

The politics of Technical Democracy. Social sciences, protest movements and technoscientific powers in the transformations of public participation in France

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Since the 1990's, discourses and apparatuses designed to foster public participation in science flourished in Europe. The model of “technical democracy” (Callon, Lascoumes, Barthe, 2001) was described as an innovative institutional framework contributing to new relationships between “science and society” through participatory and dialogic apparatus. But far from this ideal representation, twenty years later, the status of technical democracy is critical: when public participation in science is organized, it is largely ignored by scientific institutions and administrations and contested by participants and protesters. In parallel, an enthusiasm for “citizen science” is rising, in the same circles that previously celebrated the model of technical democracy. To understand such mutations, I propose to discuss the politics of participation in science by exploring the case of synthetic biology in France, which is symptomatic of changes within the mode of governing “through” participation. I will first focus on the institutionalization of the model of technical democracy over the last twenty years in Europe, suggesting the important yet understudied role of small networks of social scientists, NGO activists and administrative bodies committed to the fostering of “sciences-society relationships”. I will then suggest that these networks have failed in reforming technoscientific institutions, which never meant to redistribute their power of decision over sciences and technologies. The case of public participation in synthetic biology (where “technical democracy” apparatus was set up and contested) illustrates how this model reached the limits of its promises because of too unequal power repartitions; and how the early passions for “citizen sciences” replaced it – more conciliating because in its framing, the question of political power is easier to ignore.