# On Blues, Marx, and Elvis: Why We Need a Meaningful Participation Model to Frame Spatial Theory

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# ON BLUES, MARX, AND ELVIS: WHY WE NEED A MEANINGFUL PARTICIPATION MODEL TO FRAME SPATIAL THEORY

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## I. INTRODUCTION

For music historians, the dispute over [Moby's sampling of blues by Vera Hall and Joe Lee for an American Express commercial] echoes longstanding controversies over penurious royalty payments to R&B pioneers, who often signed over their song copyrights to promoters and corporations—and ended up broke despite the widespread popularity of their work.

"Isn't it interesting that all of our systems are set up to protect copyright holders and not the people who do the composing?" noted Charlie McGovern, a historian of popular culture for the Smithsonian National Museum of American History. "We sure have a lot more impoverished artists than we have impoverished record companies."[1]

Consider this concept in the context of everyday life, which blues itself is so much about. Folks in the urban cores of America have been working to get their narratives of despair and hope to the table for decades only to see them taken and molded and appropriated into something they do not recognize and to which they feel no attachment. They have been denied meaning, as the majority—in showing its "love" for the idea—reshapes it into something the majority will digest. Elvis becomes the rationalized, palatable surrogate who brings blues to the majority.

But what about meaningfulness? What does it have to do with appropriation? Where does the "spatial theory" come in? Simply put,

1. Richard Leiby, *Reused Blues*, WASH. POST, August 9, 2000, at C1.

Elvis lives while a few historians and fans carry memories of Vera Hall, Bessie Smith, and Joe Lee. Just as today's music consumers need to be educated about the contributions of those pioneers, the majority policymaking public must acknowledge the necessary contributions of the minority in determinations of urban spatial policy—especially when the minority constitutes the majority in those spaces. I focus on space because it is where we all spend time. Its composition determines how we will interact with each other and how life will change and improve for the millions who live in our most distressed urban spaces.

I began this paper with the assertion that policy lacks meaning for many residents of the urban core. They do not recognize it and acknowledge no attachment to it. It belongs to the majority. "But wait," someone inevitably cries out, "what about all those mandates for citizen participation evident in policy?" It is true that those mandates exist. However, what I have often seen happen in the course of my daily work with low-income urban residents is that they provide input at some community forum (rarely with the real decision-makers present) and months later find nothing of themselves in the result. What happened? The majority has appropriated their voices—it is the ostensible satisfaction of the participation mandates without the actual integration of residents' contributions.

Here is where Karl Marx comes in. A Marxist analysis allows us to understand what this "appropriation" is.[2] The commodification of a narrative (whether it is blues or community needs) where that narrative is fetishized (like the way Sally loves her Nike's but does not think twice about the labor that went into them) encourages the subordination of that narrative.[3] Marx called it commodity fetishism.[4] In blues, appropriation is an empathetic process—perhaps a majority fascination with the minority as source for "re-invigorating" culture. The majority fashions blues music as "shared" cultural space, as trans-cultural. For the majority, it is an aspect of modernism, and this acceptance serves as the reconciliation that equalizes and erases

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2. *See generally* KARL MARX, CAPITAL: VOLUME I 1-163 (Penguin Books 1976) (1867).

3. *Id.*

4. *See generally id.* at 163-177.

differences in legitimacy and portends social change. However, for the minority it actually conceals domination and is re-appropriation. What gets erased in the "reception?" Is there some culture within that needs to be expelled or "re-integrated?" (When these concepts are tied to global commodification, the opportunities for exploitation grow exponentially greater.) In an age of the Internet and information (and power) flows, the commodity of narrative—and the meaning it infuses into the processes of change—is at a premium. Meaning is mental, physical, and social. It consists of metaphor and metonymy and is hegemonic, dominated, and appropriated. It is ungraspable and fetishized. (How many times have we heard of an action-hero actor wistful for *meaningful* roles, or the lovelorn seeking *meaningful* relationships?) Instead of concentrating our attention on the production of meaning and the social relationships inherent to it, we fall into the trap of treating meaning as meaning "in itself." The result is appropriation of community voice and narrative by the majority to *effect* some meaningfulness.

Meaning, through efforts to appropriate it, has become an object of political struggle. In its very creation meaning is paradoxically both the product and the production.[5] It becomes "at once a precondition and a result of social superstructures" in much the same fashion as does the concept of space when subjected to the same controls.[6] The concept of meaning and related policies of space, so integral to our growth and socialization, are no less immune than blues from majority consumption.

There is also something else to consider about space, if, as suggested by sociologist Manuel Castells (himself no stranger to the application of Marxist concepts to the urban sphere), we are indeed moving from the space of places, where function and form is dominated by defined physical boundaries, to the space of flows, dominated by economic activities and particularized social groups.[7] When poor people are left out of policies of space, they are left out of

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5. *See* HENRI LEFEBVRE, THE PRODUCTION OF SPACE (1998) (arguing that space is an object of political struggle and an instrument of control by the state). Because space is produced when nature is dominated—often through violence—and that production involves labor or effort, Lefebvre analogizes its state to commodity fetishism. Meaning is similarly contested.

6. *Id.* at 85.

7. MANUEL CASTELLS, THE RISE OF THE NETWORK SOCIETY 410-428 (1996).

influencing and determining urban economics and subsequently urban growth. An urban spatial theory in which residents infuse personal meaning can tie residents closely to activities related to these issues (fostering attachment) and thus lay the foundation for meaningful participation and satisfactory outcomes.

In theory, there is no difference between theory and practice, and in practice there is. So, though we talk about the theory, it must be tied to practice—real living. A community is formed when it can define itself and its own interests. But how do those disenfranchised on the margins define their interests? How does a community of low-income residents do it? A lot of discussions on these issues take place amongst academics in conferences—the theory. The people living the "theorized" communities have to be there, too. No Elvis, just blues.

So what actually constitutes attachment and meaning? Why bother with this? Why not just say, "let people be involved"? Because that has all been said before, and still our urban centers suffer the inadequate policies of development. It takes more than working under an existing inadequate policy to promote change; residents must shape the initial debates. Although there are means by which low-income residents may participate in the creation of housing and community development policy, the key problem is again the lack of truly meaningful resident participation in the creation of such policy. Below, I provide an adequate conceptual language for analyzing participation in improving urban space. I also explain why we should use such language in policymaking. This new language requires a reconceptualization of participation that automatically allows residents to promote their own goals. It requires definition, examples, and analysis—and then, significantly, a shift in thinking and practice. I am indeed calling for a paradigm shift in the Kuhnian sense—if you want to get a boat leaning in the other direction, get everyone over on that side.[8]

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8. THOMAS KUHN, THE STRUCTURE OF SCIENTIFIC REVOLUTIONS 10-22 (2nd ed. 1996).

## II. THEORETICAL CONSTRUCTION OF MEANINGFULNESS

*I cried, I moaned, I cried I moaned, I asked*
*'how long, how long'*
*I asked my capt'n for the time o' day*
*Then he throwed his watch away. '*
                                    Charlie Lincoln[9]

*Me an my captain don't agree,*
*But he don't know, 'cause he don't ask me;*
*He don't know, he don't know my mind,*
*When he see me laughing*
*Just laughing to keep from crying.*[10]

Indulge me again in setting out a little theory. If marginalized groups and communities are to feel empowered and able to affect and improve their own lives, they must have some real "stake" in the processes of change. That stake is their attachment, an anchor for the meaning from which wanted outcomes emerge.

Participation that has a comprehensive and "integrative structure of interpretation, that [people] elaborate through experiences," and upon which people depend "for confidence to act" is meaningful participation.[11] A comprehensive and integrative structure of interpretation is necessarily multi-layered, and the interpretation of people's experiences informs and reveals this structure. When people's life experiences are included in an interpretation of their own goals and values, people recognize and identify with the structure and are more willing to trust that structure. The achievement of meaningfulness is then secured when people feel a sense of attachment, learned in the context of specific relationships which rely upon that structure. Ultimately, the meaningfulness of the participation is translated into modes of empowerment and mitigation of the disruptions endemic to many urban communities.

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9. PAUL OLIVER, THE STORY OF THE BLUES 49 (1969).
10. *Me and My Captain, in* THE NORTON ANTHOLOGY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE 38, 38 (Gates et al. eds., 1997).
11. PETER MARRIS, MEANING AND ACTION 7 (1985).

Subsequent methods of self-determination are guaranteed by an integration of understanding and action that promotes positive change. In *Meaning and Action*,[12] Peter Marris sets out an argument for forging the link between meaning and action with meaning intimately tied to understanding.   Marris argues that understanding is related to meaningfulness as a method for evaluating the attachment of an issue (i.e., knowing the problem and its importance), and action is necessary to reveal meaningfulness.[13]   Marris' position is that understanding must match social action.[14]  It seems to follow that residents' actions must be tied to an understanding by decision-makers that is informed by clear knowledge of problems that exist and the language used to describe those problems.  Actions must be relevant (germane to the problem) and insight must be practical (useful to attack the problem). Therefore, the significance and practicality of matching action and understanding in the development of resident participation strategies lies in residents' perception of the connection of strategies (or, those strategies' preceding structures of interpretation) to their own goals, values, and experience.  This is the theory.  But how, and why, do existing participation models lack meaning?

## III. PRACTICAL CONSTRUCTION OF MEANINGFULNESS

The thing that goes into the blues is . . . the peculiar feeling that makes you know that there is something seriously wrong with the society, even though you may not possess the . . . political power to do anything about it.[15]

The blues is an impulse to keep the painful detail and episodes of a brutal existence alive in one's aching consciousness . . . and to transcend it . . . As a form the

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12. *Id.*
13. *Id.* at 53.
14. *Id.*
15. JAMES CONE, THE SPIRITUALS AND THE BLUES 103 (1972).

blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically.[16]

Existing participation models contain little nexus to issues of import to residents—issues that ultimately promote disempowerment and marginalization—which directly relate to residents' quality of life. In a trap of circularity, residents find extant policy flawed because residents have not framed the debate, and that flaw hinders them from effecting the type of change that will meaningfully improve their lives. Existing methods have promoted no feeling of attachment to a larger cause, nor to a larger community of urban residents. As a result, residents have little confidence in their ability to make a difference because they never see anything they recognize.

Goals, values, and experience are the code words of recognition. In my work with low-income residents, I have found that they speak consistently of their own values and of decision-makers placing value in those values. Residents speak of their goals to develop policies which are "recognizable" and "which they can relate to." Many residents, surprised at my interest in their views (which in turn was surprising to me, as I work *for* the residents) noted that the act of engaging in dialogue and listening was "meaningful." The act revealed to them that I was attempting to understand their "attachment to community" by giving them an opportunity to be heard. Some residents noted that the event would be even more significant if I was a government decision maker, which might mean "resident involvement from the outset with key decision-makers" and if residents could "see what [residents said] in the final product." One woman with nearly forty years experience living in and working on issues in public housing asserted that it is the "familiarity" of the outcome (based upon her involvement in its development) to which she is "attached."

In my work, I have encountered many residents who express a desire to maintain the spatial quality of their environments, as opposed to a singular desire to maintain their particular unit, or their particular neighbor. Neighbors and community are important as they relate to the spatial quality. In other words, the circulation patterns, open space, unit placement, and place in overall city all contribute to the

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16. THE NORTON ANTHOLOGY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE 23, quoting Ralph Ellison (Gates et al. eds., 1997).

cohesiveness that defines community. Residents understand the larger space to be key in the maintenance and creation of what they perceive as meaningful—that which is recognizable, and must be valued and recognized by nonresidents. In follow-up interviews, residents explained that these issues are seldom inserted into the discussion because more often than not decision-makers deal in hard unit numbers. Decision-makers are interested only in cost—whether that is income generated by retail placement or a unit of housing or costs associated with maintaining those. Concepts of space, in the broad sense introduced above, are too ephemeral and beyond an institutional imagination that works on dollars and cents. And yet, according to residents, the concepts are precisely of an enduring nature (over generations) that should and must be addressed.

It is also important to include, in the meaningfulness construct, concepts of meaning held by the nonresident allies and advocates who work with residents. Is their understanding of what is meaningful to residents consistent with residents' understanding? If so, how is that understanding tied to meaningful action—or the display of resident concepts of meaningfulness? Are nonresidents an essential part of the meaning and action link? In Marris' experience, meaning and subsequent meaningfulness is different for clients and for those who advocate on their behalf.[17] But who are the real advocates, and how is their effectiveness measured? What is real action—that which is effective?—and for whom? If advocates are effective in their work on behalf of residents and if they have removed the barrier of faulty translation between residents and themselves, they may be appropriate (and effective) mediators who possess the right information and who are credible in the eyes of government decision-makers.

Marris asserts that policy is "institutionalized after theories . . . are discredited,"[18] but reveals that his central theme—"the difficulty in matching understanding to social action"[19]—might be achieved by advocates for social change (among whom he counts reformers, community organizers, social scientists, and planners) in their

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17. MARRIS, *supra* note 11, at 14-53.
18. *Id.* at vii.
19. *Id.* at 2.

capacities as "intellectual mediators."[20]  Of course, there is the danger that it is precisely these actors whose own faulty analysis of social issues (of urban decay and poverty, for instance) and development of inconsistent understanding of social theory might also prevent their effectiveness in promoting positive social change.  But, if residents feel better about the contact, it may bode well for the depth and extent of their participation in processes and increase their satisfaction, through attachment and recognition, with policy outcomes.

Residents' notions of attachment and their structures of interpretation are tied to the emotional setting of home and what others (namely those who have power, but also nonresident advocates) value about that home.  In my discussions with advocates, they speak about "resident participation from A to B" and the "recognition of resident voices in the entire process."  Advocates seem to understand the import of meaningfulness to residents (i.e., notions of attachment and recognition), but they are also concerned with the means by which that meaningfulness is advanced and promoted.  In my experience, a balance has been reached, and the combination of the two has worked to effectuate great change for residents as residents have gained access to elected and agency officials (at both the federal and state level) and have seen their own words in policy.  If advocates listen "so that we respond with sensitivity and care, our actions may be freeing, empowering others, rather than mechanically generating feedback."[21]

Still, why deal with space? In my work with residents, I did not anticipate that residents would be as concerned with concepts of space and spatial familiarity as they are.  The spatial familiarity concept, as discussed above, although unanticipated, reinforces the theoretical construction of meaningfulness that I have been advancing in this paper.   It relates to notions of attachment and structures of interpretation, which are imperative in constructing meaningfulness.  The concept is a method for organizing experience from which structures of interpretation emerge.  Where, when, and how residents experience life within an urban context greatly impacts their interpretation of the space.  Positive interpretation supports confidence to act in a meaningful way—in a way inspired by an attachment to the larger space.  Because I am an advocate, my understanding that the

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20.  *Id.* at 4.
21.  JOHN FORESTER, PLANNING IN THE FACE OF POWER 108 (1989).

larger space might hold some meaningful attachment for residents is key to promoting goals to include all relevant issues about that space *as* policy.

Resident self-determination and empowerment is achieved by resident involvement in determining and shaping quality of life issues—at the outset. Diminishment in stereotyping is achieved when decision-makers and legislators are forced to sit across the table from real people affected by their decisions—and to carry on a *dialogue* with them. Acknowledging the "human behind the number" has proven quite effective, especially where those "humans" so articulately and passionately express their concerns. Resident involvement in shaping community only serves to strengthen that community. The "place" where policies are implemented becomes indivisible from the "community" created, which instills a sense of ownership and pride. Indeed,

> the two concepts of communities and places are inseparable. "Place" is the vessel within which the "spirit" of community is stored; "Community" is the catalyst that imbues a location with a "sense" of place. The two are not divisible. You cannot have community without place; and a place without a community is a location. A group of people with a shared concern but not a shared place is an interest group, not a community.[22]

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22. ROBERTA BRANDES GRATZ, THE LIVING CITY: HOW AMERICA'S CITIES ARE BEING REVITALIZED BY THINKING SMALL IN A BIG WAY iii (1994).

## IV. A FEW RECOMMENDATIONS

*After all I've been through*
*I had to move*
*Next door to the blues*
               Etta James[23]

Creating policy outcomes requires the broad organization of residents and the placing of residents in a position to advance their values and goals. It requires meaningful participation. The common denominator in the promotion of resident participation has been an organized and stable liaison that brings credibility in the eyes of legislators and policymakers. Many groups exist to perform the organizing function and to provide technical assistance as partners to residents. The democracy in community development enterprises and the enabling participation of residents can be achieved by enhancing the capacity of residents to work with and establish lasting relationships with grassroots organizations and government entities. Indeed, the space of flows is being affected and impacted by grassroots efforts after initial disorientation and exclusion. From community technology centers to Community Development Financial Institutions (CDFIs), a lot of folks are beginning to seize opportunities to impact urban space.

The concept of meaningfulness is tied to outcomes by serving the dual purpose of promoting consistency and trust in the participation model itself. The residents with whom I work have gained confidence to act on their own behalf because their goals and values have been advanced through their own "structure of interpretation." Relationships with decision-makers and legislators have been founded upon that structure—formed and informed by residents. They are forming beneficial alliances with local decision-makers in order to establish relationships where they can reasonably expect those decision-makers to seek them out during initial debates about community development issues. At the same time, those decision-makers can reasonably expect to receive cogent, relevant recommendations from affected residents at the initial debate stage.

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23. ETTA JAMES, NEXT DOOR TO THE BLUES (written by Pearl Woods and Leroy Kirkland) (Chess Records 1971).

As a result, the opportunities for faulty translation and appropriation of resident goals are lessened. Less faulty translation . . . fewer mistakes . . . *more meaning.*

Elvis lives, but next door to the blues.