

◀ INTERVIEW ▶

Reflecting on Fifty Years of Democratic Theory

Carole Pateman in Conversation with Graham Smith

Carole Pateman and Graham Smith

Interview in Brief

► Carole Pateman reflects on her fifty years of scholarship in conversation with Graham Smith. The discussion focuses particular attention on Pateman's work on participatory democracy and considers her contributions to debates on political obligation, feminism, basic income, and deliberative democracy.

► **Keywords:** basic income, Carole Pateman, feminism, participatory democracy, political obligation

Graham Smith: It seems natural to start our conversation with your first book, *Participation and Democratic Theory* (1970), published almost fifty years ago. It has long been a classic in democratic theory. Can you give us some insight into what motivated you to write the book? At the time it ran very much against the current of democratic theory.

Carole Pateman: It actually started life as a B-lit thesis at Oxford but was never submitted. After I finished my degree, I had no notion of what one would do with a degree from Oxford. My parents having left school at fourteen, none of us knew anything about universities or degrees, but my advisers all said, "Do graduate work." I thought, "Well, okay. I'll carry on doing this then." A DPhil seemed too large and abstract and not something I had any confidence I could do, so I started out writing for a B Lit.



Brian Barry was my supervisor, and when I finished it, he said two things. The first was I should send it off to Cambridge University Press, which I was a bit startled by. But he'd said do it, so I dutifully sent it off. And second, he said, "You must turn it into a DPhil." So I did that, and it's tucked away in the Oxford Archives somewhere. Maybe it's now been digitalized.

Smith: Why did you write it on this particular set of issues?

Pateman: The book was published in 1970. I'm that old! Two things were going on at the time. The first was out in the streets: there was an enormous amount of participation in the sixties, whether it was the student movement, the antiwar movement, the antinuclear movement, the feminist movement. Participation was very much in the air. And then, second, in the academic debates the prevailing arguments in democratic theory were very suspicious of participation. It was perceived as actually quite dangerous for democracy. I had no idea at the time that the people I was criticizing were these great big figures in the United States. I was a total innocent. I don't think I would have written it at that time if I had known who the contemporary figures I was criticizing were. I had a go at Schumpeter, Dahl, and others, and then looked at classic texts. I remember reading Rousseau and Mill, and then Brian suggested I look at G. D. H. Cole. That's how the latter part of the book developed.

Smith: What part of your argument for participation is still relevant for you today? What still resonates? And if you were to rewrite it now, would you write it in a different way?

Pateman: Oh, you couldn't write that kind of book now. The form of employment I talk about in the book barely exists anymore. The whole economy has changed since the late 1970s and the beginning of the hegemony of neoliberalism, the whole social structure has changed, along with people who are employed and the jobs they do. It would have to be a different kind of book to discuss what's going on now. The factories, the type of work and workers that I talk about – you might still find a few, but not that many anymore. So many people are now part time or doing "gig jobs." The kinds of work that younger people especially do now is not what I describe in the book. I should say that I haven't reread the book for ages. But when I was teaching at UCLA, every now and again I did a grad class about democratic theory, and I did look at bits of it. And when I looked, I still liked the argument. It's still going, the dear old book. It's still out there. How could I not love it?

Smith: In the book the key arguments revolve around the role of political education, in particular education through participation, rather than civics in schools. An idea of education through doing and a focus on the workplace and the economy as an aspect of the political. Do you still see these arguments as fundamental?

Pateman: Yes, you can't ignore the economy.

Smith: Well, arguably a lot of democratic theorists do just that.

Pateman: Yes, I know, but I think they're wrong. What's politics about these days, largely? It's about the economy – just think about Brexit. I don't think most democratic theorists think much about social and economic structures anymore and, more particularly, about employment. But it's fundamentally important. A greater proportion of the population are employed in Britain today than in 1970, and employment has been spread globally. Employment is a vast undemocratic area of life within democracies.

Smith: After *Participation and Democratic Theory* (1970) your work seems to have shifted quite quickly into discussions of feminism and political theory. When I was revisiting your work in preparation for this conversation, it occurred to me how little issues of participatory democracy emerged in those discussions – for example, in *The Sexual Contract* (2018, originally published in 1988) and other books and articles that followed. Is this something that you felt you'd put aside in your turn to feminism and gender theory? Is that a fair representation?

Pateman: Actually, you've missed a book. Participatory democracy didn't disappear; it forms a background to my other work, even if I don't discuss it. It came explicitly into my book *The Problem of Political Obligation* (1979), and I said something about employment more recently in an article, "Self-Ownership and Property in the Person" (2002). Unfortunately, in the political obligation literature, other scholars typically either briefly mention my book and then move on or they just ignore my argument completely. In the book I tried to show why obligation is a problem, but most of the theorists who write about it don't think there's a problem. They think that in a democracy of course we have a political obligation and that their job is to spell out the best justification. I was doing something rather different, which stands at odds with the conventional approach. In the last part of the book my argument was that for proper political obligation, you have to have a participatory democracy.

Smith: So that's one of the books you regret wasn't picked up on as much as others?

Pateman: No, it wasn't. If you want to know what I think about the classic texts, that's where you find many of my ideas.

Smith: You then shifted much of your work toward debates within feminism. There's an interesting essay, "Feminism and Democracy" (1983), where you were critical of participatory democrats. In fact, you were critical of earlier Carole Pateman! You offered an argument that feminist insights are lacking in participatory democracy. This is a missing area of research. I'll quote you: "Advocates of participatory democracy have been reluctant to take feminist arguments into account even through these arguments are, seen in one light, an extension of the participatory democratic claim that 'democracy' extends beyond the state to the organization of society." It struck me when reading this that you were pointing toward a feminist theory of participatory democracy. Can you explain what you were concerned about? What it is that was missing from accounts of participatory democracy?

Pateman: Most accounts of participatory democracy in 1983, including my own earlier book, looked at the public world. That was taken to be the proper focus of political theory, with perhaps some attention to the economic sphere. But very few people ever talked about the household, marriage, family, and private life when they were doing democratic theory. And it seemed to me that this was a rather large and important – indeed crucial – omission. I began to publish feminist work from 1979 and began to argue that the public world could not be properly understood without attention to its integral relationship to the private sphere. In the 1970s I started to think about and discuss the issues that eventually I put together in *The Sexual Contract* (2018). And when another edition of the obligation book came out, I added an Afterword, which included a few of these questions (see Pateman 1985).

Smith: So if you were to rewrite your first book, it would develop that feminist perspective on participatory democracy?

Pateman: That would be part of it, certainly. Women are over half of the population; it is a rather large absence. I also became interested in the racial contract after Charles Mills (1997) wrote his book as a kind of complement to *The Sexual Contract* (2018). I did a chapter in *Contract and Domination* (2007), which we wrote together, on the settler contract, which I remain

rather pleased with. I wouldn't rewrite my first book; I never rewrite my work. But if I wrote something similar now, I would bring in not only feminism but also critical race studies. After nearly fifty years it is only to be expected that it would be a very different book.

Smith: Going back to *Participation and Democratic Theory* (1970), the move that you make in that book, which is really different from most other people in this space, is this move into the workplace. But it strikes me that your feminist analysis seriously problematized the nature of the workplace and who is perceived as a worker and what is perceived as good work. And my sense is that this is still something we're not really engaging with in participatory democracy. We don't think enough about participatory democracy and private relations.

Pateman: If you're interested in changing the whole structure of things into what I call a "participatory society," then you can't just look at the state or include the economy. You have also to look at the rest of social life, including relations between men and women and views about what it means to be a "man" or a "woman," which has a profound influence throughout social life. Especially the fact that men think – perhaps not as much as they used to, but it has far from died out and was certainly very present when I wrote my book in the late 1960s – that they have a right to govern women, whether in the household or the state. Despite all the large changes over the last half century, there is still some way to go before men regard women as equals and treat us as such or, indeed, before whites see nonwhites as equals.

Smith: Your feminist and participatory democratic interests come together in your later writing on basic income (see, e.g., Pateman 2004). You offer a particularly thought-provoking perspective on why basic income should be seen as a significant policy both for a participatory and feminist orientation.

Pateman: I got interested in basic income quite a long time ago. But now it has become incredibly popular. I'm interested to know exactly why that is. A few years ago, you could find a few bits and pieces on the web, but now you can find all these examples of people experimenting and piloting basic income. It's interesting to know why it's suddenly taken off like that. Originally, I got interested in it for two reasons. One was the utter scandal of very rich countries like the UK or the United States having such large numbers of people living in insecurity and poverty. And basic income is an obvious way to fix that. At least it is if the income is set at an

appropriate level that is sufficient to give you what I called “a modest but decent standard of life.” If this is not the case, basic income is not theoretically interesting because then it’s just poor relief. I see basic income as a policy that could possibly not merely relieve poverty but abolish poverty. Why should you have poverty in 2018 in countries as rich as ours? It’s a complete scandal. And the second reason was that, to be meaningful, basic income must be paid to individuals and not households, and thus it would follow that, for the very first time in history, all women could actually have an income they could live on – modestly, but enough to live on. At last they would be free to leave unpleasant, dangerous relationships, free to change their jobs, to do something a bit better, or even stay out of employment altogether. The latter in particular goes for men too. My other utopian hope is that it might start challenging established employment practices.

Smith: It’s breaking that link between income and formal employment?

Pateman: Yes. I think that’s critical. I like to compare it to the suffrage. We now take for granted that every adult person has a right to a vote, but why do we find it so difficult to take for granted that all individuals have a right to a decent standard of living?

Smith: I want to ask you a couple of questions about a short piece you wrote, “Participatory Democracy Revisited” (2012), when you were appointed president of the American Political Science Association. It was a really interesting intervention, and it caused quite a stir in democratic theory at the time.

Pateman: Yes, you mentioned that to me. I didn’t know that.

Smith: Like your first book, it is very concise and to the point. It takes a swipe at deliberative democracy, which has become almost hegemonic within democratic theory. A lot of deliberative democrats think they are participatory democrats. They use the terms interchangeably. But you were very clear that in your mind deliberative democrats aren’t necessarily participatory democrats. Do you want to explain why? What is it about deliberative democracy that has captured your critical attention?

Pateman: I’m not against deliberative democracy. I think it’s a very interesting and valuable development in a lot of ways. Giving reasons, justifying arguments – that’s fine. Better talk is good. But what it doesn’t

do – and I see this as central to participatory democracy – is really challenge authority structures, the institutional structures that we live within. We can have very nice debates and discussions – in fact, of superior quality – but if you’re having them in the same old institutional structures, how far are we going to get? In a nutshell, that’s my reservation about deliberative democracy.

Smith: Do you think it’s important that these two ideas, these two schools of thought, are kept separate? It seems there is something very particular for you about participatory democracy, that you want to make sure it isn’t swallowed up by a grand theory of everything, which deliberative democracy can often seem to be.

Pateman: The latter can have rather imperialistic tendencies. But I don’t want deliberative democracy and participatory democracy necessarily to be kept separate, because good deliberation is actually part of participatory democracy. I think deliberation is necessary, but I don’t think it’s sufficient. Some enthusiastic deliberative democrats seem to suggest that if you achieve good deliberation, then you’ve done the job. That was my main objection. I think you still need to consider questions of power (public and private), of authority structures, of how things are organized, of structural and institutional change – all the questions at the heart of participatory democracy. That is part of the reason I chose to talk about participatory budgeting in my APSA address. But how this is faring with the recent drastic changes in, say, Brazilian politics, I don’t know. I went there in 2015 and got the impression that participatory budgeting had already probably peaked.

Smith: We seem to be getting back to your earlier point that we don’t spend enough time thinking about what it means to democratize the economy. Instead, many of us are obsessed about particular spaces of talk.

Pateman: Yes, we don’t spend enough – or any – time talking about the democratization of (what we call) democracy. We could democratize various aspects of our lives.

Smith: So what would be your first port of call? Where should efforts of democratization be focused?

Pateman: That is a difficult question, though I’m not sure how useful it is to spend a lot of time worrying about it. What I usually say to eager students is that, given all the interconnections and the pace of change, the

best thing to do is to start from where you are or with areas that most interest you. Employment has now been spread globally and is an obvious area, though I probably don't know enough about what's going on everywhere to make confident pronouncements. Someone reading this interview might take that one on. But we also need reflection about changes in sexual and familial relations over the years; our society is now highly sexualized, but is it democratic sexuality? For example, violence against women is still endemic everywhere, but at least we talk about it now. And occasionally men are prosecuted – not often enough, but occasionally. Things have changed, and our thinking about participatory democracy has to change too – but that is for others to take forward. Half a century of work is enough.

Smith: I get the sense that in looking back to your work on participatory democracy, you are more pessimistic about the possibility of a political culture of genuine democratization.

Pateman: Oh, I'm sure I am. I think everybody is probably more pessimistic than they were fifty years ago. The sixties were a hopeful time. I'm not totally pessimistic but cannot say I am absolutely optimistic either. There are now all sorts of challenges that I did not have to consider when I was writing *Participation and Democratic Theory*: environmental disaster, globalization, privatization, deregulation, the spread of nuclear weapons. How can we cope with all that? We don't have enough new ideas. Even basic income is an old idea; it's been around for a very long time. Where are the new ideas?

Smith: One development I've worked on is randomly selected mini-publics. I know you've had one or two critical things to say about them in your APSA piece, but since you wrote that, we've seen assemblies in Ireland recommend changes on marriage equality and abortion that have been supported in national referendums. So this is one example of a public space where there is democratic potential.

Pateman: I think that's very encouraging. I'm not up to date with what's been happening, but Ireland is a very interesting example, like British Columbia before it. Obviously I am particularly attracted to the example of participatory budgeting in Brazil. That was another very hopeful example. But where are the other examples? Maybe you know.

Smith: Most of the hopeful examples are very often quite marginalized practices. Workers' cooperatives still exist; social enterprises still exist. We have a few examples of basic income experiments, of innovative social movement activity. But it does feel like it's very much at the margins,

whereas when you were writing in the 1960s and '70s, it probably felt like this was potentially system changing.

Pateman: Yes, that's right. The sixties and seventies were a very different era, when it did, at certain points, feel like things were changing. This was the time of the long march through the institutions. But since then, the system has changed in some important respects, especially the entrenchment of neoliberalism.

Smith: So one last question I want to ask: There's quite a lot of younger scholars who are just starting out on their work on deliberative and participatory democracy. Do you have any thoughts or advice?

Pateman: I think they probably know more about where the interesting developments are these days than I do. But when I'm asked to give advice, my general response would be that whatever you do, for goodness sake, make sure you're really interested in it. Don't do something just because it is fashionable now or your supervisor thinks it could be interesting. Do something you think is interesting; otherwise, it could become a terrible bore for you.

►► **Carole Pateman** is recognized as one of the world's leading political theorists. Her first book, *Participation and Democratic Theory*, has been reprinted nineteen times and is considered by many to be the definitive exploration of participatory democracy. She has made a profound impact on the way the relationship of gender and politics is analyzed, both historically and in contemporary life. Among many honors, she has been appointed president of the American Political Science Association and the International Political Science Association and was awarded the Political Studies Lifetime Achievement Award.

►► **Graham Smith** is professor of politics and director of the Centre for the Study of Democracy at the University of Westminster. He is a specialist in democratic theory and practice and environmental politics. He is author of *Democratic Innovations: Designing Institutions for Citizen Participation* and has been particularly influential in the development of that field of study. He is chair of the Foundation for Democracy and Sustainable Development. E-mail: g.smith@westminster.ac.uk

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