



## **BOOK LAUNCH AND DISCUSSION**

### **IS THERE A FUTURE FOR PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY?**

**24<sup>th</sup> February 2010, 16:00 - 20:00**

University of Bradford, Norcroft Centre

Tumbling Hill Street, BD7 1DB

**Pearce J. (Ed) (2010) *Participation and Democracy in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century City*  
Palgrave Macmillan**

**Diamond, J, Liddle, J., Southern, A & Osei, P. (2010) *Urban Regeneration  
Management: International Perspectives*, London: Routledge**

**Wainwright, H.(2010) *Reclaim the State (second edition)* London: Verso**

This conference launches three books which focus in different ways on the participatory components of democracy and the state in the UK and beyond. On the eve of the UK elections, we want to use these books to facilitate a discussion on the theme of participation in our political, activist, working and everyday lives. Amidst fears of a very low turnout in the election and in the wake of the parliamentary expenses scandal, how might we revitalise confidence and participation in our institutional structures and our democratic life? Can citizens rediscover the value and importance of democratic action at a time when society faces a frightening convergence of crises requiring the attention and understanding of every one of us to ensure equitable solutions? How would our existing democratic arrangements have to change in order for such a rediscovery to happen?

Over the last two decades there have been many experiments in participation in the UK and other parts of the world and a great deal of social movement activism. The three books present empirical evidence (as well as theoretical argument) on what happens when people get the chance to participate. We are no longer in a position where our only reference points to participation are an experiment in Athens over 2,000 years ago. We also know a lot more about why people do not participate, in particular how

deeply our social hierarchies and institutional practices limit people's interest in participating and a sense of their own capacity to contribute to public debate. As political parties all claim to support the empowerment of communities, do they all mean the same thing and how it can come about? Our research suggests that the representative state still has reservations about participation, and this limits the willingness to experiment with the kind of participation which makes it worthwhile. In other words, the outcome cannot be predetermined. People must learn to form judgements and to think of the interest of others as well as their own through the process of making real decisions. Democracy must, in other words, become a little 'dangerous' in order to be meaningful. However, this can lead to better representation, real accountability, more diversity of voices and new ways of combining experience as well as expertise, resulting in better decision making and improved services. Our research suggests that participation need no longer be the 'utopian' sibling to the 'realism' of representative democracy. However, it requires commitment over time to new kinds of processes and practices across our public institutions as well as within the places where we work and live. It requires acknowledging the difficulties which arise when conflicting views and value systems encounter each other and the search for ways in which people might change their opinions through such encounters.

We welcome everyone from representative bodies, the community, our public institutions and our workplaces as well as the critical peripheries who see no place for themselves in our current democratic arrangements.

If you are interested in attending this event please contact Events Bradford, 01274 23 3217 or email [events@bradford.ac.uk](mailto:events@bradford.ac.uk). We will also be circulating the programme and more details next week.