

STS after the participatory turns

A (self-)critical appraisal

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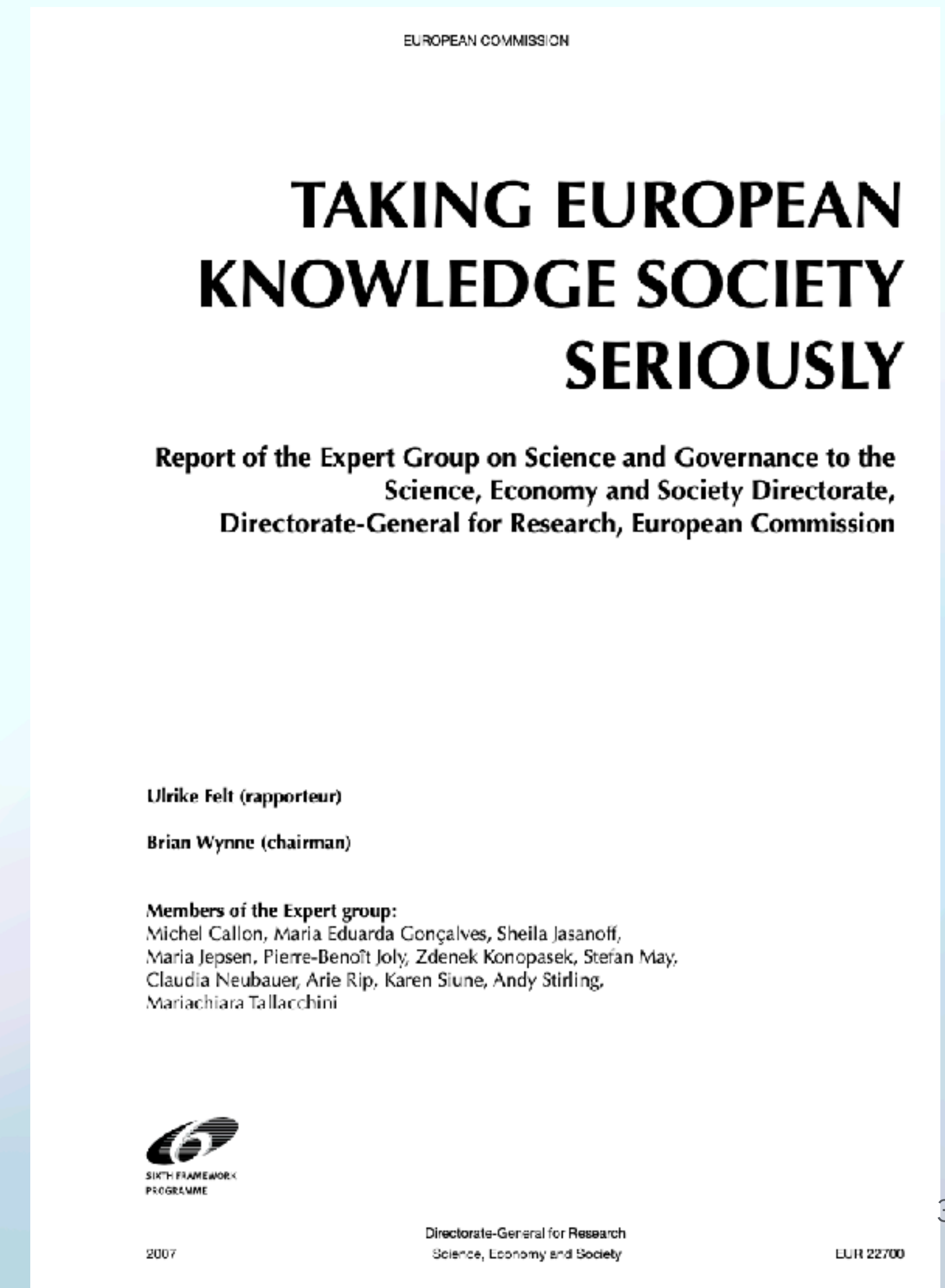
Workshop in Maastricht: Participation and STS Sensibilities: Taking Stock and Moving Forward (23 May 2024)

Structure of the talk

- Looking back on the participatory turns
- Taking stock of the latest STS thinking about participation in science and democracy
- Three challenges ahead for continued theorization and action while remaking participation
- Conclusion

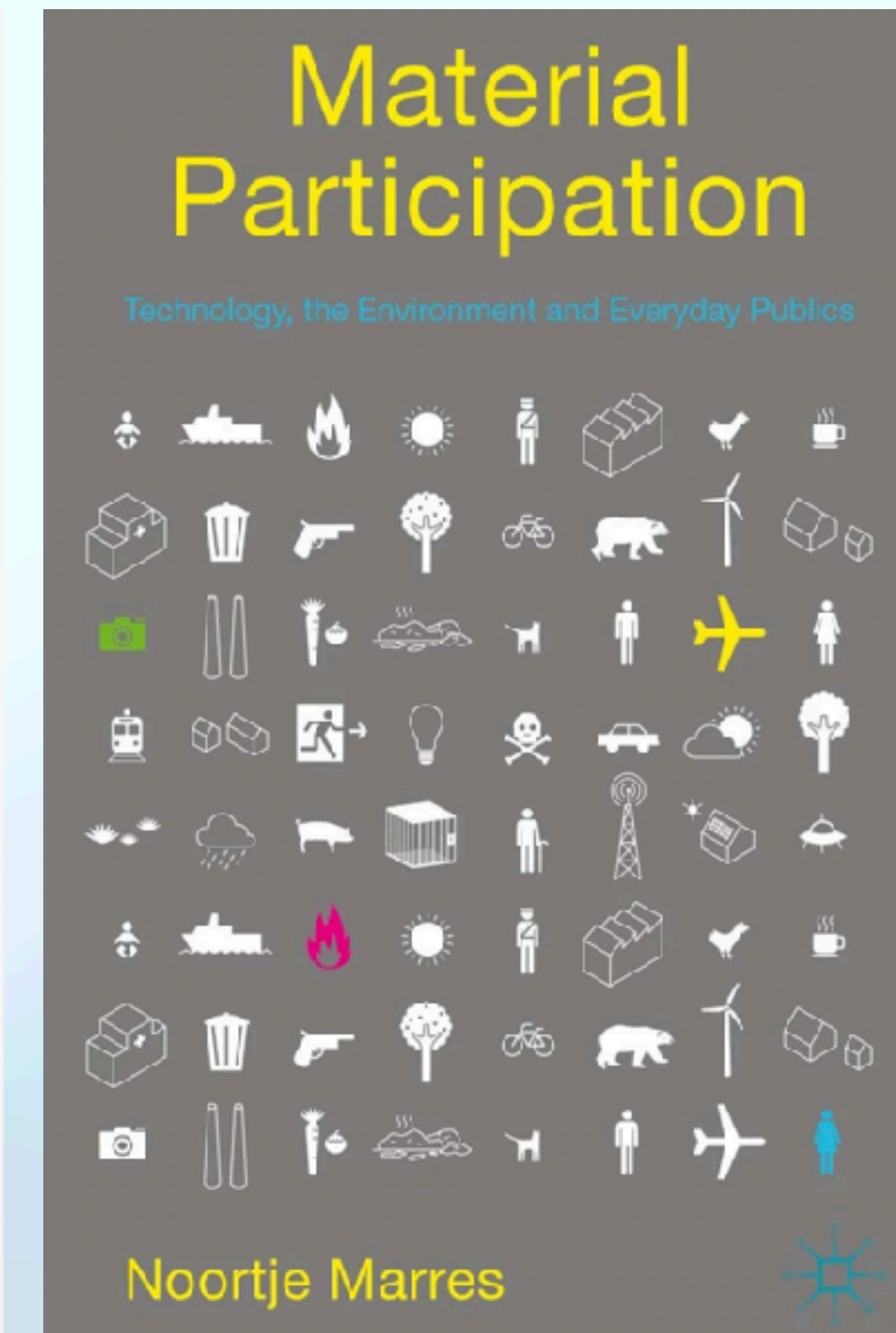
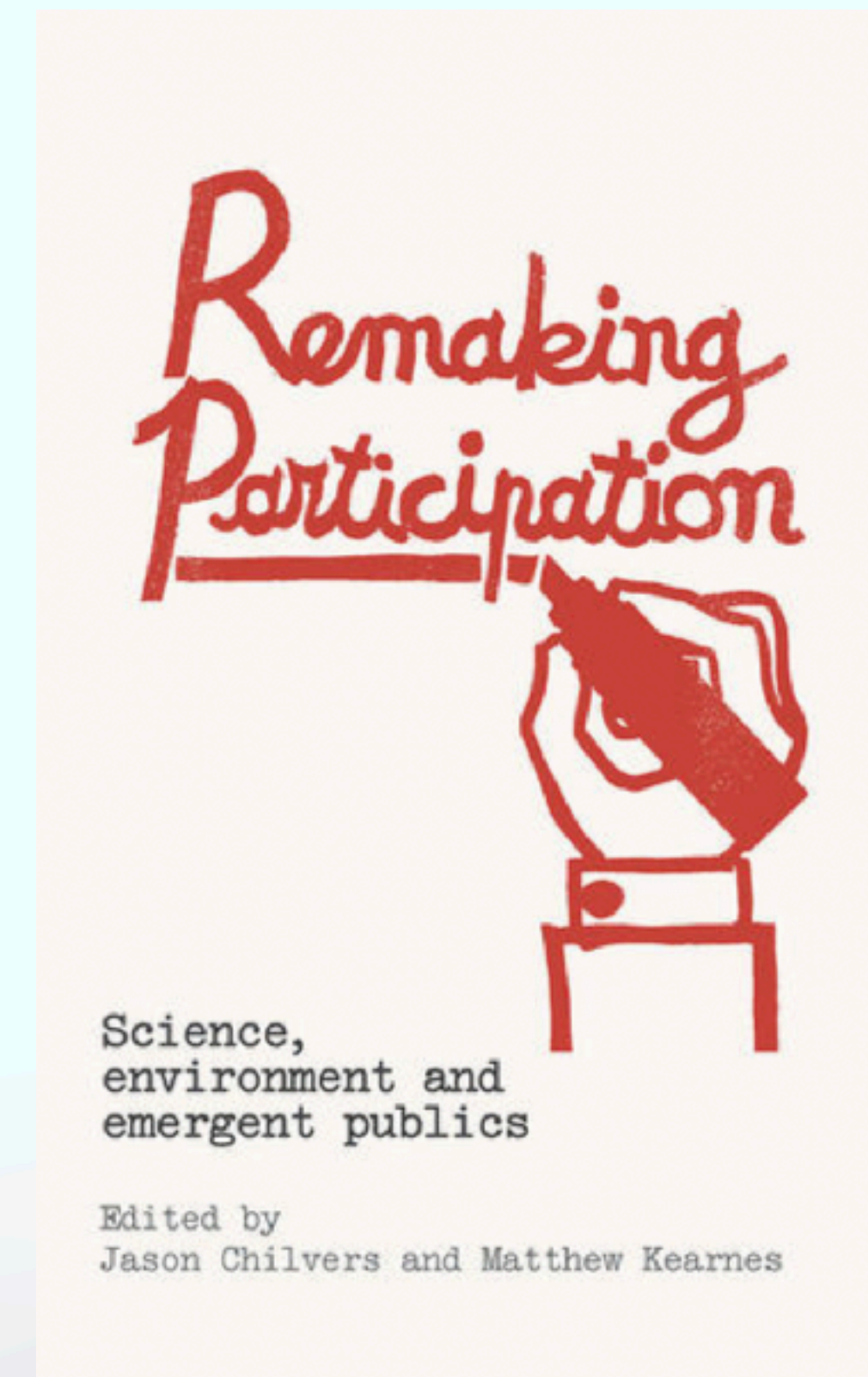
Participation as deliberation

- Turn of 2000s: claims for **opening up decision-making** processes regarding S&T-related issues
- **'Participatory Turn'**: endorsement of participatory-deliberative processes by public authorities
- **Mini-publics** often considered as the golden standard (see Voss and Amelung 2017)
- Citizen deliberation has been **mainstreamed and institutionalized** across the world, including in Parliaments (cf. Niessen and Reuchamps 2020, Macq and Jacquet 2023)



Participation beyond deliberation (1/2)

- STS scholarship's **critique of participatory-deliberative processes** set up by public authorities
- Claims for 'Remaking Participation' (Chilvers and Kearnes 2016)
- Beyond deliberation: 'Ecologies of participation'



Participation beyond deliberation (2/2)

- Institutionalized participation-beyond-deliberation (open innovation, citizen science, etc.)
- From **deliberation to production** (Macq et al. 2020)
 - Progressive abandonment of deliberation in favor of the goal of producing innovation for economic development
- **Breaking bad** with the participatory turn? (Delvenne and Macq 2020)
 - Participatory experiments seek to **extract as much value as possible** from the participants, evacuating conflict and **narrowing down** the scope of what is up to debate



Taking stock of the latest STS thinking

- A broad understanding of participation (invited and uninvited) that moves beyond arguments for 'serviceable STS' entering the 'policy room' (cf. Webster 2007, Felt and Wynne 2007) and addresses **ecologies of participation**
- A **relational co-productionist approach** that tracks down any remaining pocket of realism concerning the practices and technologies of participations and democracy
- The idiom of coproduction (Jasanoff 2004) is combined with a **performative account of publics** (Marres 2007), drawing on American pragmatism

Challenge 1: empirically describe co-production at work between participation and governance

- Need to illustrate the mutually constitutive relation between participation and governance through **thick empirical descriptions** (Braun et Könninger, 2018, p. 681)
- The question of **power relations** comes up
 - The **opening up** to diverse sociomaterial collectives can be very disappointing and reveal a monoculture of 'new' ideas and actions (Cf. Macq 2020)
 - Breaches do occur through **closing down** and it's more complex than a strengthening of neoliberal globalization and science-led progress (Cf. Parotte et al. 2024)

Co-production is asymmetrical and criss-crossed by unequal power relations.

Yet we should avoid repeating a pattern of case studies followed by critical assessments.

Challenge 2: not turn a blind eye to institutional participation when ecologizing

- Making institutions is a **crucial site of co-production** (Jasanoff 2004), and institutions are key levers for democratic ordering
- Institutions shall not be considered as a **monolithic block** within ecologies of participations
- Democratic and STS theories drawing on pragmatism have most often been constructed **against** the institutions and procedures of representative democracy (Delvenne and Parotte, forthcoming)

Institutional strengthening or stability is a guarantee for the survival of a democratic order.

We can't rely entirely on institutions of representative democracy for reflexive learning, but neither can we assume that no participatory democratic innovation will develop there.

Challenge 3: Taking the full measure of the current atmosphere of democracy

- A realistic approach to the current « atmosphere of democracy » (Latour and Weibel 2005) calls for being open to the **political realities of the present**
- The institutions of representative democracy have recently appeared **particularly fragile** and even broken, corrupted, and plagued by the **rise of the far right** in many European countries
- The shaping that is coming as a result of extremist, populist and authoritarian politics will probably **choke the space** for 'wild, uninvited, protest, and in-the-making participation'



If co-production is to be taken seriously, then we should worry about the new political order's influence on participatory practices.

It's also doubtful that self-organized groups will *always* be able to transcend local realities and concerns, and provide essential collective services (social security, justice, equity) for national communities.

Conclusion (1/3)

- The enthusiasm for “remaking participation” (Chilvers and Kearnes 2016; 2020) has enabled very significant progress, allowing for an approach **less rigidly bound by ‘best practices’** to be implemented or the **obsession with institutionalization**.
- Yet, STS sensibilities have increasingly (and inadvertently) tended to produce a **blindness to institutional political action**, extending and organizing the forgetting of part of what underpins a democratic society.

Conclusion (2/3)

- We have pointed out **three challenges ahead** (and related key messages) for remaking participation in science and democracy:
 - 1) empirically describing the (asymmetrical) co-production at work between participation and governance;
 - 2) not turning a blind eye to institutional participation when ecologizing;
 - 3) taking the full measure of the current atmosphere of democracy.

Conclusion (3/3)

- The analytical and **critical resources of STS** are and will be essential for « remaking participation in more experimental, reflexive, anticipatory, and responsive ways » (Chilvers and Kearnes 2020)
- But these resources should **also be used to rethink and rebuild the institutions of representative democracy** *along with* participatory democracy in new ecologies of participation => Changing institutions and remaking participation!
- A more radical reform of decision-making that rethinks democratic legitimacies and redistributes political power is likely to come from the bottom up, but it will not be achieved without the **support of progressive/left elite politicians** (Niessen 2023)
- Time for a **more radical reconstructivist engagement** with identified allies at various sites in ecologies of participation?

Thanks for your
attention!

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