Bar Camps: Reflections on the Ideology of Participation and the Politics of Knowledge Production

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In close association with online cultures based on the ideals of non-propriety sharing, a series of experiments in face-to-face participatory knowledge production have emerged under the name of "bar camps." Also referred to as unconferences, bar camps are "user-generated" conferences or workshops modeled on the participatory structures used in Free Libre Open Source Software (FLOSS) production. The first bar camp took place in 2005 and was organized by IT workers in reaction to the inaccessible, non-participatory nature of a major IT conference which they desired to attend but could not due to limited space and restrictive fees. The initiators of this first bar camp were critical of conferences that featured famous lecturers and argued that this model of knowledge exchange leaves the brain power of the audience untapped and therefore wasted. In contrast, the FLOSS method of working encourages the contributions of the audience within an open structure and is perceived to lead to better, more efficient solutions. In the following I focus on a group calling themselves Critical Practice (CP), a group who privilege participatory structures like bar camps as sites of knowledge production within the humanities. CP offer an example of the influence of FLOSS culture on educational and artistic spaces, and exhibit an ideology of participation that I argue may be more damaging than helpful to critical thinking.

In a typical bar camp, topics of discussion are based on what participants put forward as the theme of their respective talks. Since the schedule of talks is decided at the start of the day by the participants, at times coming down to a vote on which topics sounds the most interesting, these events require

minimal organization. In keeping with the motto "everyone is an expert," participation is strongly emphasized as everyone present is encouraged to contribute something in the course of the day. Each presentation is usually limited to ten minutes in order to encourage dialogue and prevent the audience from adopting a "passive" role. These face-to-face discussions are rendered accessible through various modes of online representation and documentation such as wikis, audio files, video sharing, flickr, twitter, etc. The IT bar camps serve as a testing ground for new start-ups and a place to garner interest from venture capitalists. While the events are often sponsored by large tech companies, the sponsors are said to have no influence on the content or nature of the discussions.

The group CP, a cluster of artists, researchers, academics, PhD students and staff supported by London's Chelsea School of Art and Design, have taken inspiration from the participatory structures of the IT bar camps and have attempted to import this model into the realm of critical discussion based in the academic world. Since 2005, CP have organized dozens of events aimed at providing platforms for people to engage in "creative practice." Experimenting with different ways of exchanging ideas in an open and participatory manner, they organized a "Market of Ideas" in 2008 and then adopted the bar camp model for a conference in Poland in 2009. CP describe bar camps as "an international network of user generated unconferences – open, participatory and often thrilling workshop-events, whose content is provided by participants."[1] What is most striking about CP is the degree to which their own organizational structure and working process is at the centre of their concerns and projects.

[1] Critical Practice, interviewed by Agata Pyzik and Kuba Szreder, "Barcamp: Making Knowledge In Public," *Journal of the Free/Slow University in Warsaw* 1 (2009): 2.

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Participation, transparency, and horizontal structures have become commonly shared ideals within online cultures. These terms are often associated or equated with an emancipatory political function. The idea that more or better participation in social and political life is the solution to numerous problems is certainly not uncommon. Whether it is expressed through calls on the electorate to vote, solicitations to audiences to produce content for entertainment industries, artistic constructions of participatory situations, or activists calling on people to join general assemblies, participation has become a central obsession of our culture. What the preceding list makes clear is that participation is a contradictory concept, one that contains the promise of collective emancipation and individual self-empowerment, as well as the incorporation of energy, creativity and labour into the reproduction of our existing institutions and power structures. The typical response to this contradiction tends to be to distinguish *genuine* participation from the mere appearance of involvement. The question remains, however, whether or not participation in and of itself is radical. As a concept based fundamentally on inclusivity, participation tends to reflect a pluralistic vision of society that relies on a denial of structural inequality. CP exemplifies one attempt to put forward participatory practices as a solution to the problem of the privatization of knowledge. Bar camps, as conceived by CP, are posited as new public spaces of knowledge production that function as alternatives to traditional academic conferences and that reject intellectual property regimes. A closer look at the spoken and written statements of CP members reveals the limits of participation as an ideological ground for critical practice.

The primary goal of Critical Practice is to develop new ways of being in public.[2] The public sphere is held up as something they want to protect and enrich in the face of the encroachment of private interests on the development and dissemination of ideas. The basis of public knowledge production for CP revolves around two poles: transparency and participation. In relation to the first, CP affirm that any knowledge produced with the support of public money will be made available for free to the public.[3] Consequently, they post extensive documentation of their meetings, finances, and events on their wiki. The second aspect of CP's concept of this new public is participation. The ideal of participation shapes the nature of the events they organize in concrete ways. Primarily, this means that they attempt to organize events that result in a large degree of audience participation. In the "Market of Ideas" conference, for example, speakers are distributed in stalls throughout the space. The audience is encouraged to move about from stall to stall, talking back to the speakers, "taking" a bit of knowledge here and then "exchanging" it somewhere else. The audience is therefore seen to be empowered through a transactual relation to knowledge.[4] In this event, as well as another called "Parade," spatial organization plays a large role in facilitating audience participation. This spatial dimension is less considered in the bar camps, which tend to take place in typical conference settings with people gathered in a room to present and discuss. In bar camps, everyone present is encouraged to present at some point in the day or to at least respond vocally to the ideas of

[2] Critical Practice, *Parade* (CCW Camberwell, Chelsea, Wimbledon: London, 2010) 35. http://ia601203.us.archive.org/21/items/PARADE_856/PARADE-9-8.8MB.pdf

[3] CP are mostly funded as a research cluster of the Chelsea School of Art and Design.

[4] Critical Practice, "Barcamp," 2.

others. Speakers are limited to only ten minutes so that everyone has time to contribute.

In her introductory comments at the Warsaw bar camp, CP member Marsha Bradfield clarifies that bar camps are not about solidarity or collective authorship, but about individuals contributing knowledge from a situated place, which results in a constitutive understanding.[5] CP regularly refers to bar camps as sites of knowledge production rather than places where knowledge is exchanged or disseminated. CP member Neil Cummings states that their concern is "who produces what, how it is distributed, or how it is owned and embodied."[6] CP member Cinzia Cremona describes knowledge production as a process of creative co-production that emerges through interaction and practice.[7] The emphasis on a particular form of interaction that is privileged as a form of knowledge production is perhaps what is unique to CP's conception of the public.

In 2009 members of Critical Practice were interviewed to discuss the bar camp they held in Warsaw in October of that year. Over the course of the interview they describe what participatory knowledge production entails and how events like bar camps enable the participants to be more active and productive. The troubling aspect of this interview is how concepts like participation, activity, and productivity are put forward as inherently positive, without any further qualification as to how these are beneficial to either intellectual or political culture. CP's privileging of participation rests on two assumptions: first, that contemporary power relations are fundamentally

[5] Bradfield's comment begins at 6 minutes 10 seconds into the audio file. The introductory comments can be downloaded as an Mp3 at the following address: http://www.criticalpracticechelsea.org/wiki/index.php?title=The_Public_Body_Barcamp:_Documentation.

[6] Critical Practice, "Barcamp," 2.

[7] *Ibid.*

hierarchical and limit the audience to a passive position, and secondly, that participatory conference structures lead to "more" and "better" knowledge. In order to impart an emancipatory dimension to participatory practices CP contrast bar camps to a particular image of the "typical academic conference" that they claim is based on an unequal power relationship between lecturer and audience. According to CP, academic events tend to be based on a broadcast model in which famous people are invited to speak to a passive audience. This image of academia is mentioned five times over the course of a fairly short interview. At one point, when referring to the "Market of Ideas" event, CP member Cinzia Cremona repeats the IT bar camp idea that "there is more knowledge in the audience than in the famous invited speaker, so, in a way, the Market tries to unleash the potential of the "audience." It's the very opposite of a conference."[8] CP clearly relies on this trope of an academic world modeled on a broadcast method of communication in order to construct a network model of participation as the solution. However, we should question this logic on both empirical and conceptual grounds.

It is far from obvious that academic events revolve around a famous lecturer and a passive audience. The typical academic conference involves from a dozen to hundreds of speakers taking turns throughout the day to give presentations of between twelve and thirty minutes. These speakers can range from graduate students to well-established professors, public intellectuals, and everything in between. The audience at any given panel tends to consist of fellow presenters who are given a chance to engage with the speakers during question periods. While these conferences can be criticized for a number of reasons, a lack of participation on the part of the audience is not one of them. While lecturing is certainly one important mode of communication that is

[8] *Ibid.*

utilized in university settings, this is combined with a plethora of pedagogic models based on more dialogical or interactive relationships such as seminars, workshops, group research, and short presentations. All of these demand an engaged audience that contributes to the mutual production of knowledge.

While participatory modes of knowledge production already form a large portion of interactions within universities, it is questionable that these should entirely eclipse longer lecture formats. What kinds of ideas can be effectively communicated in ten minutes? While brevity is a skill that is desired in many contexts, it is not always appropriate when the expression of difficult or counterintuitive concepts is at stake. As regards length, many academic conferences are increasingly coming to resemble the bar camp structure as presenters are given as little as twelve minutes to share their research. In recent years universities have also introduced even briefer formats intended to work as networking events. McGill university, for example, hosts an event called "3 Minutes to Change the World" in which young scholars have precisely three minutes to pitch their research to their peers and the broader community.[9] In light of these developments, perhaps bar camps are not presenting us with a totally new kind of publicity after all, or at least, they are not unique in organizing events based on participatory formats.

Participation has become a core component of contemporary cultural practices both within educational institutions and outside. For instance, the ubiquity of personal communication technologies that offer users innumerable platforms to express themselves is one indication that the broadcast model of communication that CP are critical of has already been displaced. A number of scholars have argued that the broadcast model of communication no longer

[9] The "3 Minutes to Change the World" event took place on March 14, 2012 at McGill University, Montreal. http://www.mcgill.ca/sustainability/three-minutes-attending#event_details.

corresponds to the hegemonic mode of power relations in late-capitalist societies. Rather than domination being exercised through the mediation of mass spectacle, we are today living in a "control society" where domination is mediated through networks of personalized media. Jodi Dean refers to this contemporary system of exploitation as communicative capitalism.[10] Under this regime of control the circulation of information and affect that we voluntarily contribute though our online participation is exploited, not only by large corporations but also by ourselves as we attempt to maximize our own value and status in a job market increasingly defined by short term contracts and "projects."[11] Dean targets public sphere ideology in particular, arguing that the lure of an ever-greater transparency functions as a stimulus to a continuous search for more information and an increased circulation of affect and critical reflection. In a world where the mere volume of communicative exchanges, the availability of information, becomes the ultimate value regardless of the effectivity of this access in relation to political action, publicity loses its critical edge, she says, and becomes a form of "capture." Participation has become a new mode of power. From this perspective, the more people express themselves, the more they contribute to the circulation of information. Consequently, the more value there is to be accumulated, the better people can be monitored.

It should be clear that while within communicative capitalism we are offered many opportunities to participate as individuals, participation does not translate into equality. In this context, people who wish to engage in critical practice must go further than simply produce yet another opportunity to

[10] Jodi Dean, *Publicity's Secret: How Technoculture Capitalizes on Democracy* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University, 2002).

[11] For a description of how late-capitalism rationalizes itself through a project-based mechanism of determining just distribution see Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (Verso: London and New York, 2005), 103-164.

"participate." If we are genuinely concerned with the production of better knowledge, we must turn our attention towards the conditions required to produce critical, complex and nuanced ideas. These include the general context of academic work, the subjective relations fostered by educational practices, and the forms of mediation that enable ideas to circulate. CP generally value freedom of information and make reference to new IP regimes that restrict the circulation of some research. However, they do not situate these issues within the broader context of the corporate governance of universities, the casualization of academic labour, and increasingly quantitative measurements of intellectual productivity. In fact, CP's own assertions imply that participatory methods are more "efficient" and that there is "more" knowledge in the audience that is not being maximized during lectures, which seems to reflect the very market categories of accumulation and productivity for productivity's sake that they otherwise criticize. This is perhaps where CP's attempt to transpose the values of FLOSS onto critical thinking is most obviously ill-fitted.

The university is today suffering from serious problems. The central problem is not that famous keynote lecturers are invited to speak, or that there are not enough opportunities for participation. The problem is that the conditions in which academics teach and research are worsening. Corporate governance has resulted in more power for management and less control by teachers, students, and staff over their educational spaces. The casualization of academic labour has increased job insecurity and constrains the kind of work researchers will risk undertaking. If a disproportionately small group of famous intellectuals have the freedom to speak almost as long as they wish and to be invited abroad, while others don't have these opportunities, our attention should not be turned towards the symptom (unequal speaking time)

but towards the structure of privileges within universities and the economic logic of associating "big names" with the institutions that sponsor them.[12] We must also confront the contradiction that some of these intellectuals are theorizing these very conditions and so are worth listening to for more than ten minutes.

It is not difficult to see the benefits of informal settings of discussion and exchange, such as bar camps, within and alongside existing institutions of knowledge production. Such informal workshop-type events build a culture of inquiry that takes academics beyond the confines of knowledge production for the sake of individual career goals. In a period of diminishing working conditions, increasing precarity, and intense competition, there is a great amount of pressure on academics to produce research in order to fill institutional quotas. In the UK, point systems have been introduced which attempt to quantitatively measure the productivity of researchers and departments. In conditions such as these, informal spaces of exchange that do not count much for a research profile may be valuable for working through ideas in a less restricted manner. They might also allow academic workers, who tend to work in isolation, to articulate their collective identities and interests and build solidarity in order to counter such destructive levels of competition.

Of course, the stated aims of CP are not to build solidarity or affirm collective interests, but rather to *empower* the audience through individual participation. Without addressing the actual conditions of academic work, more enriching, more effective knowledge is unlikely to appear in a

[12] For a discussion of the academic "star" system and how it depends upon a growing system of casual academic labourers see: Stanley Aronowitz, *The Knowledge Factory: Dismantling the Corporate University and Creating True Higher Learning* (Beacon Press: Boston, 2000), 68-101.

participatory process. This requires not pluralistic spaces where academics contribute as individuals (of which we already have plenty), but organized spaces where collective interests are defined and common conditions of labour are made apparent. In the long run, the improvement of the working conditions of academic workers and students is what will result in better knowledge.

The objective conditions of knowledge production include subjective conditions. We might ask what kind of subjective relations are encouraged by bar camp activities? CP's conception of knowledge as something that emerges through dialogical encounter is a widely accepted claim within pedagogy. An early proponent of a similarly dialogical approach to learning can be found in Paolo Freire's well-know work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2000).[13] Freire's argument for equality in the educational process can be distilled into the phrase "everyone is a student." With this phrase, Freire reconceptualizes education as a subjective process of becoming that is always incomplete. The teacher is therefore also a student, rather than a master who possesses all knowledge and who manages its distribution. The motto of the bar camps, "everyone is an expert," initially has the sound of an assertion of equality amongst learners. However, it contains an inverted sense from that of "everyone is a student." Rather than humbly acknowledging our incomplete nature, and thereby opening ourselves up to mutual transformation, it asserts that everyone can adopt a position of mastery and therefore no one needs to rely on the ideas of anyone else. The idea that everyone is an expert is flattering to participants but perhaps damaging to expertise.

Freire's pedagogy is clearly intended as a tool of class struggle. What is of primary importance is enabling students (who in this case are illiterate

[13] Paolo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed.* 1970. (New York: Continuum, 2000).

peasants) to recognize the conditions of their own oppression and further, to understand that they play an active role in reproducing or altering these conditions. In contrast, the language of oppression or social division does not occur in CP's definition of bar camps. What we find instead is a loose concept of hierarchy. The audience is not positioned unequally vis-à-vis the lecturer according to class, race, gender or nationality, but is seen as disadvantaged simply by virtue of being an audience member – as listeners rather than speakers. Bar camps are conceived as pluralistic alternatives to the power of a singular expert voice. They result in individuals feeling empowered to speak from their own unique situated place. The end goal of bar camps therefore becomes not an awareness of the social conditions of knowledge production and a will to transforming them, but simply the continuation of already existing practices: a pluralistic discussion without end.

CP claims that bar camps have "political value" but the particular kind of politics is not specified.[14] Based on the statements of CP members it seems fair to conclude that the ideological assumptions that form the basis of their practice are derived from FLOSS; that is to say, a libertarian philosophy that revolves around freedom of information with an ultimate aim of personal, rather than social, transformation. The attempt on the part of CP to transpose this logic onto spaces of knowledge production in contexts other than that of software production quickly bumps up against limits. These include the fact that critical thought cannot be encapsulated in a line of code and so often requires more time to be properly expressed, and that the relative value of an individual's contribution cannot be easily measured when it comes to philosophical or political, rather than technical, problems. While in a certain sense it is easy to agree that every audience member can contribute something

[14] Critical Practice, "Barcamps," 1.

to knowledge production, it does not follow that more or equal speaking time at every event is the way to facilitate this. While the production of spaces for critical discussion are necessary for raising critical consciousness, these spaces should not be depoliticized through the fetishizing of participatory structures as the guarantee of political virtue or intellectual value. In particular, they should not be used to undermine other modes of dissemination such as lecturing. A lazy dichotomy of "participation" over "passivity" encourages the production of more talk, more opinions, the expression of more feelings, as though the resulting accumulation will yield a better and more enriching knowledge. It also obfuscates contemporary forms of power by turning our attention towards the mode of broadcast communication that is already in decline. Rather than try to determine whether a certain practice really has *it*, I claim that the concept of participation should be rejected. The very logic of participation is a floating signifier that can be pinned down in any direction except one. It reproduces the structure of inclusiveness that is fundamental to a social order premised on a consensual pluralistic space that denies the antagonisms at the core of capitalist social relations.

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