Participation 'with Justice and Dignity': Beyond 'the New Tyranny'

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Abstract

The idea that 'participation' is an appropriate remedy for political (and other forms of) exclusion has become problematic: On the one hand, participatory approaches to 'community-building', policy-making, and development are becoming increasingly popular. On the other hand, they are being questioned and challenged, even by people who are committed to the principle that people should not be excluded from debates and decision making processes that have significant effects on their lives. This article suggests that the concept of dignity, as it appears in the discourse of the Zapatistas in Mexico, might be a good basis for rethinking the debate around exclusion and participation. The discussion is structured around the problem areas identified by the critics of participatory approaches. For each of these problems, I suggest how an emphasis on dignity might help us to approach the search for answers.

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Participation 'with justice and dignity': Beyond 'the new tyranny'

The idea that 'participation' is an appropriate remedy for political (and other forms of) exclusion has become problematic: On the one hand, participatory approaches to 'community-building', policy-making, and development are becoming increasingly popular – not least in the UK. On the other hand, they are being questioned and challenged, not only by those who never advocated participation but, more importantly, by some of those who are committed to the principle that people should not be excluded from debates and decision-making processes that have significant effects on their lives. A recent collection of reflections by academics and practitioners in the area of development explicitly raises the question of whether 'participation' has become 'the new tyranny'.[1] Among the issues raised by the critics, the following seem particularly salient:

1. **The depoliticisation of participation** that accompanies the valorisation of the personal, the local, and the community at the expense of an analysis of and challenge to the power structures that suffuse both the local and the wider context in which it is embedded. In this context, it is important to recognise that participatory approaches themselves are part of these power structures. Whether we like it or not, 'empowerment', 'participation' and 'consensus' may translate as ever more effective incorporation into agendas set elsewhere. In this sense, 'programmes designed to bring the excluded in often result in forms of control that are more difficult to challenge, as they reduce spaces of conflict and are relatively benign and liberal'.[2]

Note: Translations from Spanish and German into English are my own. EZLN communiqués can be found at www.ezln.org/documentos/index.html.

[1] Bill Cooke and Uma Kothari (eds), *Participation: The New Tyranny?* (London/New York: Zed Books, 2001).

[2] Uma Kothari, 'Power, Knowledge and Social Control in Participatory Development', ibid, p. 143.

2. **The roles and motivations of outside facilitators**. It is being suggested that the restriction of the outsider's role to 'facilitation' may be as problematic as the role of the expert who takes over: Both can stand in the way of genuine dialogue and exchange.[3]

3. **An over-emphasis on formulas and techniques**, and a neglect of the ways in which unacknowledged dynamics of participation and exclusion, both outside and within formalised instances of participation, shape the outcomes of 'participation'.

4. **Problems that have prevented many attempts at public participation/consensus-building from living up to their promise**. These include the potential of public participation to reinforce existing privileges and discourage an articulation of subordinate perspectives[4], group dynamics that are likely to lead to 'dysfunctional group consensus'[5], and the creation of group identities that may themselves be exclusive.

5. **The simplistic – and quasi-religious?[6] - dichotomisation of approaches**, with 'participation' firmly on the valued side. Within this conceptual framework, participation may become associated with 'salvation' and non-participation with guilt as the complexities of both get lost.

Can we take these issues seriously without abandoning the idea that exclusion is part of the problem and participation part of the answer?

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[3] Giles Mohan, 'Beyond Participation: Strategies for Deeper Empowerment', ibid.

[4] David Mosse, ''People's Knowledge', Participation and Patronage: Operations and Representations in Rural Development', ibid, p. 19.

[5] See the article by Bill Cooke, 'The Social Psychological Limits of Participation?', ibid.

[6] Paul Francis, 'Participatory Development at the World Bank: The Primacy of Process', ibid; Heiko Henkel and Roderick Stirrat, 'Participation as Spiritual Duty; Empowerment as Secular Subjection', ibid.

A big part of the failure of many participatory approaches to deliver the 'empowerment' they preach stems from their tendency to emphasise 'local' contexts, 'community' and consensus at the expense of wider power structures, dissent and confrontational politics. In this context, John Hailey speculates 'how much participative development owes its genesis to attempts by Western governments, and … Northern aid donors to limit the power and influence of political dissidents, freedom-fighters or radical Marxists'.[7] It is by no means clear, though, that 'political dissidents, freedom-fighters or radical Marxists' are - or can provide - the answer. Their approaches to exclusion and marginalisation, indeed, have undergone a crisis of their own, and one that is not unrelated to issues of participation: Vanguardism, charismatic leadership, and the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' are hardly attractive alternatives to 'participation'. Nor, however, is acquiescence to existing patterns of power and communication. Is it possible to rescue the best elements of participatory approaches and confrontational politics without repeating their worst mistakes?

I would like to suggest that it is worth looking for clues in the discourse of the Zapatistas in Mexico. It is worth looking at the Zapatistas because they are the result of a confluence and confrontation of traditional Marxist-Leninist ideas about revolutionary struggle and ideas about participation and dialogue. It is also worth looking at them because they have been remarkably successful at opening up spaces for participation from a starting-point of extreme marginalisation. Finally, it is worth looking at them because their ideas have become influential in their own right, inspiring both theorists and activists. This is not to suggest that there are no problems with the Zapatistas' discourse and practices or that they are 'the answer'. The Zapatistas themselves have insisted that they 'neither want to nor are able to occupy the place that some would like us to occupy, the place from which all the opinions, all the routes, all the answers, all the truths emanate'[8]. Instead, they have suggested that 'we move forward by asking questions'. In this spirit, this article aims to raise a set of questions and to suggest that perhaps the Zapatistas do have a proposal - their insistence on dignity - that might help us

[7] John Hailey, 'Beyond the Formulaic: Process and Practice in South Asian NGOs', ibid, p. 99.

[8] Opening speech at the National Democratic Convention, 8.8.1994.

to move forward, beyond formulaic approaches to 'participation' on the one hand and exclusionary politics on the other.

What's wrong with exclusion (and right with participation)?

Participation may not be as straightforward an answer to exclusion as we might wish. Yet it is worth remembering that 'alternative critiques of participation do not simply arise from critical/radical approaches' but also from 'authoritarian, oppressive and interest-protecting' ones.[9] If we want to continue to defend the idea that there is something wrong with exclusion and something right with participation, it is worth reflecting on what this 'something' might be, on what it is that might distinguish critical/radical approaches from authoritarian and oppressive ones.

I suggested that it might be worth looking at the Zapatistas for clues. Here, then, is the first clue, from comandanta Susana, one of the indigenous women who joined the EZLN:

> We are always behind, we haven't got the word. Always the mouth shut. Because of this we want that we women have our word. … That they respect us. Because before we could not say anything. Now, bit by bit, we are going to awaken, so that soon we may be able to speak and to see. What we want most is that they respect us.[10]

At one level, this is a statement about exclusion and the desire to participate. Yet it is more than that. It also contains a justification for why it might be important to participate: 'What we want most', Susana asserts, 'is that they respect us'. This justification constitutes the core of the Zapatistas' project. If the Zapatistas' struggle had to be summed up in one word, it would be this: Dignity. It is the emphasis on dignity that grounds the Zapatistas' commitment to a participatory politics. It is the emphasis on dignity, too, that has kept their project revolutionary. The Zapatistas insist that what they are struggling for is 'a peace with justice and dignity'. I would like to suggest that this

[9] Harry Taylor, 'Insights into Participation from Critical Management and Labour Process Perspectives', in Cooke and Kothari, *Participation: The New Tyranny?*, p. 138.

[10] Comandanta Susana, EZLN, in *La Jornada*, 7.9.95, quoted in Susan Street, '*La palabra verdadera* del zapatismo chiapaneco (Un nuevo ideario emancipatorio para la democracia)', in *Chiapas*, no. 2 (1996), 75.

qualification may be similarly applicable to the concept of participation. Dignity may be a good basis from which to rethink the debate around participation – not because it solves all the problems, but because it suggests a way of approaching them that the concept of 'participation', on its own, cannot provide.

What is dignity? The Zapatistas have suggested that 'dignity is not something that one studies, it is something that one lives or dies'[11], 'something that doesn't walk in the heads', 'something that walks in the heart'[12]. Nevertheless, they have conveyed a sense of what it means not just through their struggle but also through a language that appeals both to the head and to the heart. In one of their formulations,

> dignity is a bridge.
> It needs two sides that, being different, distinct and distant become one in the bridge
> without ceasing to be different and distinct, but ceasing already to be distant.
> When the bridge of dignity is being made,
> the us that we are speaks and the other that we are not speaks.
> On the bridge that is dignity there is the one and the other.
> And the one is not more or better than the other, nor is the other more or better than the one.
> Dignity demands that we are ourselves.
> But dignity is not just being ourselves.
> For there to be dignity the other is necessary.
> Because we are ourselves always in relation to the other.
> And the other is other in relation to us. …
> Dignity, then, is recognition and respect.
> Recognition of what we are and respect for what we are, yes,
> but also recognition of what the other is and respect for that which is the other. …
> So dignity is the tomorrow.
> But the tomorrow cannot be if it is not for all, for those who we are and for those who are other. …
> So dignity should be the world, a world where many worlds fit.
> Dignity, then, is not yet.
> So dignity is yet to be.
> Dignity, then, is struggling so that dignity eventually be the world.
> A world where all the worlds fit.

[11] EZLN, message to Eric Jauffret, 10.6.1995.

[12] EZLN communiqué, 10.4.1995.

So dignity is and is something that needs to be created.
It is a path to travel.
Dignity is the tomorrow.[13]

This attempt to get closer to the meaning of dignity is at once simple and demanding. It is simple because it expresses values and aspirations that we, and many others, can easily recognise. And it is demanding because, so often, we are so far from realising them. The image of the path is a good one: It is something that has a starting-point where we are but demands the willingness to move beyond where we are.

What does this mean in practice? In the following, I will suggest some of the things it might mean in relation to the discussion around exclusion and participation. I will structure the discussion around the problem areas identified by the critics of participatory development. For each of these problems, I will attempt to identify how an emphasis on dignity might help us to approach the search for answers.

1. (De)politicisation should be rooted in the struggle for dignity

One of the strongest points of critique against mainstream participatory approaches concerns their failure to take sufficient account of the wider power dynamics that constrain the potential impact of participation at a local level. To counter this tendency, the critics suggest, participation needs to be re-politicised, 're-scaled' beyond the local[14], and be part of struggles 'to gain participation not as a placatory gift from the powerful but as a genuine shift in the social and power structure of capitalist society'[15].

Yet the connection between the insistence on dignity and the scale of the struggle is not as straightforward and unproblematic as it might seem. After all, the insistence on the need for large-scale change that has motivated – among others - many traditional Marxist/socialist struggles has often gone together with a disrespect for the dignity of real people. Taking dignity seriously means letting it 'replace imperialism as the point of

[13] Words of the EZLN during the 'March of Dignity', Puebla, 27.2.2001.

[14] Mohan, 'Beyond Participation', p. 166.

[15] Taylor, 'Insights into Participation', p. 138.

departure of theoretical reflection'[16]. The implications of this change are simple but profound: Protest against 'the system' can no longer be justified solely with reference to its intrinsic evil; rather, it needs to be rooted in the specific experiences of people who cannot live in dignity under the present system.[17] It also means that people's dignity should not be sacrificed for a cause that may turn out to be unfeasible and/or incompatible with the goal of a dignified life.

In practice, the decision on the scale of politicisation and struggle that is most compatible with the dignity of those who have been excluded can be very complex and very difficult: The uncompromising insistence on fundamental change may not necessarily be the stance that is most respectful of the autonomy and dignity of the particular people who are struggling for their livelihoods and their rights to participate here and now. As Baviskar points out, integrating actual social movements of people who have been marginalised into more universal narratives potentially

> amounts to an act of appropriation which excludes [the marginalised] as the conscious subjects of their own history and incorporates them as only an element in another history with another subject.[18]

In this sense, the attempt to incorporate a particular group of people into a general critique of – or movement against - 'development', globalisation, or other 'grand narratives' can undermine the possibility of genuine participation. Even if it seems justified by an analysis of wider power structures, it can be as disrespectful as the instrumentalisation of 'participation' for agendas set elsewhere.

The decision on how far politicisation should extend is one for which the people involved have to 'account with their life histories'[19] – and, indeed, with their lives. It is

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[16] John Holloway, 'La revuelta de la dignidad', in *Chiapas*, no. 5 (1997), p. 12.

[17] Dussel, *Ética de la Liberación*, pp. 561/562.

[18] Amita Baviskar, *In the Belly of the River. Tribal Conflicts over Development in the Narmada Valley* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 239/240.

[19] Jürgen Habermas, 'The Scientization of Politics and Public Opinion', in *Towards a Rational Society: Student Protest, Science, and Politics* (London: Heinemann, 1971), p. 75.

precisely because of this that their full participation in taking this decision is so important.

If this is true, however, it becomes important to take a critical look at the question of whether and how people who have not themselves been marginalised or excluded – and who might not have to 'account with their life histories' for decisions taken in a context that is not theirs! – can play a legitimate role in struggles for participation. This is the theme of the following section.

2. 'Outsiders' need to think very seriously about their own commitments

In the late 1960s, Samuel Ruiz, bishop of San Cristóbal in Chiapas, asked a commission of 30 indigenous elders to review the diocese's work with indigenous people. The results of their review were highly significant: Although the elders affirmed that they believed in the catechists' God – because 'it was a God of freedom'[20] - they raised three fundamental questions:

> The first was whether the bishop's God could save only souls, or bodies too. The second was, if 'the Word of God is like a seed that is to be found everywhere, … can we not assume that these seeds are to be found where we live in the mountains and forests? … Why should we have to come to your centres, to your schools, to seek these seeds and harvest them? Why cannot we do it in our own communities?' Third, to the bishop and his missionaries, 'You have lived among us and shared our lives. We regard you as our brothers and sisters. Is it your desire to be our brothers and sisters for all time?'[21]

I would like to suggest that these questions are as critical to 'participation' as to pastoral work. Can participation 'save bodies', i.e. make a difference to the very real material problems that poor and marginalised people are facing? What and how can outside 'experts' contribute to the contexts in which people live? What is the nature and extent of

[20] Javier Vargas über den Lernprozeß der Katecheten, in Topitas (eds), *¡Ya Basta! Der Aufstand der Zapatistas* (Hamburg: Verlag Libertäre Assoziation, 1994), p. 177.

[21] John Womack Jr, *Rebellion in Chiapas. An Historical Reader* (New York: The New Press, 1999), p. 29.

their commitment to these people and these contexts – and what should it be? These questions pose a challenge to 'participatory approaches' that stay at a superficial level – that see 'participation' as a cure without taking sufficient account of material realities, that set up a dichotomy between 'local knowledge' and 'outside expertise' and privilege one or the other, and that allow outsiders to drop into and out of 'local settings' relatively easily. I have already considered aspects of the first question, which relates back to the question of politicisation. Here, I will focus on the latter two, both of which centre around the relationships between 'local people' and 'outsiders'.

The questioning of top-down 'solutions' and their replacement with 'participatory' approaches has entailed a move from teaching to listening. I would like to suggest, though, that while listening is necessary to a relationship that recognises the dignity of the other, it is not sufficient. The assumption that whatever 'local people' say is valid is as patronising as its opposite. Both stand in the way of serious engagement. As Enrique Dussel points out, 'denying the possibility of arguing is denying the Other as someone who argues'[22]. Recognising the other 'as someone who argues', however, means both accepting the other's challenges to one's own arguments and challenging the other's arguments. In effect, it means becoming a participant in a dialogue in which neither speaking nor listening are one-sided.

If the idea of a genuine dialogue in which all can participate equally expresses the ideal, however, it is important to acknowledge that there can be very real inequalities between 'outsiders' and people who have been marginalised. This raises a difficult question: If we acknowledge that outsiders do have something to contribute, how can they do so without once again marginalising the voices of those who have been most excluded?

A reflection on this question from the perspective of dignity suggests several strands of response: Firstly, if dignity is not only about participation but also about 'bodies', trade-offs between perfect participation and effectiveness may sometimes be justified. Secondly, 'outsiders' who do want to make a legitimate contribution to the struggle against marginalisation need to think very seriously about their own commitments: 'Is it

[22] Dussel, *Ética de la Liberación*, p. 232 (footnote 309).

your desire to be our brothers and sisters for all time?' While an affirmative answer to this question does not eliminate inequalities in terms of access to communicative resources, it does equalise the relationship between marginalised people and those who might support them in a very significant respect: Outsiders who do make a serious commitment to a struggle against marginalisation put themselves into a position where they, too, have to 'account with their life histories' for the consequences of decisions that are taken. In this sense, they cease to be outsiders and become genuine participants, with all the risks this entails.

I am not suggesting that this is the only fruitful answer to the question about the potential role(s) of outsiders. In some situations, a limited facilitating role may be a more appropriate response. What I am suggesting, though, is that outsiders in any capacity need to be very conscious and honest about the nature and justification of what they are (not) doing. Thinking this through from the perspective of dignity may not lead to one single solution, but it does preclude certain approaches.

The search for approaches that are appropriate to particular situations also raises questions about the ways in which participation should be structured, particularly for outsiders who are consciously trying to create opportunities for participation. What does an emphasis on dignity imply for the structure and organisation of participatory initiatives?

3. Participation should be real and effective

Despite their declared emphasis on flexibility, improvisation and experimentation, participatory approaches to development have been criticised for being too formulaic. Thus it has been argued that in practice, their tendency to endorse formal arrangements and methodologies fails to take sufficient account of the complexities of real people's real lives.[23]

[23] Frances Cleaver, 'Institutions, Agency and the Limitations of Participatory Approaches to Development', in Cooke & Kothari, *Participation: The New Tyranny?*; Kothari, 'Power, Knowledge and Social Control', pp. 146-148; Henkel and Stirrat, 'Participation as Spiritual Duty', pp. 179-182.

At the same time, questions are being raised about what actually happens within participation and consensus-building activities. Cooke, for instance, cautions against the assumption that the outcomes of such activities are necessarily legitimate. 'Participation', he suggests, 'can cause decisions to be made that are more risky, with which no one really agrees, or that rationalize harm to others, and it can be used consciously or otherwise to manipulate group members' ideological beliefs'.[24]

Are formal structures part of the problem or part of the solution? I would like to suggest that on this issue, too, it is worth thinking through what an emphasis on dignity might contribute to the debate. As far as the forms and fora of participation are concerned, dignity demands that participation be both real and effective - 'real' in the sense of being meaningful to people's lives and concerns as well as serious and challenging, and 'effective' in terms of its (foreseeable) capacity to fulfil its declared functions.

Clearly, participatory approaches that disregard the existence and importance of informal everyday processes are in danger of becoming less relevant than they aim to be. On the other hand, though, it is important to acknowledge that the 'tyranny of structurelessness'[25] can be as serious as the 'tyranny of structure'. Participation built on personal relationships and informal networks is likely to generate its own exclusions, both of people and of important issues and concerns. It is worth recalling Freeman's insistence that

> 'structurelessness' becomes a way of masking power… For everyone to have the opportunity to be involved … the structure must be explicit, not implicit.[26]

The important point here is that any decision – including that to avoid a decision - on the structures of participation has consequences for who participates, how they do it, and

[24] Cooke, 'The Social Psychological Limits of Participation?', p. 102. Also see Cass Sunstein, 'Deliberative Trouble? Why Groups Go to Extremes', *The Yale Law Journal*, vol. 110, no. 1 (October 2000).

[25] Jo Freeman, 'The tyranny of structurelessness', in *Untying the Knot: Feminism, Anarchism and Organisation* (London: Dark Star/Rebel Press, 1984), pp. 5-16.

[26] Freeman, 'The tyranny of structurelessness', p. 6.

how effective participation is likely to be. If this is acknowledged, it becomes crucial to look at what those consequences are, and to question whether they correspond with the intentions and declared aims of particular instances of participation.

In this context, it is interesting to consider the potential role of research on deliberative and participatory processes. Cooke's critique of 'participatory development' is partly based on the observation that the results of existing research have not been used to inform current practices of 'participation for the poor':

> [T]he poor of the world, particularly but not exclusively those in 'developing countries', are the victims of a disciplinary bias: put simply, the rich get social psychology, the poor get participatory development. … The absence of social psychology from participatory development … identifies it as yet another technology used with the Third World without the care and concern that would be expected elsewhere.[27]

Clearly, participation driven by respect for the dignity of potential participants – poor or not – would avoid this kind of bias. It would be committed to learning from failure and success. It would avoid practices and approaches that have been shown not to work or to be counter-productive.

Nevertheless, the suggestion that using research from social psychology and elsewhere to 'design' participatory initiatives is the best way of respecting the participants' dignity may turn out to be problematic in itself: Knowledge of the effects that different 'designs' of participation are likely to produce puts those who have such knowledge in a position of power vis-à-vis (other) participants. It gives them the opportunity to choose particular approaches and thus to influence, if not to determine, the outcomes of participatory initiatives.[28]

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[27] Cooke, 'Social Psychological Limits of Participation?', p. 121.

[28] For an analysis of the power exercised by practitioners of participatory development, see Kothari, 'Power, Knowledge and Social Control'; for a more general consideration of the problems of 'designing' democratic practices, see Ricardo Blaug, 'Engineering Democracy', *Political Studies*, vol. 50, no. 1 (2002), pp. 102-116.

At one level, this is an issue for would-be 'catalysts for democracy'[29] (including academics): The most obvious way of using their knowledge of participatory processes to encourage processes compatible with respect for the dignity of participants seems to be through sharing that knowledge with those participants wherever possible, even if this means giving up some of their own power.

Even more importantly, however, - and particularly where those who initiate 'participation' are less open about their rationale and ultimate agenda – it is an issue for participants themselves: How can they resist the potential for manipulation, domination, and undemocratic outcomes that is likely to be present in most experiences of participation?

Here again, I would suggest that a focus on dignity might help. This is the theme of the next section.

4. Dignified participation is demanding

A conscious affirmation of dignity may be one of the most important antidotes to the potential problems of 'participation' – and one that is particularly important where the kinds of participation that are on offer are not deliberately designed with the dignity of the participants in mind.

In what sense might the affirmation of dignity function as an antidote? At this point, it is worth revisiting the EZLN's text on dignity cited above. Dignity, it says,

> is recognition and respect.
> Recognition of what we are and respect for what we are, yes,
> but also recognition of what the other is and respect for that which is the other.
> …
> So dignity is the tomorrow.
> But the tomorrow cannot be if it is not for all, for those who we are and for those who are other.

What does this mean for participation? Fundamentally, it means that participation that is rooted in the affirmation of dignity is demanding, both of 'ourselves' and of 'the other'. For people who have been marginalised, the affirmation of their own dignity –

[29] Blaug, 'Engineering Democracy', p. 113.

‘recognition of what we are and respect for what we are’ – is a difficult but necessary starting-point. In a first sense, then, participation demands the affirmation of one’s own dignity. It is likely that such an affirmation acts as an antidote to manipulation, forms of ‘consensus’ that do not actually reflect what participants really think, and the instrumentalisation of participation for other agendas.

The implications of basing participation on dignity, however, go beyond the affirmation of one’s own dignity: ‘for there to be dignity the other is necessary’. This, too, is demanding. It demands commitment to a genuine search for solutions that respect the other as well as ‘ourselves’. It demands an alertness to the possibility that decisions may ‘rationalize harm to others’, and it demands a conscious effort to avoid ‘groupthink’. None of these demands are easy. The emphasis on dignity demands a high degree of responsibility and commitment of the participants, both to themselves and to others.

As the above discussion has shown, realising processes of participation that are rooted in dignity – particularly in a wider context of inequality and exclusion – is far from easy. This, if nothing else, raises serious questions about the inherent goodness of actual ‘participation’. As I have pointed out, the critics have suggested that the moralistic dichotomy between participation and non-participation may be overly simplistic…

5. Participation is not inherently good

Dignified participation needs certain conditions: The ‘right’ degree of politicisation, a commitment to serious engagement, the recognition of the dignity of all participants, and procedures that ensure that both participation itself and any outcomes reached are real and effective. In the absence of these conditions, the refusal to participate might defend the ideal of genuine participation better than ‘participation’ itself.

The problem, of course, is that actual opportunities for dialogue between people who have been marginalised or excluded and the powerful are unlikely ever to come close to fulfilling the conditions that would qualify them as ‘participation with justice and dignity’. The implications of genuine dialogue may turn out to be more than a system that is ultimately based on the assertion of power can bear. If perfect participation is

impossible, however, the really difficult question is this: Where is the cut-off point beyond which the rejection of 'participation' is the only way of affirming the idea of meaningful participation?

The difficulty of deciding these questions erodes the straightforward dichotomy between participation and non-participation, inclusion and exclusion. Against this background, it is too simplistic 'to link participation with social responsibility, to characterize non-participation as irresponsible'[30] – or even to be sure that 'participation' is necessarily the most appropriate response to inequality and marginalisation. Yet if it is too easy to celebrate 'participation' as the cure for social exclusion, it is similarly dangerous to dismiss it as 'tyranny'. If this is true - if we can no longer rely on the dichotomy - we need a different basis from which to evaluate instances of (non)participation.

Holloway argues that the key to the Zapatista project is the moment in which 'dignity replaces imperialism as the point of departure of theoretical reflection'[31]. I would like to suggest that it might be similarly fruitful to let dignity replace 'participation' as the point of departure of theoretical reflection. In this paper, I have tried to draw out some of the implications this might have for the way we approach issues of participation. Perhaps the main one is this: Participation is not good because and insofar as it is participation, but because and in so far as it is a way of affirming dignity and struggling for justice. The experiences of the Zapatistas suggest that rooting participation in the struggle for justice and dignity is far from easy. And yet, what matters in the end is not whether it is easy but whether it is worthwhile.

Participation 'with justice and dignity' is difficult and demanding – and it does not carry a guarantee of success -, but is participation without any better than tyranny?

[30] Cleaver, 'Limitations of Participatory Approaches', p. 48.

[31] Holloway, 'La revuelta de la dignidad', p. 12.