Introduction to the Plenary Session

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1. The scope of this Plenary

The scope of this Plenary is broad and challenging for the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences, which is its very reason for existing. We are asked to outline and implement a kind of society that can ensure the full participation of all its members, not simply in terms of compensation or compassion for the most disadvantaged, but in terms of a just and sustainable societal configuration in which people have the opportunity to pursue a good life for themselves and for everyone else.

In the face of growing social injustice, poverty dramas, rampant conflicts in the world, extensive migration flows, and an increasing fragmentation of society, many voices are raised to express urgent concern to find new cement for society.[1] Building a participatory society may be the way to go. But, one question becomes apparent: what is a ‘participatory society’?

If one surfs the internet, one will find expressions like: participatory government, participatory democracy (‘dialogue with citizens’), participatory governance, participatory economy, participatory education, participatory research, etc. What are they? The term ‘participatory society’ rarely appears. What does it mean? It is clear that this concept of participation could be given many different meanings, when applied to the whole configuration of society.

Often, the expression ‘participatory society’ is used to describe a way in which complex relations between the state and civil society should take place. But we can easily notice that very different, and also opposing, visions are given. Should it refer to ideas of a ‘caring’ and ‘responsible’ society? Probably yes, but the aim of achieving such a society is conceived and can be implemented in many different ways.

There are those who think that participatory society refers to a civil society simply seen as ‘non-governmental’, where ‘self-responsible’ citizens are expected to take care of their own affairs, feel more responsible for the needy and their local communities, with little or no state aid.[2] On the other hand, there are those who understand participatory society as the result of a strong state that intervenes to guarantee citizens a series of rights that enable them to take an active part in public life, quite often with an emphasis on an anti-capitalist, anti-racist, anti-sexist, and anti-authoritarian vision of society.[3]

It is evident that we need to clarify which project for a participatory society we are referring to. For instance, is it possible to draw clear distinctions between civic participation as self-reliant participation and as policy-influencing participation? Usually, the first refers to forms of participation that mainly involve people doing something themselves, such as keeping their neighbourhood clean or keeping a service or amenity running, while the second is about exerting influence on the policy of a public or private body, for example by voting, lobbying or exercising the right to public consultation and participation in decision-making.

Everybody is well aware that any project for a participatory society is referred to a counterfactual reality. Suffice it to recall the so-called ‘Matthew effect’ (or accumulated advantage), i.e. the phenomenon where the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. We know how widespread are the processes that exclude many people from the enjoyment of their human rights and the access to the opportunities that are relevant to their fulfilment. These processes are pervasive and ever recurring. We can list them as: exploitation, discrimination, alienation, reification, enslavement, estrangement, refusal of recognition, human trafficking, and so on. In short, they are processes of dehumanization.

John Paul II had in a certain sense anticipated this conference when he wrote:

“The problem of the choice between participation and alienation is the central issue of our epoch (…) Alienation is the negation of participation (…) The actualization of the participation with respect to every human being appears as a duty for each one”.[4]

Pope Francis has reminded us of this imperative on many occasions. He has underlined the need to counterbalance the predominance of economic and technological considerations (“the new power structures based on the techno-economic paradigm”) and give attention to local contexts and their cultural specificities:
“A consumerist vision of human beings, encouraged by the mechanisms of today’s globalized economy, has a levelling effect on cultures, diminishing the immense variety which is the heritage of all humanity. Attempts to resolve all problems through uniform regulations or technical interventions can lead to overlooking the complexities of local problems which demand the active participation of all members of the community. New processes taking shape cannot always fit into frameworks imported from outside; they need to be based in the local culture itself. As life and the world are dynamic realities, so our care for the world must also be flexible and dynamic. Merely technical solutions run the risk of addressing symptoms and not the more serious underlying problems. There is a need to respect the rights of peoples and cultures, and to appreciate that the development of a social group presupposes an historical process, which takes place within a cultural context and demands the constant and active involvement of local people from within their proper culture. Nor can the notion of the quality of life be imposed from without, for quality of life must be understood within the world of symbols and customs proper to each human group”.[5]

Our task is to enlighten these processes, analysing their causes and designing possible solutions. References should be made to the specificities of the different geo-political, economic and cultural contexts. At the same time, however, we have to pay attention to the overarching global dynamics that oppose the pursuit of social participation across countries, in that they deny people’s rights to take part in the decisions that affect their lives.

2. The many faces of participation.

Participation – be it social, economic, cultural, political or religious – has many faces. On the one hand, it is the opposite of exclusion, and therefore it requires ‘inclusion’ in a reference system. On the other hand, since inclusion can be pursued in various ways, participation can be articulated and qualified by different forms of ‘integration’ between people, between people and institutions, between the parts and the whole.

One might wonder whether the two antonyms ‘exclusion/inclusion’ and ‘differentiation/integration’ are identical or at least have some aspects in common. Possibly, they have different meanings and implications, both theoretically and practically, in respect to how participation is configured.

‘Exclusion/inclusion’ refers to the fact of being in or out, rather than up or down, whilst ‘differentiation/integration’ refers to how to deal with differences within a reality that needs to achieve unification.

If we assume that social exclusion is about broken relationships, there are always two parties to consider: those who exclude as well as the excluded. Participation means talking about these relationships in terms of their relations, which is an issue of ‘relational inclusion’ from both sides. As Pope Benedict XVI wrote:[6]

“The dynamics of inclusion are hardly automatic. Solutions need to be carefully designed to correspond to people’s concrete lives, based on a prudential evaluation of each situation. Alongside macro-projects, there is a place for micro-projects, and above all there is need for the active mobilization of all the subjects of civil society, both juridical and physical persons. (…) The theme of development can be identified with the inclusion-in-relation of all individuals and peoples within the one community of the human family, built in solidarity on the basis of the fundamental values of justice and peace”.

The issue of how participation can integrate differences is a matter of how to configure the whole in such a way that each part should not be forced to give up its own specificities.

The problem of how these two antonyms (exclusion/inclusion and differentiation/integration) can be articulated between them, thereby making for synergy between the principles of equality and respect for differences, is complex and yet challenging.

In my opinion, the task of this Plenary is not so much to insists on the failures and lack of participation in present societies, since there is ample knowledge about them, but rather it is to explore the positive aspects of those initiatives fostering a more inclusive and integrated society through different forms of participation: institutional and non-institutional, formal and informal, private and public, cooperative and conflictual, and so on. Of particular importance seems to be the distinction between participation as representation, participation as protest and participation as civic action.

3. Some major challenges in pursuing a ‘participatory society’ today.

Lack of participation is a multi-dimensional phenomenon that is largely due to a combination of economic and social deprivation, and involves political, legal and cultural factors. In brief, it is always a cumulative process of multiple and interrelated disadvantages.

Just to provide some initial suggestions for our debate, I would like to point out some major challenges in the pursuit of a participatory society within our contemporary world.
a. The crisis of representative democracy. Is representative democracy participatory? What are the alternatives?

The model of representative democracy that has prevailed since the Second World War is now clearly facing a crisis due to the increasing gap between the elites and common people in most countries. The lack of social and political involvement of citizens in the political government of society and the mismatches between civil society and the political system have produced two trends: on the one hand, the rise of autocratic and authoritarian regimes, and, on the other hand, permanent protest movements that make political systems extremely unstable, not to mention the increased antagonism of international relations. These trends indicate how difficult it is to create new forms of political participation. Some people believe that democracy will never be the same again. What are the alternatives? New electoral systems? New social movements and/or civic initiatives able to revitalize democracy? New forms of direct representation? How can we foster active citizenship, mobilize intermediary bodies (third sector, civil networks) that can promote social, economic and political participation at any level (micro, meso, and macro)? What else is needed in order to solve the failures of representative participation?

b. Growing social inequalities. In what way and to what extent do social inequalities actually prevent or distort participation?

We know that, in general, there is a positive correlation between the degree of social equality and the level of social participation. Participation is favoured by an egalitarian distribution of resources: the more resources are distributed equitably, the more social actors participate in the various spheres of society. But is this correlation in any way causal, let alone deterministic? Are there intermediary variables and countervailing influences that affect the processes and their outcomes? Is it true, as some scholars argue, that in the last decades the decline of social participation, at the local as well as at the nation level, has been due to increasing inequalities produced by the capitalist economy in conjunction with a kind of welfare state that renders citizens passive? What is the role of the economy and that of the state in reducing forms of participation? How should the criteria for distribution and redistribution of life opportunities be conceptualized in order to support the participation of all? Social justice is necessary to give people the opportunity to participate fully in the various spheres of society, and, in turn, participation in all such spheres is a precondition for having social justice. Answers to these issues come down to understanding whether or not a trade-off between social participation and social justice could create a virtuous — instead of a vicious — circle between them. It would be interesting to consider how to pursue social justice through new social and economic policies in fighting against poverty, combatting unemployment, and ensuring more equity between generations (in particular the issues of disadvantaged young people and the NEETs).

c. Increasing migrations and refugees. How to welcome migrants and refugees in the host countries, integrating them and enabling them to participate in social life?

We have to expect large migration flows in the near future, because of economic and demographic imbalances between different areas of the world. We need to reconsider migrations from the point of view of the lack of any adequate participation in the contexts of departure and in terms of demand in the contexts of arrival. How can we build bridges instead of walls? The way in which a country manages its national borders is a good indicator of the way it conceives of social participation.

d. Technological innovations (ICTs). Are innovations in the field of the ICTs an obstacle or do they enable or stimulate social participation?

Regarding this issue there are differing opinions and divergent results from empirical research. When they appear, all technological innovations tend to favour some and exclude others. For this reason, is establishing a participatory society a permanent challenge vis-à-vis technological innovations used not only for exchanging messages and information, but also in order to access many welfare, social and health services? What can be done to bridge the gaps and to make sure that those who are excluded from the use of these means can have a free and comprehensive access to them, which is necessary for full integration into society?

e. Religious and cultural conflicts emerging in a multicultural society. How are conflicts between different cultures (ethnic groups) and different religions managed in order to avoid the marginalization — and even segregation — of minority groups? How is it possible to favour dialogue, cooperation, and equality of rights for all?

The political doctrine of multiculturalism, as it was experienced in many countries following Canada (since the 1970s), has produced very limited and unsatisfactory results in promoting effective social and cultural integration. More often it has generated social segmentation and cultural relativism. What are the possible alternatives?
From a theoretical point of view, the social doctrine of the Church provides a fundamental inspiration and basic principles for positive solutions to these issues. But it needs to be translated into concrete actions in the face of what is happening. The world is supposed to be ‘globalized’, and in some ways it is supposed to share a common destiny, but we witness the emergence of new processes of division, alienation, injustice, and widespread conflicts that hinder effective participation in building a shared society. Indeed, we need a new vision to make the participation of each and every human person in society effective.

4. Envisioning a new scenario.

Humankind is bound to live in a post-ideological and constantly changing globalized world. It seems that a participatory society cannot be identified with a certain ideology. Those who would like to legitimize a participatory society with an ideology from the past would be undertaking a hopeless operation. At this moment in time, the label ‘participatory society’ seems only to exclude the opposites of rampant capitalism on one side and statism on the other side. We are dealing with a scenario that forces us to confront a wide variety of possible outcomes for our societies. Possibly, social participation will become a matter of purely adaptive processes.

The Church urges us to make new efforts to assure a future for humanity in which no person is excluded from decent participation in social life, one that is respectful of her dignity. It may be useful to recall the words used by Pope Benedict XVI to suggest moving towards an integration driven by relational inclusion:

“Globalization is a multifaceted and complex phenomenon which must be grasped in the diversity and unity of all its different dimensions, including the theological dimension. In this way it will be possible to experience and to steer the globalization of humanity in relational terms, in terms of communion and the sharing of goods” (…) “The theme of development can be identified with the inclusion-in-relation of all individuals and peoples within the one community of the human family, built in solidarity on the basis of the fundamental values of justice and peace”.[8]

After all, a participatory society is, or better should be, the necessary consequence of the recognition that in our world “everything is closely interrelated”, as Pope Francis reminds us.[9]

From this point of view, a number of emerging ideas for a real social participation are worthy of consideration, such as associational citizenship, relational goods, coproduction and peer production, direct democracy, communal networks, civil relational economy.

Since the Church’s social doctrine is not linked to any historic ideology and encourages everybody to adopt an approach of transcendent openness towards social issues, it can inspire new creativity in thinking about new solutions for the promotion of a participatory society. This is the challenge that we have ahead of us.

May everyone rise to it.

[1] This call echoes from the beginning of the industrial age, but the processes of poverty and exclusion have to be interpreted in precise historical contexts: see Bill Jordan, A theory of poverty and social exclusion (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996).

[2] Examples can be given with reference to the UK, the Netherlands and other countries. In particular, one should be aware that in the Netherlands what they call ‘participation society’ has been launched to declare the end of the welfare state (cf. Lei Delsen, From welfare state to participation society. Welfare state reform in the Netherlands: 2003-2010, Institute for Management Research, Radboud University Nijmegen, NiCE Working Paper 12-103, May 2012).


