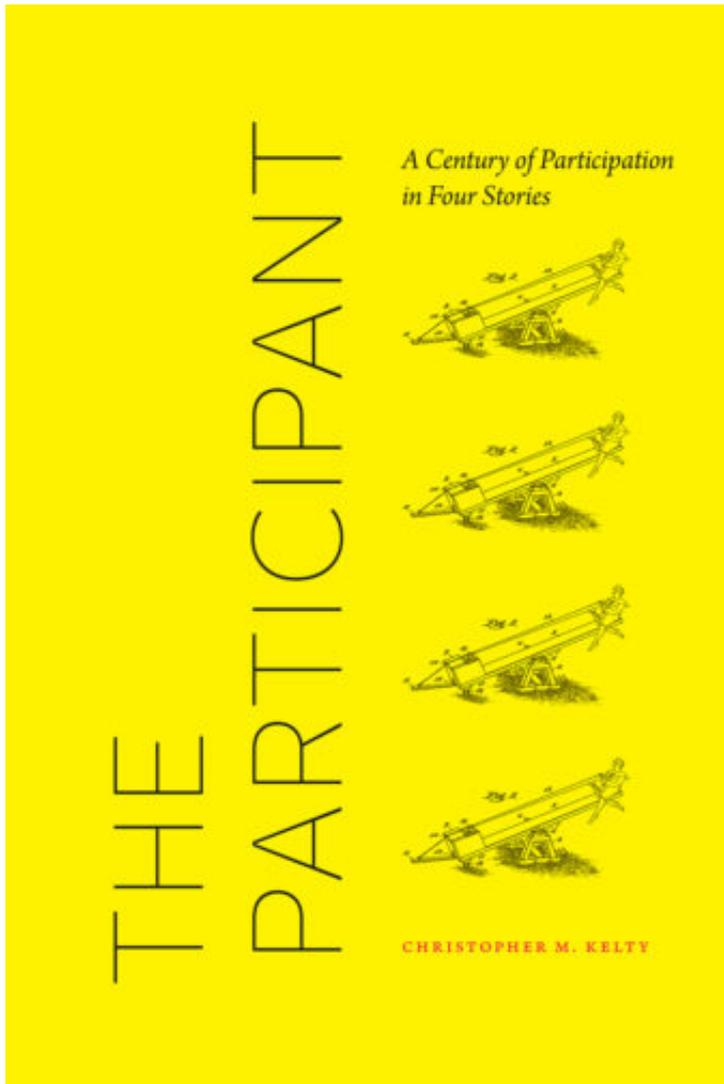


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Christopher Kelty's *The Participant: A Century of Participation in Four Stories*

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By Talia Dan-Cohen



[The Participant: A Century of Participation in Four Stories](#)

[Christopher M. Kelty](#)

University of Chicago Press, 2020. 344 pages.

A book about participation? Chris Kelty's delightful new book begins by giving voice to his audience's likely incredulity. Mimicking the standard

response to the project, he launches with the question, “Participation in what?” In everything and nothing, of course. He notes that participation, which “at first seems obvious,” soon “reveals itself to be challenging and difficult to grasp” (1). Yet Kelty’s account of participation is not a dissection of the topic or an anatomy of its senses. He offers a sharp argument around a central premise: over the past century, participation has changed in ways that leave us worse off, spreading far and wide while undercutting its power.

The reader may immediately leap to two conclusions that Kelty deftly wards off. First, we might feel drawn to the verdict that it is our digital participation and its associated experiential dimensions that have cheapened the concept. To this, Kelty replies by suggesting we look instead to some unlikelier sources, rooted in earlier events; hence, his historical approach. Second, we might feel equally impelled to overdetermine an analysis of participation in terms of the rise of new forms of domination under neoliberalism. Yet, here, Kelty insists that participation comes into conflict with neoliberal values as often as it is coopted by them. Rather than critique participation, therefore, Kelty asserts that participation is an elusive concept at the heart of democratic politics. Understanding it better, and developing some equipment for figuring out what has happened to it, is then part of the project of re-imagining those politics.

Although we now know something of where we are headed, the question remains how we are to get there. The answer is through stories. Storytelling was once the mark of “unsophisticated” scholarship. To tell stories was to impose narrative unwittingly; to be naïve. In the anthropological and STS scholarly lineages, storytelling was vehemently reclaimed and resuscitated, particularly in feminist scholarship in the later 20th century, as a genre that lends itself to perspectival knowledge and to the part-fictive character of all fact-making. Yet Kelty’s motives for choosing stories are a bit different. Kelty argues that participation is not only a concept (though an imprecise one) and a procedure, but also an experience. It is this experiential, affective component which is perhaps hardest to grasp; that fades as soon as participation has ended. And it is therefore this last component that also motivates the choice of storytelling as the approach taken in much of the book. The stories bookend chapters that present more conventionally composed history and analysis.

The stories themselves are organized around a single character, *The Participant*. That’s right. *The Participant*. The choice of the singular protagonist, for a book that calls itself at one point a “historical ethnography,” suggests gumption. Kelty is a trained anthropologist, and while anthropologists use pseudonyms, or paste together and tease apart events and stories involving different actors to protect privacy or for

narrative expediency, their interlocutors are usually named and individuated in ways that are framed as epistemologically (and sometimes ethically) load-bearing. But here, Kelty is less interested in generating authority through ethnographic realism than in linking and interlacing stories whose narrative coherence we might otherwise overlook. We are thus invited to experience, with the author, the “mischievous pleasure” of “an absurd experiment” that involves a generic hero, strewn across centuries (6). The stories themselves—cases of sorts—are rich and varied enough to draw in new conceptual problems, yet thematically unified enough to convince the reader that there is a *there* there for a term that at first sight had seemed too capacious or too familiar.

At the heart of *The Participant* is Kelty’s enduring interest in the relationship between persons and collectives. The book is organized around three main concepts: contributory autonomy, the experience of participation, and the grammar of participation. Contributory autonomy refers to the “form of personhood” at the core of participation as we know it, a creature of late liberalism that embraces individual autonomy, sees collective life as dependent on collections of autonomous individuals, and is governed largely by procedural rationality. Over the course of the book, Kelty develops an argument about the rise to dominance in the 20th century of the lowest common denominator, and most highly individualizing form of contributory autonomy, one that, instead of forming every individual as an instance of a collective, simply aggregates atomized individuals into constantly shifting collectivities (hello, social media!). The experiential component draws out the ways that eliciting and containing participation also change the experience of participation. Thus, for example, the experience of participation where contributory autonomy reigns supreme is a personal one, in which the distance between person and collective is often augmented, as opposed to the blurring of boundaries between person and collective that constitutes the mystique (and danger) of crowds. Finally, in appealing to grammar, to the rules of the game, Kelty has in mind Wittgenstein’s writings on “forms of life.” Participation is one thing when participants share a form of life. It is quite another when their judgments about reality do not align, and when they lack a shared sense of how things ought to be. What arises in these cases is *perplexity*, another concept that Kelty develops, especially in the first chapter in which he excavates some older meanings of participation—concerning direct and immediate experience, unmediated by representations—from the work of Lucien Lévy-Bruhl. If participation, in most of Kelty’s book, is largely about participating in decisions, *perplexity* arises where shared ground cannot be found so that even disagreeing is impossible.

Chapters 2, 3, and 4 examine different 20th century settings in which participation was posed as a problem: worker participation, civic engagement, and participatory development. The approach here is sort of

history of the present-ish. Kelty examines the contours of assemblages that arose as responses to different situations in which participation became problematized. These assemblages tie together concepts, techniques, rationalities, and materials, among other things. While they possess deep ties to the particular situations out of which they arise (which is part of what makes the cases themselves so interesting), pieces of these assemblages exceed those situations, gain flight, and root down elsewhere, or, alternatively, disappear.

Chapter 2, on the rise of “participative management” in industrial relations, is exemplary of the approach in these three chapters. It largely concerns psychological experiments on worker participation that took place at the Harwood Pajama Factory in Virginia in the middle of the 20th century. The chapter’s main argument is that, while the Harwood experiments took groups as their proper object of study, focusing on their emergent psychological properties, the problem of participation at work was subsequently reframed in terms of individual desires and motives.

Moreover, as the chapter unfolds, it plays out a tension between enthusiastic readings of workplace participation that see participation as the enfranchisement of otherwise alienated workers, and readings that see it as a form of cooptation that uses the appearance of freedom as a disciplinary cudgel. Missing on both sides, Kelty observes, is the experience of participation in workplace innovation that takes seriously the “group experience of democratic participation” (102), something that, Kelty argues, even the social psychologists who designed the Harwood experiments failed to grasp. In some sense, they had been meaning to elicit a limited participatory experience that can be used as a tool in overcoming workers’ resistance to exogenous change, but accidentally impelled a real and robust participatory experience by inviting the workers to design the change itself. This robust experience, however, is nearly impossible to reproduce methodically through set procedures. The problem of containing, mobilizing, and scripting participation is a theme that traverses the chapters: attempts to stabilize participation towards instrumental outcomes often evacuate its experiential dimension. Yet here, something of the opposite seems at play as well in Kelty’s reading. An attempt to design a completely instrumental form of participation inadvertently produces something far more participatory—if still ephemeral—than psychologists themselves intended or could appreciate.

Another noteworthy feature of this chapter is the way it unpacks a kind of nesting doll of participation: women factory workers are enrolled without knowledge as participants in social psychological experiments on participation. The nesting doll reappears in many places throughout the book, because participation has to be “formatted,” as Kelty insists: there is no participation prior to the affordances and limits of particular ways of

participating. And, what is often lacking is participation in the formatting of participation. That is, if “who gets to participate and how?” is a set of first order questions, “who gets to decide or design who gets to participate and how?” is a second order question, and one that can concentrate the power and authority to not only shape participation (or its absence), but also to mold particular forms of personhood.

The Participant is a book that rewards repeat reading, not as a slow accrual of more detail and subtlety, but as an almost Gestalt-like feeling of starting to “get it.” The crucial conceptual work laid out in the introduction feels a little unmoored until the cases do the work of making the concepts more concrete. Once this happens, the introduction is worth revisiting, now that the reader is on more secure ground. Having revisited the conceptual groundwork, the chapters suddenly reveal themselves to be more tightly conceived, and densely reflective of the book’s overall project.

On yet another plane, *The Participant* is an enormously rich resource for anyone configuring a not-entirely-traditional object of analysis. It is a model work of rigorous yet genuinely multidisciplinary scholarly creativity, that invites us to look at “wily” concepts that are, as Kelty puts it, “always in the shelf next above the one [we are] looking at” (1). Given the rewards, the reader might start wondering, what else is on that shelf?

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