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**Research Paper no. 3/99**

**Democratic governance and the  
changing role of users of public  
services**

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**Research Papers from the Department of Social Sciences, Roskilde University, Denmark.**

**Working paper series**

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**Abstract**

Among those involved in the reform of institutions of public governance an intensive debate has taken place about the possible consequences of a more active user role democracy. Some emphasize its negative effects while others focus on advantages for democracy. The article analyses differences and similarities in the arguments made by the parttakers in the debate, and direct our attention towards a lack of clarity in the foundation of this debate about the analytical relationship between universalism and particularism. On this background it is argued that an analysis of the relationship between democracy and an active user role calls for a reconcretization of the concept of the political.

**Keywords:**

Users, Governance, Democratic Institutions.

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**Democratic governance  
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## **1. Introduction**

In the 1980s and 1990s decisive efforts have been made particularly in the nordic countries to modernize institutions of liberal democracy. These efforts have challenged the traditional role of users of public services in the governing process, that is users as passive receivers in need of publicly produced services. Hence, the modernization process has introduced a new notion of users as active and capable participants in deciding the form and content of public services.

In the wake of this development an intensive debate has taken place among those engaged in the development of new institutions of democratic governance about whether this transformation of the user role is to be considered as an advantage or a threat to democracy (Burns, Hambleton and Hoggett, 1994; Hirst, 1994; Eriksen and Weigård, 1993; Nyseth and Torpe, 1996; Haarder, 1990). The aim of this article is to present some of the leading views on this topic in the nordic debate and to offer yet another view. In order to do so, I draw on Danish experiences with various forms of institutionalizing an active user role in processes of public governance.

### **Views on the active user**

In what follows I shall present three very different reactions to the introduction of an active user role to the processes of public governance: opposition, hesitance and support.

Among those who speak against the emergence of an active user role are Eriksen and Weigård. In their article "From citizen to consumer" (1993) they argue that the emerging user role is a direct threat to the notion of citizenship (Eriksen and Weigård, 1993: p.113). The notion of citizenship is strengthened when public institutions are organized in a way that enhances the propensity of the members of society to take into account the common good. A common good is more than the sum of particular interests. That is,

"in the end it is the quality of the argument which determines what is to count as a rational common good in political situations (p.114).

Accordingly, it is the ability to participate in a political debate based on reasoned argumentation directed towards the determination of the nature of the common good which makes the individual a citizen. The superior institutional framework for developing citizenship through reasoned debate is parliamentary democracy e.g. universal franchise and a well functioning public debate.

Eriksen and Weigård argue that the introduction of a more active role of users of public services threatens the notion of citizenship due to its unavoidable character of particular interest promotion. At this stage it is necessary to stress that Eriksen and Weigård refer to a very narrow perception of the user role as a purely individualistic identity similar to that of the consumer in the market. This consumerist role of the user weakens the ability of the individual to step into the political realm and become a part of a collective identity (p.123-4). For that reason the new user role supports the establishment of some sort of “privatized democracy” (p.123) more than it supports parliamentary democracy.

Actually, it is only particular interests which are formulated. It is those who are involved in an area of public governance who are allowed to make themselves heard and to promote their wishes without having to weigh these wishes against the wishes of others. For that reason active user participation in processes of public governance has clear parallels to corporative governance. (...)The interests maintain a private character (p. 124).

Hence, Eriksen and Weigård refer to the existence of a fundamental antagonism between the political realm - the realm of the common good - and the private realm - the realm of particular interest promotion. This antagonism calls for a sharp institutional separation of the public and the private in order to ensure a realm dominated by reasoned debate in which not the strongest, but the person with the best argument wins (p.124). Efforts to renew political institutions of public governance must therefore aim to establish the best possible framework for reasoned political debate. Eriksen and Weigård concludes not surprisingly that neither a more active user role nor corporatism adds to the development of such institutions.

Nyseth and Torpe also express scepticism towards the introduction of a more active role of users of public institutions (Nyseth and Torpe, 1996). This follows from the fact that they, like Eriksen and Weigård, conceive the political as the production of a collective identity and democracy as founded on the ability of the people to act in the interest of the common good (p. 6, 17). It should be noted that Nyseth and Torpes notion of a common good is different from that of Eriksen and Weigård. That is, they do not claim the existence of a Habermasian rational reason as the foundation for its identification (Eriksen and Weigård, 1993: p. 114). Instead they point to the existence of a Rawlsian and hence predominantly procedural foundation for the common good. This procedural foundation is organized around some basic principles of justice e.g. respect for difference and equal worth (Nyseth and Torpe, 1996, p. 3). However, this proceduralization of the status of the common good does not change the fact that in the end it is the reference to a hypothetically derived universal foundation for society which makes possible the image of society as a collective identity and the citizen as a collective existence.

This collective existence is threatened by the emergence of the active user role due to its presumed inseparable connection to a particularistic perspective on the outcome of the governing process (p. 13, 17). That is, there is a danger that

“user participation adds to the formation of the citizen as user by decreasing the areas of societal governance for which s/he feels responsible to those which are of direct interest to her/him and her/his family. Hence, a strong community of users of a public service does not necessarily go hand in hand with a strong local citizenship” (p. 6).

For that reason an increase in the influence of users of public services necessarily means a strengthening of a pluralistic perspective directed towards the promotion of either individual or group interests. This could very likely mean a weakening of democracy. Efforts to increase democracy should instead aim at enhancing “political integration and the development of a collective identity between citizens” (p. 17). Nyseth and Torpe argue that society needs increased political integration due to the weakness of the integrative capacity of the traditional institutions of democratic governance in liberal democracies. The way citizenship has been institutionalized traditionally has not managed to integrate the individual citizen sufficiently in the political community (p. 3). In order to remedy this state of affairs Nyseth and Torpe point to increased participation of ordinary citizens as the main means to promote political integration.

Given this insistence on the need for increased public participation Nyseth and Torpe put considerable distance to Eriksen and Weigård. While the latter are engaged, first and foremost, in defending the traditional role of national citizenship Nyseth and Torpe underline the necessity of transcending this traditional role in order to increase the integrative capacity of the institutions of democratic governance. What is needed is more public participation in the governing process. In order to promote this, Nyseth and Torpe point to collective forms of user participation as one possible means of institutionalization. Hence, the establishment of user boards, and user councils etc. might serve as one step on the way to the creation of a political community and a citizenship which is more solid than the one we have today (p. 6, 18). However, if collective forms of user participation are to serve this purpose they must be institutionalized in a manner which forces users to consider their actions in the light of the common good for society as such (p. 17, 18). This could be done by institutionalizing close contact between politicians and user boards and councils. If such efforts are not made there is every reason to believe that collective forms of user participation will lead to increased institutional chauvinism.

However, functionally based forms of participation such as user participation have little to offer in comparison with territorially based forms



of participation due to the unavoidable promotion of a particular interest perspective of the former. In comparison, territorially based forms of participation promote the holistic perspective on governing society which is necessary to engage all citizens in the effort to promote the common good. For that reason the first priority should be given to a decentralization of parliamentary democracy by increasing the autonomy of municipality councils and local councils.

All in all one can conclude that Nyseth and Torpe are reluctant to support user participation as a means to promote political integration is reluctant. Due to its close connection with private interest promotion it can never become a political form of participation. At best it can serve as a bridge between a private and a political way of thinking.

Having now described the “negative” and “reluctant” views on the active user role we shall take a look at a true supporter of a strengthening of the role of the user in processes of public governance. Simultaneously we move from authors who underline the need for a protection of collectivity towards an author who regards it as his main purpose to protect individuality (Haarder: 1990a and 1990b). Haarder’s crusade for the protection of individuality leads him to conclude that “the less politics the more democracy” (1990a: p. 59). According to the logic of Eriksen/Weigård and Nyseth/Torpe this sounds like a contradiction in terms. How, then, does this statement make sense? It does so because Haarder’s concepts of democracy and politics are radically different: democracy is about enhancing the freedom of each individual while politics denotes the sphere of collectivity. In this connection it should be stressed that collectivity is not thought of as being founded on a common good. It is founded on the suppression of the view of the few by the view of the many. That is, in Haarder’s view of the world there are only particular interests and no common good. Accordingly, the element does not exist which makes possible an evaporation of the divide between individual and society. The relationship between the two is basically one of conflict and subordination.

The interpretation of the political as conflict, battles of power and subordination explains why Haarder focuses on the question of influence more than on the question of participation in his thoughts on the implications for democracy of the institutionalization of a more active role of users. That is, democracy is not about the creation of a collective identity within society by means of participation. It is about the development of societal institutions which ensure that each individual maintain control over her or his life to the greatest extent possible. According to this way of thinking two things must be ensured if democracy is to be protected: that the sphere of collective decision-making is kept to a minimum and that all members of society have equal opportunities to influence those collective decisions which cannot be avoided. Haarder regards the first objective, the protection of individual democracy, as more important than the second, the protection of collective democracy:

“A country does not become more democratic if politicians make collective decisions in still more areas of societal governance and, thereby, supersede individual decisions. On the contrary: the more politics the less democracy.” (Haarder, 1990b).

Due to the priority which Haarder gives to individual democracy over collective democracy he regards the institutionalization of improved channels of individual influence for users of public services as an important means to strengthen individual democracy. Hence, individual channels of influence equip users of public services with the influence through freedom of choice which costumers have in the market. The analogy between the role of being a customer and the role of being a user, which is exactly what makes Eriksen/Weigård and Nyseth/Torpe argue against the user role, is what triggers of Haarder's support for it. He is considerably more sceptical in his view on user influence in user boards and the like since they will probably increase collective democracy at the cost of individual democracy (Ibid). For these reasons Haarder speaks in favour of balancing individual and collective democracy through the institutionalization of a mixture of individual channels of influence. This is to be achieved through freedom of choice. when collective decisions are an unavoidable means to ensure individual rights. When collective decisions are unavoidable in order to ensure individual rights this balancing gives priority to individual choice: for users of public services between competing institutions, and for citizens between political parties.

### **Differences and similarities**

It is evident that there are some major differences in the way the three above mentioned (pairs of) authors regard the role of the user in relation to the notion of democracy. In short the role of the user is seen, respectively, as

- an apolitical basis for the protection of individual interests (Eriksen and Weigård),
- a pre-political form of collective participation (Nyseth and Torpe), and
- an apolitical channel of democratic influence (Haarder).

In spite of this difference a few similarities between the three positions can be detected. I shall mention two since they are of central importance for the discussion of the role of the user in a democratic society. First, the authors tend to agree that the protection of democracy calls for a clear division of the political and the private realm. However, their reasons for drawing this conclusion vary considerably. For Eriksen/Weigård and Nyseth/Torpe the political and the private realm must remain separate in order to create a safe haven for the development of a collective identity (a mutual understanding

of the common good). A haven which is constantly threatened by the focus on the promotion of particular interests which dominate the private realm. This argument for the necessity of clear borders between the public and the private is ironically directly opposed to Haarder's arguments for the same. Hence, his primary goal is to protect individuality against the spread of the realm of collective democracy. In this sense one can speak of two opposed theories of colonization: claiming that either individuality or collectivity is in danger of taking over the whole terrain of societal decision-making. The mutual wish to maintain a sharp institutional division between the public and the private leads us to the second common feature between the three positions. That is, a shared agreement that functionally based forms of participation and influence such as user boards are a potential threat to democracy. Eriksen/Weigård and Nyseth/Torpe argue that functional forms of participation and influence such as user boards will most likely enlarge the sphere of particular interest enhancement while Haarder argues that they represent an institutionalization of a mediating body of collective governance which will unavoidably increase the realm of collective democracy at the cost of individual democracy.

In my view both lines of argument produce serious explanatory difficulties. To begin with the line of argument presented by Eriksen/Weigård and Nyseth/Torpe suggests that the strength of the territorially based forms of participation and influence are that they serve to keep particular interests out of politics. However, studies of actual processes of democratic governance within the framework of the traditional territorially based institutions of representative democracy do not speak in favour of this suggestion. Numerous examples can be found of citizens' and politicians' use of territorially based forms of participation and influence to promote particular interests. Just think of the presence of regionally based coalitions across party lines within every national parliament. And think of the double role as class representatives which most parties have (Andersen, 1990).

If we take a look at the argument put forward by Haarder it is just as dubious. Haarder insists that a common good and a common societal identity does not exist. Hence, politics is the battle between particular interests. This line of argument does not explain, however, why references to a common good are made all the time in political life. This is in fact what the political ideologies which are the point of reference for most political parties are all about. That is, ideologies aim to be logically consistent normatively based constructions of the ideal world. A world which is in the interest of all members of society. And this is not all. Outside the political realm references are frequently made to a common good. Can't we all remember situations in which private actors be it on the market or in civil society legitimate their behaviour and views with the claim that they are in the interest of all? One example of this is when firms legitimate their trading activities with totalitarian regimes by pointing to the integrating effects of such activities. Another example is the emergence of the political consumer who uses PC-standards more than price and quality considerations when

deciding whether or not to purchase a product. It is in fact very difficult to think of examples of promoting particular interests which are not legitimized with reference to the common good. Even Haarder himself does so in his argument for the primacy of individual democracy over collective democracy. Hence, this primacy refers to individual freedom as an absolute and uncontested common good (Haarder, 1990b).

To sum up the argument so far the relationship between particular interests and the common good is highly complex. This complexity is found in all spheres of society and in both functional and territorial forms of participation and influence. In order to get a hold of the nature for this complexity we must take a closer look at the relationship between the universal and the particular.

### **The universal is hegemonized particularity**

The key problem in the above mentioned positions is in my opinion, that they reduce the political either to pure particularism (the battle between particular interests) or to pure universalism (the identification of the common good). As a result of this reductionism they fail to see that the very essence of the political is the tension between particularism and universalism (Laclau, 1992: 89; Laclau and Zac, 1994: 37). Politics is *“the management of the incompleteness of society which derives from the constitutive split between the universal and the particular”* (Torfing, 1997: ch. 9). In line with this understanding of the nature of the political democracy is when this tension between the universal and particular is managed in accordance with the democratic norm that access to political participation and influence should be distributed equally between all members of society.

Now, why is there a constitutive split between the universal and the particular? That is because both pure universalism and pure particularism is impossible. If we start by looking at pure universalism it must necessarily refer to a point outside society - be it a rational reason, or an overarching principle of justice - in order to obtain an universal status (Laclau, 1992: 84; Torfing: ch. 9). However, these points of reference are in fact no more than social constructs which have obtained a hegemonic position in society. In other words the universal is a pluralism which has obtained hegemony. But is this not the same as saying that Haarder is right in stating that politics is no more than a battle between competing interests. If this is so we can just as well give up the very notion of universalism? To this question the answer must be “no” since society cannot exist without reference to a universal norm in the shape of a hegemonized plurality. That is, it is the hegemonization - or universalization - of a plurality which constitutes society as a unity - a community to which individuals can either belong or not belong (Ifersen, 1989: 33). Instead of giving up the notion of universalism what is needed is a reformulation of its status as a presocially founded fact to

the empty place which has to be filled in order to create societal unity (Laclau, 1992; Torfing, 1997: ch. 9). In accordance with this perception of the universal the political is conceived as the battle between particularisms over which is to fill in the empty place. However, the proposed reformulation of universalism affects our perception of particularism as well. That is, universalism defined as a hegemonized pluralism points to a interrelatedness between universalism and particularism which rejects the existence of pure particularism. Hence, a central aspect in any strategy to promote particular interests and viewpoints is to argue for their foundation in a universalism. And most certainly this is true in political life.

In short the political is the battle between particularities for obtaining a universal status. And so democracy is the claim that this battle should be organized in a way which is in harmony with the principle of equal distribution of channels of influence for all members of society. Keeping this in mind some of the basic principles according to which the traditional institutions of liberal democracy have been organized must be given up. That is, it makes no sense to institutionalize a sharp division between the universal and the particular. The two perspectives per definition are closely linked although this link is full of tension. They are like an old married couple who fight all the time but cannot live without each other. Accordingly, efforts could be used more constructively than seeking to develop institutional forms which ensures a sphere of pure be it universalism or particularism. They should be invested in analyzing how current institutions of public governance balance the relationship between them. Is the issue at stake the development of new channels of democratic participation and influence specific attention should be directed towards the development of institutions which promote two things: that a considerable pressure is placed upon individuals and groups to give their actions and views a universal foundation, and that the channels of participation and influence which allow people to take part in the battle to obtain hegemony is equally distributed.

This being said we must reject the idea that the political can be restricted to a specific sphere of society. Politics is in action every time individuals or groups seek to legitimize their actions and viewpoints by referring to their foundation in universal norms and values. And such references are not only made in the traditional institutions of political life. They are also made in both family life and business life. However, recognizing that politics is found in all corners of society is not the same as concluding that everything is politics. Many activities both in the political system and in civil society are legitimated through references to a universal foundation. Just consider the vast quantity of routinized patterns of behaviour which takes place for the simple reason that "this is what we always do". Such routinized activity takes place either because nobody ever raised the issue "why?" or because it is the result of a long gone battle for hegemony. A hegemony so strong and stable that those involved in the activity in question have long stopped asking why. While the former background for routinized behaviour is caused by a lack

of politization of the action at hand the latter is the result of a sedimentation of former political battles. This sedimentation means that the activity loses its political nature.

Having now given up the notion that the political can be restricted to a specific sphere in society - a sphere which is based on territorial patterns of participation and influence - the scene opens up the possibility of defining as political a whole range of individual and collective forms of participation and influence. This means that they can be used much more actively and aggressively in current considerations about the modernization of institutions of public governance in liberal democracies. That is, conditions are available for a much more open and complex discussion about the strong and weak sides which are connected to all forms of participation and influence. In what follows we shall take a closer look at the strong and weak sides of specific forms of user participation and user influence.

### **Is the user a political actor?**

The recognition of the close relationship between the universal and the particular has major implications for the understanding of the potential of the user role as political and democratic form of participation and influence. Hence, it points in the direction of a constructivist view of the user role which does not regard it as a fixed role but as a role which is currently in the melting pot. And so one must give up the a priori notion that "the user" is an inherently apolitical actor and accept the possibility that "the user" might become a central political actor. All it takes is the development of institutions which promote the idea that users must legitimize their actions with reference to a universal foundation.

In what follows we shall look at three main models of institutionalizing a more active user role in Denmark in the 1990s: freedom of choice, user boards in public institutions and user councils. Let's start off by looking at the extended freedom of choice between producers of public services which is given to users of public services. This model is mostly used in the areas of health and education e.g. freedom of choice between family doctors, between hospitals and between public schools. When judging the value of freedom of choice as a channel of influence and participation one must conclude that its potentials are limited. For even though freedom of choice gives the user power to avoid what s/he does not want the choice is kept in an invisible and privatized manner. For nobody but the individual is aware of the reasons for the choice made. This means that the individual easily avoids demands from society regarding the universal foundation of their choice. However, this does not mean that freedom of choice per definition is an apolitical form of action. It is very much so when it is combined with more visible forms of participation and influence. One example of this is taken from the traditional institutions of parliamentarism which combine

universal franchise and public debate. Another example is the emergence of the political consumer which is a political form of participation and influence which is based on freedom of choice between goods, but which is nothing without an association which gives the many choices a voice (Hirschman, 1994: 199). Hence, if freedom of choice is to become a political form of participation and influence it must be institutionalized in a way which ensures that the choices become visible for other actors. For visibility is a precondition if the claim for universal legitimation is to be posed. In a democracy it is essential that this visibilization of choices is not left to civil society e.g. voluntary associations or grassroots movements. As experience shows this leads to a situation in which the call for universal legitimation will end up being distributed unevenly and randomly. This is not to indicate that voluntary associations are a threat to democracy. It is merely to underline that if an active user role is to become an integrated part of an overall system of democratic governance the claim for universal legitimation of choices made by users must be distributed equally among them. This calls for an institutionalization not only of freedom of choice but also of the claim for universal legitimation of this choice. In Denmark this institutionalization of "the voice of the choice" has taken the shape of user boards governing public institutions such as primary schools, nursery homes and old peoples homes.

And so we move to the second leading model of institutionalizing a more active user role: the user boards. As indicated above user boards are in most cases combined with some level of freedom of choice between institutions producing public services. To give an example of how choice and voice is combined we take a closer look at the governing of primary schools. Hence, users (parents) of primary schools have a restricted choice between primary schools in the sense that they have a guaranteed right to send their child to the school located in the district in which they live. In addition to this they have the right to choose another school if there is room for it on another school. Having chosen a school the parents elect 7 members to sit on a school board in which teachers and pupils have representatives but parents have an absolute majority. The representatives for the parents on the school board are to a considerable extent forced to give their views and actions a universal legitimation when confronted with a powerful opponent such as the teachers. The issue at stake between them is how to define the content of a good school and how to reach this aim. While the claim for universal legitimation is considerable within the governing of the individual institution - be it a primary school, a nursery home or a home for the elderly - the claim for universal legitimation of the actions of the institution in relation to the surrounding society is next to none existent. This is due to the fact that the institutions are only in exceptional cases asked to argue for their role in producing a good local community, a good municipality, not to mention a good nation. The reason for this narrow scope of the claim for universal legitimation is due to the fact that user boards have been institutionalized in a way which isolates them from the political system as such. This isolation is a direct result of the fact that they were not introduced as a means to renew

the democratic institutions of liberal democracy. They were first and foremost an element in an overall effort to increase the administrative efficiency of the public sector (Nyseth and Torpe, 1996: 6). In some localities user boards have taken initiatives to establish voluntary network cooperation between local institutions which tends to widen the scope of universal legitimation. But in most localities the institutions are isolated islands with limited contact to the political system (Sørensen, 1995: 101ff). For that reason I shall conclude that user boards in their present form serve as an important instrument to give the choice a voice within the individual institution. However, if full benefit is to be made from them the isolation between the institutions and the political system must be abandoned and exchanged with a more integrative model of public governance.

Finally, we shall take a look at the municipal user councils introduced in 1997 as a central body for the governing of services for old people. Hence, old people's councils are elected in all municipalities by all citizens over a certain age in the municipalities. The council has not formal decision-making competence but has the right to be heard in all matters dealt with in the municipal council with relevance for the living conditions of old people. It is evident that this model of user voice places the user representatives right in the centre of the political system. First of all it confronts the user representatives with the claim that they must provide universal legitimation for their views and actions which goes way beyond the limits of the individual institution. It must relate to the well being of the old people in the municipality. And second, the close cooperation between the municipality council and the old peoples council is likely to drag the old people's council into overall considerations regarding the well being and the governing of the municipality as a whole.

However, the question which comes to mind is whether user councils such as the councils for old people are in fact a case of institutionalized user voice. That is, defining old people in general as users of old peoples politics is a much more abstract perception of the user than indicated in the previously mentioned two models of institutionalizing an active user role. For those elected and those voting are not necessarily using services for old people. They are only users in the sense that they are older than other members of society. For that reason I shall argue that this model is best conceived as a hybrid of a citizen role and a user role. Such a hybrid model has in my opinion important advantages since it is well suited to function as a link between territorial and functional channels of influence and participation. Does that mean that we should always adopt this model when institutionalizing an active user role? I think not. For there is plenty of use for purer forms of user-influence and user-participation.



## **Reconcretization of the political**

What I find of use is the ability of the user role to make the political concrete. And concreteness is exactly what is needed in the political system of liberal democracies today. For this system has made the political abstract. There is little doubt that the current interpretation of citizenship which links it to territorially defined channels of participation and influence forms the basis of to the establishment of the territorially founded community without which society cannot exist. The problem is, never the less, that this linking has resulted in an abstraction of politics. Politics has become something remote and distant - something that has to do with principles, ideologies etc., with little immediate relevance for the everyday life and problems of the individual member of society. A sign of this state of affairs is that most people do not regard as political the many activities taking place outside the formal institutions of liberal democracy directed towards concrete problem solving which they and others are involved in.

There are two reasons for this abstraction of the political. First, societies has grown to a size which makes it inevitable that the constitution of territorial communities and activities directed towards collective problem solving has become loosely coupled. This state of affairs can to some extent be remedied through decentralization of the political system by delegating competence to municipalities and district councils. - a development which is taking place in many countries in the 1990s including Denmark. But in most cases even these territorial communities will be so big that the distance between the constitution of community and concrete processes of collective problem is disconnected. Second, the modern notion of citizenship has contributed to making political action highly abstract. That is, the individual is first defined as a political actor when s/he takes on the role of the citizen, according to which the individual regards it as her/his duty to relate to the governing of society as such. And that is, I shall argue, highly difficult, not to say impossible, to do so in a concrete manner. For that reason it becomes both necessary and easy to keep politics at some distance. Necessary because it is downright impossible to remain in the abstract role of citizenship for very long and easy because the political is institutionalized in a way which promotes the notion of the political as a play in which politicians are the actors and citizens the spectators. All the citizens have to do to fulfil their political obligations, apart from an occasional cheer or a boo is to place the cross every fourth year.

This does not mean that we do not act politically the rest of the time. It means that we don't perceive our concrete problem solving activities as political. In short we have developed a very narrow perception of the political which defines large parts of human action out of the political realm. This has two serious consequences: First, it smooths the way for a concentration of political power in a few hands. For if one chooses to step into the political realm you step into a different reality which tends to take all or nothing at all. There is no in between. Either you stay out or you

become homo politicus - politician by profession - careerist, the old guard, professional activist etc. Seen in this light it is understandable that many people conclude that: "politics is not really me". Politics becomes for the few. Second, the limited role which citizens play in the political theatre results in a limited feeling of responsibility among the citizens for public problem solving. It is legitimate for them to place the responsibility for unsolved matters on the formally powerful politicians. Both of these consequences have serious implications on the ability of liberal democracies to govern efficiently.

### **Bringing the concrete back in**

This is precisely where the active user role comes in. It is a means to bring the concrete back into politics. As many have mentioned there are a number of problems connected to introducing the user role as a political actor. For it is just as evident that territorially founded channels of influence and participation contribute to the construction of territorial community as it is evident that functionally based channels of influence and participation can disturb the territorial unity by creating a functionally demarcated unity. And when a unity is defined somebody is excluded. Hence, there is a danger that functionally based communities become communities which are in danger of undermining the community of which they are a part. However, one must keep in mind that this logic of inclusion-exclusion is the case for both territorially and functionally based communities. Hence, decentralization of decision-making competence to municipality councils and district councils is just as likely to bring about chauvinism as delegation of competence to user boards. The main difference between territorially and functionally founded channels of influence and participation is therefore not as many seem to think whether or not they promote the creation of the community or a partial community. They are both partial communities. The main difference is that they promote different forms of community with the advantages and disadvantages they respectively have.

The major disadvantage of the functionally based partial community is that it tends to produce institutional chauvinism and a sectorial perspective on politics. There is of course good reason to restrain these tendencies by institutionalizing tight bonds between these forms of community and other forms of community. Hence, it seems a good idea to establish close links between user boards, district councils and municipal councils. But we should keep in mind that the disadvantages mentioned above are also the advantages of functionally based communities. For the constitution of a community among those immediately involved in concrete problem solving makes it possible to maintain the core of the political at the very spot where the political as phenomenon is born. That is, the moment in which there is a mutual recognition of the need to act together in order to solve a defined task and disagreement about how it is to be done. It is the

institutionalization of this moment which might contribute to the reconcretization of the political. A reconcretization of the political will first of all make the political more open and accessible and accordingly increase the possibilities for people legitimately to move in and out of the political without forcing them to redefine themselves as *homo politicus*. Second, there is a fair chance that a reconcretization of the political will result in a revision of the traditional distribution of labour between politicians and citizens: that the citizens demand and the politicians produce solutions (Sørensen, 1995: 65). An introduction of an active user role into political life will make them co-responsible for the production of public solutions to defined problems. And so the current democratic overload in many liberal democracies is likely to disappear.

If we add up the advantages and disadvantages connected to the use of territorially and functionally founded channels of influence and participation it is evident that neither of them represents the means by which democracy should be institutionalized. What is needed is a patchwork of channels of influence and participation which in combination establishes a balance between territorial and functional integration and between abstract and concrete aspects of political thinking. The principal task in developing such a patchwork of institutions is to develop efficient means of coordination. Hence, it calls for coordination between locally, nationally and internationally founded territorial channels of influence and participation, coordination between functional units of governance, and, finally, coordination between functional units and territorially defined authorities. This coordination is immensely important in order to create a level of unity between parts which constitute society. Paradoxically, what is to be developed is a hierarchy of relatively autonomous units.

### **Democracy and “the user”**

The question is whether it is possible to maintain democracy in a hierarchy of relatively autonomous units. I defined democracy above as a state of affairs in which everybody is guaranteed equal conditions for obtaining influence and for participating in the battle between particular views and interests for obtaining hegemony. The question is whether this claim for equality can be maintained. If equality means that all members of society should have equal influence and participate equally in all processes of decision-making in society we have a problem. However, this interpretation presupposes that it is evident who “all members of society” are. It does not take into account the fact that this “all” is a social construction - that is, an outcome of a political battle. This construction is unavoidably based on an exclusion - somebody does not belong to the all. The basis of legitimacy for drawing the line between those who are in and those who are out always refers to the degree of involvement (Sørensen et al, 1996: 21). That the degree of involvement is a central point of reference in legitimizing who is

to obtain access to functional channels of influence and participation is obvious to most. It is probably more controversial to claim that the same is the case for territorial channels of influence and participation. The fact that one argument is controversial while the other is not derives from the historical fact that the territorial demarcation of the sovereign, a result of the hegemonious position of the nation state, has dominated the last two centuries of democratic thinking. Consequently, there has been little need to argue for the advantages of a territorially based demarcation of the sovereign. Or to put it in another way: the particularistic view that democracy presupposes a territorial demarcation of the sovereign has for a long period of time occupied the empty place of universalism. Its position as universalism has been strong enough to prevent the recognition of the self evident fact that municipal autonomy - not to mention local autonomy - is a serious threat to the principle that "all members of society" should have equal access to channels of influence and participation. Hence, the hegemonic position of territorially based channels of influence and participation has made us blind to the fact that "all" is never everybody. It is those we choose to define as "all". When legitimizing the exclusion of some from the "all" references are made to the degree to which people are influenced by the decisions made; people in Denmark ought to have more influence on what happens in Denmark than the English; people in Copenhagen ought to have more influence on what happens in Copenhagen than do the rest of the Danes; and those who have kids in a kindergarten ought to have a greater say on this area of public governance than those who do not.

It is probably the current weakening of the nation state as unit of governance which makes it possible to challenge the hegemony of territorially based channels of influence and participation. This weakening has made necessary a radical reconsideration of the traditional concept of democracy. Where is democracy without the nation state? It goes without saying that the notion that everybody is to decide everything is more or less meaningless in a society with no absolute boundaries such as our hierarchy of relatively autonomous units. Hence, what is needed today is the formulation of a concept of democracy which is both more explicit and more dynamic in constructing the sovereign. That is, it must define some principles for determining who is to be regarded as a part of the sovereign. These principles must guide us in deciding who are to be defined as involved - be it territorially or functionally. For these principles should form the basis of the construction of the units in the hierarchy and the distribution of influence between them.

One of the central aims of the above discussion was to underline that it is not incompatible with the concept of democracy to grant the more involved more influence than the less involved. It is, I have tried to argue, an inherent logic of democratic thought to do so. And so there is no reason to maintain that a more active role to users of public services necessarily is a treat to democracy. There is a chance that it could become an important

factor in the necessary renewal of our democratic institutions. However, if this is to be the active role of users must be institutionalized in a way that promotes an equal distribution of channels of influence and participation among all users. Everything must be done to prevent a situation in which only some users, user boards and user councils have access to channels of influence and participation. If access is given to some it must be given to all. For although a reformulation of the concept of democracy is needed the one core which is to be maintained is the claim for political equality between those we define as a part of the sovereign. If we give up reference to equality the concept of democracy has lost its meaning.

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