The geography of participation

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Benedikt Korf*

*Department of Geography, University of Zurich, Winterthurerstrasse 190, CH-8057 Zürich. E-mail:

benedikt.korf@geo.uzh.ch

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Abstract:
Revisiting the critique of participatory development and one of its core political technologies, Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA), this paper suggests that participation in the form of ‘PRA’ creates ‘provided spaces’ that dislocate ‘development’ from politics and from political institutions of the postcolonial state. PRA thereby becomes what Chantal Mouffe calls a post-political aspiration through its celebration of deliberative democracy (though this is largely implicit rather than explicit in the PRA literature). What makes this post-political aspiration dangerous is that its provided spaces create a time-space container of a state of exception (the ‘workshop’) wherein a new sovereign is created. In combination with other developmental techniques, PRA has become a place where a new order is being constituted – the state of exception becomes permanent and nurtures the ‘will to improve’ that undergirds ‘development’.

Introduction
In the 1980s, a number of scholar-activists around the world started to propagate and practise what came to be known as ‘PRA’ (Participatory Rural Appraisal) – a bundle of methods to incorporate local communities in analysing, planning and implementing their own development. As Robert Chambers, one of its key proponents, famously wrote the core idea of PRA was to ‘hand over the stick’ to rural populations in order to plan their own futures. I PRA creates a new space for the political, nurtured and protected by external facilitators and NGOs - what Cornwall calls ‘invited spaces’ or ‘provided spaces’ into which ‘people’ are ‘invited’ by external, resource-bearing agents. These invited spaces were once ‘small islands’ of participation, sites of experimentation for activists, scholars and NGOs. But with its increasing mainstreaming since the mid-1990s – the ‘scaling-up’ - PRA became a
A widespread method to ‘practice’ participation in mainstream development. In other words, PRA underwent a reification process.

A core problem with PRA that this paper discusses is that ‘provided spaces’ of PRA dislocate ‘development’ from institutions of the post-colonial state and its formal (state) as well as informal orders (eg chieftaincy) and place it in the political sphere of ‘civil society’ or ‘the community.’ This move begs the question of who and what legitimises – or ‘gives the right’ to – those agents to dislocate ‘development’ from politics and to redraw the boundaries of the political sphere for the sake of ‘development’. The problems we see with PRA in fact indicate a much larger concern: PRA is just one among many other instruments or techniques of ‘development’. These developmental techniques serve what Tania Murray Li calls ‘the will to improve’: ‘Development’ cannot be thought without ‘improvement’, but there is an ‘inevitable gap between what is attempted and what is accomplished’. And this will, Li writes, is persistent and parasitic on its own shortcomings.

One of the key practices of the will to improve is ‘rendering technical’ what actually (or in fact) is ‘political’, a process (or transformation) that James Ferguson famously sums up as ‘anti-politics machine’. Rendering technical transforms a problem into something that requires a technical solution. At first sight, rendering technical appears as the same as rendering non-political or anti-political. In the case of PRA, one could argue that rendering participation technical in the form of PRA is driven by a post-political aspiration in the sense Chantal Mouffe understands it: it is a dislocation of the political through consensus. PRA is a post-political technique, a new canopy to regulate politics. The development industry uses PRA and similar techniques of governing to create a space-time container where the ‘will to improve’ displaces politics. The ‘will to improve’ is legitimised through post-political techniques of consensus building that claim to purify ‘development’ from the antagonising effects of ‘the political’, its friend–enemy distinction, and the dirty, mundane practices of ‘politics’.
But, the post-political aspiration of rendering participation technical is not non-political. It is deeply political (an observation in line with Li’s and Ferguson’s propositions). In the present paper, I will be arguing that PRA as a post-political aspiration, as a political technology, creates ‘invited or provided’ spaces for local ‘communities’ to take part in a space of exception wherein a decisional act is being performed to bring (local) development into being.\textsuperscript{v} In this sense, PRA suspends the postcolonial order temporarily to create a space of decision that is placed outside of the space of politics, of the post-colonial polity. At the same time, these PRA spaces remain bound to the postcolonial order as the decisional act needs to be re-embedded into the order of the post-colonial state, while at the same time undermining the distinction between rule (or order) and exception. The post-colonial order remains a potentiality, but is displaced from actuality through the staging of PRA as an exceptional event (and act of decision).

\textbf{Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) – a brief recapitulation of its ideas, practices and challenges}

Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) is a methodology that seeks to incorporate local communities in analysing, planning and implementing their own developmental programmes. While it was designed as antipode to large-scale, top-down rural development programmes in the 1970s and 1980s, it has now become a widely accepted tool in development planning and action research on development. As Robert Chambers, one of the key proponents of PRA, has argued the core idea of PRA was to ‘hand over the stick’ to rural populations in order to plan their own futures. PRA employs methods that enable people to express and share information with the aim of stimulating discussion and analysis which are believed to be enhanced through visualisation, creativity, transparency and exchange of ideas.\textsuperscript{vi} A core idea of PRA is that social learning provides the most appropriate basis for rural development.\textsuperscript{vii} In this sense, its proponents argue that PRA is not a strict method, but a ‘family of approaches, methods and behaviours enabling people to express and to analyse the realities of their lives and conditions, to plan what action to take and to monitor and evaluate the results’\textsuperscript{viii}.}
Different practitioners of PRA tend to emphasise either instrumental or transformative ends of PRA.

On the instrumental side, it is often suggested that PRA makes better use of indigenous knowledge to analyse problems and derive action, which is considered to lead to more sustainable development solutions. Others go even further and emphasise the transformative powers of PRA as an instrument of empowering rural populations to help themselves. But in both cases, the ‘will to improve’ is apparent.

PRA emphasises three core practices: first, facilitation by external actors shall ensure the equal participation of all members of a community. Second, visualisation shall enable all participants to share information and knowledge. Third, planners shall follow a new ethical codex whereby they are enablers rather than doers and ‘hand over the stick’ to local communities. PRA has often been conducted in the form of an intensive workshop that is temporally and spatially bounded, although there are multiple ways of practising PRA and related approaches. Such a PRA workshop takes place in a specific locality (or ‘community’), lasts up to a couple of days and involves sessions, discussions and observations with the ‘community’ – or a collective group. Some sessions are held in plenary, others with social (sub-) groups only (women, young people, farmers etc.). There is a PRA toolbox that provides external facilitators with facilitation and visualisation methods compatible with local knowledge to analyse and prioritise problems and plan developmental action. A PRA workshop normally ends with an action plan that is believed to be shared by the whole collective and forms the basis for collective action by the local group, both in conjunction with the organisation that facilitated the PRA workshop, and with other developmental actors.

In its initial form, PRA was more of an experimental site of transformative practices of ‘development’, nurtured by well-meaning scholar-activists. The reification of PRA – when it started to become an instrument of mainstream development – begged more fundamental questions about its legitimacy. In their influential compilation Participation – The New Tyranny, Cooke and Kothari claimed that ‘participation’ – and PRA as one of its most popular technologies – had in fact created a kind of tyranny which they defined as ‘the illegitimate and/or unjust exercise of power’ (my emphasis). They
distinguished three different forms of tyranny that they found perpetuated by PRA and other methodologies of participatory development: first, they argued that the external facilitator had significant power to influence the dynamics and directions of debate that could result in a tyranny of decision-making and control. Second, they suggested, the tyranny of group dynamics could lead to decisions that reinforced the interests of the already powerful rather than advocating the needs of the less powerful. Third, they found a certain fetishism of tools in the practice of PRA that foreclosed a more open process of deliberation and planning. These sets of criticism have been discussed in a large body of literature that has looked at both, theoretical assumptions pertinent, but not always explicit in PRA – and its still remaining transformative force – or that of other forms of participation.¹¹ Practitioners have also discussed and been self-critical on the practical pitfalls of applying PRA or similar methods in a power-ridden political arena.¹² In the following sections, I will build on and re-shape these criticisms.

PRA as post-political aspiration?

PRA creates ‘invited spaces’ through consensus-based procedures of decision-making. It is designed as a bounded space, a kind of time-space container (the ‘PRA workshop’), where specific instruments of consensus building – the PRA toolbox - are applied in order to arrive at a decision – a decision taken by a collective about its shared problems and possible remedial action ‘to improve’. The instruments and procedures that are applied through PRA are tailored in a way to place ‘development’ outside of the friend-enemy antagonisms of politics. PRA draws on a moral register that undermines antagonisms, places these into the exterior of ‘development.’ PRA thereby opens up a political space outside and beyond politics, a space that seeks to place ‘development’ outside of ‘politics’ and its conventional decision-making procedures. PRA does so through the moral register of discourses around ‘participation’ and ‘empowerment.’
PRA can thereby be understood as a technique of governing that Chantal Mouffe calls a ‘post-political aspiration’. Chantal Mouffe uses the term to criticise the proponents of deliberative democracy and its idea of rational consensus building through deliberation. In Mouffe’s view, this post-political aspiration displaces the friend–enemy dichotomy. Deliberative democracy makes antagonism a taboo, places it into deadly passions of enmity. Antagonisms become negative affective forces. This, Mouffe argues, displaces the very ontological foundation of the political, that is the friend–enemy discrimination, from politics; it places the political outside of politics.iii In Der Begriff des Politischen (1932), Carl Schmitt famously suggested that at the core of the political was the friend–enemy distinction. Following Schmitt, Mouffe defines the political as the disruptive moment of antagonism, whereas politics takes place in practices and institutions through which a political order is organised. Mouffe believes that political identity is relational. It constructs identity by establishing difference, ‘difference which is often constructed on the basis of a hierarchy’. Antagonism becomes an ever present possibility in social relations. Post-political consensus building undermines these antagonisms, places them into the exterior, the forbidden, the alien spaces outside of the post-political consensus.xiv

But this attempt to undermine antagonisms is like a fight against windmills. The post-political aspiration, argues Mouffe, cannot avoid making distinctions and defining difference, but the consensus model defines this difference on moralising grounds, by drawing it into the moral register. Mouffe detects this dynamic in the rise of populist right wing parties throughout Europe: This return of right-wing forces could only be interpreted as ‘the return of some archaic force’ that remains excluded from consensus politics. Mouffe suggests to acknowledge antagonism instead, but to transform it into agonism – a term she borrows from Schmitt. Agonism is ‘a we/they relation where the conflicting parties, although acknowledging that there is no rational solution to their conflict, nevertheless recognise the legitimacy of their opponents’, ie the legitimacy of the other party in its existence as oppositional actor and the legitimacy of it having another point of view. Mouffe seems to suggest that democracy’s task is to tame antagonisms (by making them agonisms).xv
Consensus, argues Mouffe, appears as stabilisation of something that is essentially unstable and chaotic, ie inherently undecidable.\textsuperscript{xvi} A decision is taken in an undecidable terrain.\textsuperscript{xvii} In the PRA container, stabilisation is attempted through applying ‘tools’ that tame the antagonising forces of local politics. A PRA workshop creates a temporally and spatially bounded space within which uncoerced deliberation of equal discursive partners will arrive at a consensus decision on a formulation of the problems and remedial actions for the collective that is invited into this provided space. Decision is arrived at and legitimised through the process of uncoerced deliberation, although this has not been made explicit in the PRA literature.\textsuperscript{xviii} For Habermas, it is the process of uncoerced deliberation that justified and legitimises a procedure.\textsuperscript{xix} Kapoor suggests that while Habermas’ theory of communicative rationality grounds legitimacy in deliberation, Chambers’ pragmatism and empiricism fails to make this explicit, although it needs to presume a kind of Habermasian logic at least implicitly as PRA claims to provide a procedure to find legitimate decisions for a local collective based on uncoerced deliberation.\textsuperscript{x} PRA therefore qualifies as post-political aspiration as Mouffe defines it that displaces the core ontological dimension of Schmitt’s conception of the political, ie the friend–enemy distinction. In Mouffian logic, such displacement of the political potentially nurtures the rise of even deeper antagonisms, rather than ‘taming’ antagonism into agonism.

However, Mouffe’s position has also been criticised. Several scholars writing critically on PRA have found in her work a tendency to essentialise and romanticise the local.\textsuperscript{xvi} Mouffe also tends to overplay the value of antagonism (turned agonism), while there may be manifold affective registers of temporalities in ‘being with others’.\textsuperscript{xix} The political is also taking place in practices of temporarily connecting with spatially close and distant others through affective modes of hospitality, generosity and compassion. Mouffe’s celebration of antagonisms turned agonisms, as the procedural logic of the ontologically given friend–enemy distinction of the political, fails to provide a convincing alternative rule-making system that can be applied in political practice. Kapoor concludes that ‘Mouffe and Habermas’s First World democratic theories ... can be projected onto other parts of the world only up to a point’ – given the specific conditions we find in postcolonial societies that are
socio-economic inequality, state–society relations and continual subjugation to the West - and finds
in their work a ‘(complicit) silence ... on Western imperialism/colonialism’. xxiii

Kapoor’s critique suggests that the question of PRA is not primarily its take on legitimation and
adjudication procedures that implants values and practices of deliberative democracy in the space-
time container of the PRA workshop. PRA as laboratory of procedural experiments for ’bottom-up
development’ may have had its place in the minds of well-meaning scholar-activists, but through its
reification, through its becoming a mainstream method of ‘development’, it has lost its innocence.
‘Development’ has not remained a temporary project, but has become a permanent presence in
many postcolonial countries. PRA was one of the technologies, instruments to make ‘development’
appear more participatory, more empowering, more collaborative. This is what I have called the
reification of PRA in ‘development’. The bounded space of PRA as experimental site of the island of
development has become porous, blurring the boundary between ‘development’ and ‘politics’. The
problem is therefore not, as Mouffe may suggest, that PRA as post-political aspiration displaces the
political. Following Kapoor, it could be argued that PRA as a technology of ‘developmental’ rule –
among other technologies – contributes to the creation of a new sovereign. This new sovereign is
being created in the time-space container of a state of exception that is celebrated in the PRA
‘event’.

PRA’s decisionism and exceptionalism

PRA is designed as an event (the ‘workshop’) that brings about a decision – a decision on how to act
as a collective or – in the developmental language - a ‘community.’ And this decision is made in a
state of exception – a post-political space that is placed outside the space of ‘politics’ – it is the
‘provided’ space Cornwall alludes to (Cornwall 2004). This ‘outside’ is based on the primacy of
making a decision. The PRA ‘event’ is a performative act that brings about a decision in a space of
exception – it is an exceptional act taken outside of the ‘normal’ arena of politics. PRA defines an
exceptional rule by claiming to transcend the space of ‘conventional’ politics and by bringing about a
decision in this outside space. PRA thereby creates a state of exception as locus wherein a new
sovereign is being instituted.

In Carl Schmitt’s famous dictum, ‘sovereign is he who decides on the exception’, xxiv the problem of
sovereignty is grounded in the essence of the legal form, i.e. that a decision is being made. xxv The
Schmittian paradox is that what can be considered as the last resort of a sovereign, to declare the
state of exception, to annul (temporarily) the rule of law and the constitutional order, becomes the
defining moment of (the constitutional) order itself. Schmitt grounds (legitimate) rule in an event:
the decision. PRA uses the decision that is performed in the event ‘PRA’ as a source of legitimating its
rule. In this sense, PRA embodies a Schmittian decisionism and exceptionalism and becomes the
stage of the expressive realisation of the unity of an authentic community. This event creates ‘true’
representation compared to merely ‘mechanical’ types of representation that are common in the
spaces of ‘conventional’ politics. PRA as depoliticised technology of ‘participation’ becomes a
punctual act of will. xxvi Of course, in PRA, decision is not a punctual act of heroic individualistic will,
but an authentic punctual act of collective will, of a Hegelian kind of collective subjectivity that is
instituted in the act of decision.

This Schmittian type of decisionism that permeates PRA is designed as exceptionalism. Agamben’s
writings on the undecidability of rule and exception, the blurring of its distinction are useful here to
expose the implicit dangers of PRA as exceptionalism. Giorgio Agamben defines the state of
exception as ‘... a “state of law” in which, on the one hand, the norm is in force [vige], but is not
applied (it has no “force” [forza]) and, on the other, acts that do not have the value [valore] of law
acquire its “force”’. Agamben formulates here the following paradox: the state of exception is an
anomic place in which what is at stake is a force-of-law without law. In this space, potentiality and
act are radically separated: the state of exception creates a situation in which the norm is in force,
but not applied and, on the other hand, acts that do not have the value of law acquire its ‘force’. xxvii

Carl Schmitt had located the spatiality of the exception in a container space, defining exception as a
suspension of all law for a certain time and in a certain space. For Agamben, the logic of exception is first of all topological, it is ‘unlocalisable’. The exception as a zone of indistinction where law and its suspension are indistinguishable, is a logic or technique of power and governmentality that comes into effect – becomes territorialised - in particular geographical spaces. It is a technique that merges exception and rule, natural order and law, outside and inside.

Arguably, PRA and the post-political aspiration have elements of both, Schmittian decisionism and the Agambian figure of exception. PRA creates a state of exception where the law and the political order are temporarily suspended, whereas other acts (such as PRA) acquire the force of law. PRA operates in a space that Agamben calls the zone of indistinction. ‘Development’ is no longer negotiated in the conventional spaces of politics, for example through the clan rule of a Chief and his elders or the procedures of an elected local council, but in the post-political space of deliberation that is constituted through the PRA procedures. This post-political space of exception is defined and executed through procedures, rules and actors outside of the space of conventional politics, such as PRA facilitators or development experts. PRA becomes the event and space where a decision is – finally - made.

This state of exception is at first sight localised in the container space of the PRA ‘workshop’ But the state of exception spills over the boundaries of this container space. But contrary to Schmitt’s idea of the exception being bound in time and space, PRA operates in a space that Agamben calls the zone of indistinction. Agamben suggests, following Walter Benjamin’s dictum, that ‘the state of exception has become the rule’. What is designed as exceptionalism – PRA as a state of exception, an event where a decision is made – becomes the ‘norm.’ PRA does not remain confined to a temporary exception, spatially confined to a project ‘island’ – the ‘carefully controlled arenas’ of participation. PRA is continuously performed, at different occasions, in various places and times. PRA then becomes one of the places where a new order is constituted – the permanent state of exception that ‘development’ imposes and that permeates many post-colonial countries. It reproduces a situation where the ‘norm’ is in force, but not applied (the post-colonial ‘local’ order) and acts that
do not have the value of law, in this case PRA and subsequently the ‘development’ rule, acquire its
force. PRA is not restricted to a singular event that suspends the order in a temporally and spatially
bounded space, but becomes a topological figure, a form of relation.\textsuperscript{xxxiii} PRA becomes a permanent
exceptionalism that undergirds the rule of ‘development’ under the guises of ‘participation’ and
‘empowerment,’ a perpetuated rule over post-colonial societies.

The PRA container is not the punctual act of will of a sovereign bounded in time and space of the PRA
‘workshop’ as a Schmittian reading may suggest. Rather, the PRA container has become porous,
leaking into both directions inside and outside of the bounded space of exception that the PRA
container attempts to construct. The boundaries between rule (postcolonial order) and exception
(development) thereby become blurred. The exception has become the rule.

\textbf{Is PRA dangerous?}

Does the above argument not confuse facts and normative claims? It implicitly suggests that what is
already ‘there’ seems to have a \textit{per se} higher legitimacy than what is coming from outside, not yet
‘there’ – or more precisely – what is ‘there’ (the postcolonial order) does not have to explicitly justify
its legitimacy, while the ‘new’ PRA has to do so. Already Philosopher David Hume warned in his
\textit{Treatise of Human Nature} that whenever an ought is derived from an is, when a normative
statement is derived from a descriptive statement, one needs to provide reasons for doing so.\textsuperscript{xxxiv}

There are two answers to this caveat. First, I have argued that PRA is performed as an event where a
decision is made. Thereby, it constructs a state of exception that places PRA outside, beyond the
rule. In Schmittian terms, this power to declare such a state of exception, to annul – albeit
temporarily – the current order, becomes the defining moment, or event of sovereign power. But I
have gone on to argue with Agamben that in the practice of PRA within the international aid regime,
PRA becomes a permanent exceptionalism that legitimates ‘development’ as ‘the will to improve’
at the expense of post-colonial sources of legitimacy, power and rule. This leads to an undecidability
of rule and exception, its distinction becomes blurred. This is why I agree with Ilan Kapoor that PRA is
(potentially) dangerous. The danger, however, does not only emerge from self-indulgent narcissism
and benevolent paternalism of external ‘facilitators’ as Kapoor suggests, but also from the blurring of
boundaries between rule and exception that obfuscates the sources of legitimacy upon which a
decision that PRA produces is based.xxxv

One could also argue that PRA is only a marginal (meaning unimportant) political technology applied
at the margins of power, at the peripheral politics of the post-colonial state, at the rather subaltern
spaces of the global development industry. Why should we bother about the legitimacy of PRA and
its decisional acts if those decisions only have limited impacts on livelihoods of people and the power
configurations of a post-colonial state? The marginalisation thesis, however, runs counter to the
transformative claims of ‘empowerment,’ even though these may only be applied at the margins. It is
arguable that PRA is only one among a large set of political technologies that endeavour to bring
‘participation,’ ‘empowerment’ and ‘transformative powers’ as a more sympathetic face to
‘development’ as ‘the will to improve’. Again, the danger of PRA emerges from its undermining and
blurring the boundaries between rule and exception, between postcolonial order and ‘development’.

Any decision is oriented towards an urgent imperative to act. This imperative is trapped in a
Schmittian vitalistic decisionism that foregrounds an exceptionalism. The decision becomes an
exceptional act. PRA as a technological performance and event of a collective decision embodies this
exceptionalism. Sure, Carl Schmitt had the sovereign in mind who institutes the law through a
decision, not a deliberatively taken decision by a collective. But while deliberation is the constituting
pillar of the PRA space of decision, the logic of PRA nurtures decisionism and exceptionalism because
PRA is part of the project of ‘development.’ This project of ‘development’ creates a permanent state
of exception as the perpetuation of a project that understands ‘underdevelopment’ as something
that needs to be overcome through exceptional measures – in order to reach ‘development’ as
normal state of affairs in the future. PRA is a political technology that infuses ‘participation’ and
‘empowerment’ into this project of ‘development.’ PRA is co-opted into the mainstream project of
'development' and is therefore not a depoliticised form of transformative power. It is deeply implicated in the political project of 'development' as vitalistic decisionism exercised in a state of exception that has become permanent and permeates beyond the bounded space of a singular event.

6 Conclusion

PRA has held a lot of promise for 'the will to improve' that we find in 'development'. PRA has been a paradoxical technique, though. While it suggested a very political act of 'improvement' — towards empowerment and social transformation — the means to achieve these ends have been post-political when it comes to PRA as a technique. Post-political in a Mouffian sense whereby a consensus based technique of governing sought to displace both politics and the political from development. But this move to render participation non-political has been deeply political. The problem with PRA's post-political aspiration has not primarily been that it displaces the political from development, though. Rather, it could be argued that PRA has contributed to the creation of a new sovereign.

Rendering participation technical through PRA required the establishment of a new sovereign in the form of a state of exception. PRA became a well-bounded time-space container (the 'event'), where this state of exception of developmental rule was being exercised. The decision that is performed in this time-space container becomes the legitimating source for the expressive realisation of the unity of an authentic community. PRA becomes a collective punctual act of will, where in a state of exception, law and political order of the postcolonial state are temporarily suspended. But PRA has not remained confined to small islands. Combined with other developmental techniques, it has become one of the places where a new order is constituted – the permanent state of exception that 'development' and 'improvement' require as long as underdevelopment prevails. This state of exception has become the rule.
Already in *Geschichtsphilosophische Thesen*, Walter Benjamin suggested that the state of exception has become the rule. Benjamin saw in the state(s) of exception of his time (the Weimar republic and the Nazi regime) the exercise of the monopoly of legality and the coercive power of ‘law.’ In contrast to these states of exception that were merely masking the exercise of existent powers, Benjamin’s endeavour was to bring about a real state of exception as a revolutionary act.

Benjamin celebrates here a vitalist decisionism that can be found in Schmitt’s writings (and was the fertile ground for the hidden conversations between Schmitt and Benjamin in the 1920s). PRA, to some extent, also alludes to such Schmittian decisionism in a space of exception, but it does not engage in a revolutionary act. It is a post-political space of exception that incorporates consensus in the very act of decision. The paradox of PRA is, then, that it appears as post-political container of deliberative democracy in a Mouffian sense, and is, at the same time, deeply political by playing into the project of ‘development’ and ‘improvement’. This project of ‘development’ needs the post-colonial state as its spatial container wherein ‘development’ is performed, while it displaces the post-colonial state as the space of politics where decisional acts are being performed.

Jacques Derrida writes that a decision ‘... can only come into being in a space that exceeds the calculable programme’ that would destroy all responsibility by transforming it into a programmable effect of determinate causes’ (my emphasis). In Jacques Derrida’s notion, undecidability opens up the condition of responsible, autonomous action in a space that exceeds a calculable programme. Undecidability signals the impossibility of responsible action that is saturated through knowledge. Decision in Derrida’s notion includes an element of radical passivity; it is a response to a claim that exceeds what can be known. Development cannot wait, though. In *The Will to Improve*, Tania Li cites a development expert saying: ‘... we still have to do something, we can’t just give up.’ The task of improvement is a condition that requires exceptional acts. ‘Underdevelopment’ creates the source of urgency, to undergird the ‘responsibility to act’ that legitimates PRA as a post-political space of exception and nurtures the will to improve.
Notes


5 A Cornwall, ‘Spaces of transformation?’, pp 75-91.


Kapoor, ‘Participatory Development, Complicity and Desire’, Third World Quarterly, 26(8), 2005, pp 1203-1220;
M Kesby, ‘Spatialising participatory approaches: the contribution of geography to a mature debate’,


G Agamben, ‘Homo Sacer. Sovereign Power and Bare Life’.


