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## **Participatory embeddedness and democratic deepening: Feminist Subaltern Counterpublics (The cases of Ripollet (DR) in Catalonia and Etxebarri (LVP) in the Basque Country)**

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### **Abstract**

The objective of this research is to analyze how participatory embeddedness through Feminist Subaltern Counterpublics is related to democratic deepening. To this end, two cases have been selected in the towns of Ripollet (Catalonia) and Etxebarri (Basque Country) developing a multi-method design that triangulates interviews, a direct observation and a discussion group. After applying a cross-case analysis, the findings reveal how the practical and spatial dimensions produce temporary rooting oriented towards democratic deepening from a gender perspective. Firstly, the dissolution of the public/private tension leads to inclusive practices and –therefore– to the politicization of subjects and problems previously excluded from the public sphere. Secondly, the institutionalization processes of social movements can favor spaces of hybridization where the concerns of the subalternized are mobilized in order to –thirdly– be transformed into public policies sustained over time.

### **Key words**

Participatory embeddedness; Feminist Subaltern Counterpublics; democratic deepening

### **Resumen**

El objetivo de esta investigación es analizar cómo se relaciona el arraigo participativo a través de los Contrapúblicos Subalternos Feministas con la profundización democrática. Para ello, se han seleccionado dos casos en los municipios

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de Ripollet (Catalunya) y Etxebarri (País Vasco) desarrollando un diseño multimétodo que triangula entrevistas; una observación directa y un grupo de discusión. Tras aplicar un análisis de casos cruzados, los hallazgos revelan cómo las dimensiones prácticas y de espacios producen enraizamiento temporal orientado a la profundización democrática desde una perspectiva de género. En primer lugar, la disolución de la tensión público/privada conduce a prácticas inclusivas y –por tanto– a la politización de sujetos y problemas anteriormente excluidos de la esfera pública. En segundo lugar, los procesos de institucionalización de movimientos sociales pueden favorecer espacios de hibridación en donde las preocupaciones del tejido social subalternizado son movilizadas para –en tercer lugar– ser transformadas en políticas públicas sostenidas en el tiempo.

### **Palabras clave**

Arraigo participativo; Contrapúblicos Subalternos Feministas; profundización democrática

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## 1. Problematization

### 1.1. Institutionalization and de-democratization processes

Throughout the literature, the notion of institutionalization has been defined as the trajectory of a collective actor configured as a social/community movement towards its entry into/alliance with formal representative institutions (Klandermans *et al.* 1998). That is: the idea of institutionalization is a dynamic and complex intersection in which community and formal institutions intersect.

However, both the Theory of Political Party Organizations and different perspectives within the literature on social movements – specifically the Entrepreneurial Approach and the Political Process perspective – continue to link the consequences of institutionalization with processes that are negatively related to the idea of democracy. More specifically, they associate institutionalization with de-democratization defined in two senses: in its (i) organizational aspect – elitist professionalization and formalization –; and in its (ii) aspect related to collective action: demobilization and loss of transformative capacity.

Firstly – in its organizational aspect – the Theory of Political Party Organizations has come to link the idea of institutionalization with a loss in the internal democracy of the structures in the sense of tendencies towards elitist professionalization (Michels 1915, 138; Duverger 1957, 31–32; Kirchheimer 1966, 190; Rohrschneider 1994, 209; Gunther and Diamond 2003, 177; Krouwel 2006, 250). Where “the goals of politics become more self-referential, with politics becoming a profession in itself” (Katz and Mair 1993 and 1995, 19) to the detriment of militant affiliation or civic participation.

Meanwhile, according to the Entrepreneurial Approach of the literature on social movements, institutionalization tends to shape an authority (Seippel 2001, 125) conducive to maintaining positions (Rupp and Taylor 1987; Zald and Ash 1966, 327–328; Gamson 1990, 91–95; Giugni and Passy 1998; Suh 2011, 450) which prioritize the organization's own survival (McCarthy and Zald 1977).

Whereas the dynamic perspective of the Political Process maintains that institutionalized activists are absorbed into the institution (Coglianese 2001, 113–114) and “enter into relationships of convenience with the authorities (...) or become bureaucrats of social movement in the pay of the organization” (Kriesi 1999, 247), more interested in promoting their own organizations, careers and profits than in the welfare of their supposed constituencies (Coglianese 2001; Tilly 2004, 2010).

To this idea is added the fact that the literature on social movements – the Entrepreneurial Approach and the Political Process perspective – have defined institutionalization as formalization, relating it in a negative way to the idea of democracy. This is because, by formalization, both currents refer to how institutionalized social movements “become more formalized organizations over time” (Seippel 2001, 125). In the sense that “the traditional way is to move from a loosely ordered movement to an organization more formalized in structure: losing in normative foundations and gaining in formal structures and procedures” (Kriesi 1999, 247, Seippel 2001, 127; Morgan 2007, 281 cited in Pavan 2017, 437).

While secondly, and considering now the aspect related to collective action, much of the existing literature persists in analyzing institutionalization with de-democratization by linking and defining the latter as “co-optation” (Cloward and Piven 1977; Tarrow 1994; Coglianesi 2001, 113–114), demobilization, quietude, inaction, passivity and immobility (Wilson 1973, Jung 2010, 25, Andrew 2010). These are interpreted as the natural death of “organizations oriented to change and social justice” (Andrew 2010, 609), as a result of what has come to be understood as the stabilization of parties and social movements in institutional structures. Dynamics that lead to the social uprooting of political participation and therefore erode the idea of democratic deepening (Ureta 2022).

In short, the literature on both political parties and social movements generally understands that the idea of institutionalization leads to projects that erode the idea of democratic deepening. This is due to the fact that they focus on how social organizations make use of internal democracy as a device for their own survival and accommodation within formal institutions; rather than understanding social organizations as critical and counter-powerful agents of social transformation (Zald and Ash 1966, Katz and Mair 1995). In other words: much of the work concentrates its energies on relating the idea of institutionalization to the sophistication of formal procedures and how these determine democratic processes and decisions (Bussu *et al.* 2022) to the point of leading to the uprooting and disappearance of the transformative power of social movements and community spaces (Bussu *et al.* 2022).

### *1.2. Institutionalization processes linked to participatory embeddedness: dimensions oriented towards democratic deepening.*

However, recent research problematizes these excessively rigid and unidirectional interpretations and advocates a more complex analysis of the idea of institutionalization. This does not necessarily have to be analogous to tendencies towards de-democratization. In other words, institutionalization not always reproduce the negative effects of elitist professionalization, formalization and the stagnation of critical collective mobilization. The relationship between the processes of institutionalization and the idea of democratic deepening depends on its orientation towards participatory embeddedness or disembeddedness. That is: institutionalization could not be negative in itself “rather it is the way in which it facilitates or hinders embeddedness that can revitalize democratic institutions or deplete participatory energy” (Santos and Avritzer 2005 cited in Bussu *et al.* 2022, 136).

The idea of institutionalization can therefore focus on “social justice and democratic deepening” (Bua and Bussu 2021, 717) to the extent that this process produces entrenchment and embeddedness in the community; that is, to the extent that it produces embeddedness. Participatory embeddedness is defined by following a bottom-up logic that starts from social mobilization towards “the recovery and reinvention of participatory structures to pursue transformative aspirations” (Blanco *et al.* 2020). In order to build and reproduce institutions integrated in/with/for the community, which “exist in a cycle of mutual support with their environment” (Bussu *et al.* 2022, 135) through hybrid processes where “invented spaces of citizenship interact with formal institutions” (Bua and Bussu 2021, 719).

Thus, this paper assumes that the idea of institutionalization has an ambivalent relationship with democratic deepening insofar as it can have a double facet: on the one hand – as much of the literature points out – it can be directed towards the self-referentiality of institutions and the search for the legitimization of political decisions in order to remain in formal structures. This produces disengagement with respect to the community and – therefore – disconnection and disembeddedness in relation to popular mobilization and social demands. On the other hand, institutionalization can also be linked to democratic deepening to the extent that it promotes the rooting of highly inclusive political practices and spaces that make community and institution intersect in a lasting way. Thereby allowing for broader political change, in the sense of influencing public policies throughout different political cycles.

What now remains to be understood from a qualitative viewpoint is how and in what sense participatory embeddedness is related to democratic deepening. Or, in other words, how this embeddedness is materialized in social reality and how it contributes to democratic deepening. Therefore, the research question of this paper is: How is participatory embeddedness related to the idea of democratic deepening? A question that aspires to be answered through three interconnected dimensions: (i) the practical dimension referring to concrete practices of embeddedness, both informal and formal (Bussu *et al.* 2022, 134–139). (ii) The spatial dimension, which analyzes how citizenship can “influence a variety of decision-making spaces and the extent to which participation connects these decision-making spaces to broader civil society” (Bussu *et al.* 2022, 138). And finally, (iii) the temporal dimension, avoiding examining only the institutional characteristics of the participatory process. Including, as well, how the connection occurs across different “normative cycles and political communities with which it interacts” (Bussu *et al.* 2022, 137), encompassing “several policy issues rather than being limited to a single issue” (Bussu *et al.* 2022, 138)

But – in addition – this research questions the relationship between participatory embeddedness and democratic deepening by integrating the gender perspective. Given that the possibilities of participation and enlargement of the public sphere linked to embeddedness are widened by applying a feminist reading. This is because dissolving the public/private distinction on which participation in the institutionalized public sphere has traditionally been built, implies breaking with the idea that “impartiality and universality correspond to the public sphere, while partiality and particularity have come to be assigned to the private sphere” (Martínez-Palacios 2017, 41). By diluting this distinction, participatory horizons committed to democratic deepening are broadened; as processes of politicization and transit towards the public interest are mobilized (Angell 1993, 316). Activating the integration and rooting “with greater intensity of more people in political life” (Serra and Ubasart 2019, 73)

## 2. Participatory embeddedness and Feminist Subaltern Counterpublics

Thus, the paper considers it suggestive to intersect the idea of participatory embeddedness with Feminist Subaltern Counterpublics, which are defined as “parallel discursive arenas where subordinate individuals and social groups construct and circulate counter-discourses from which to formulate oppositional interpretations regarding their identities, interests and needs” (Fraser 1990, 123).

Feminist Subaltern Counterpublics are spaces that have a denser relationship with the idea of embeddedness because: (i) attending to the dimension related to practices, Feminist Subaltern Counterpublics are characterized by a greater integration of practices of subordinated groups that are recognized in a set of political exclusions with respect to participation and the traditional public sphere (Guha and Spivak 1988; Felski 1989, 171; Squires 2002, 446 and 452; Dube 2011, 218). (ii) In their spatial dimension they have a dual mission not only as “spaces of retreat and regrouping” (Mansbridge 1996, 47, Squires 2002, 458, Karpowitz *et al.* 2009, 579–582) “but also as bases and training grounds for agitation activities aimed at broader publics” (Fraser 1996, 117). While – finally – (iii) in its temporal dimension, the durability of Feminist Subaltern Counterpublics in time goes beyond the deliberative instant (Martinez-Palacios 2017, 116) where there is a greater sustainability and resonance of change (Dube 2011, 228).

Therefore, Feminist Subaltern Counterpublics can be defined from the idea of embeddedness via the practical, spatial and temporal dimensions noted, as they are constituted as spaces of safety, encouragement and care – as “a room of one's own” (Martínez-Palacios 2017, 115) embedded and lasting in character; but also as an “extension of discursive contestation in offensive terms” (Weisser 2008, 610; Dube 2011, 218) confronting diverse forms of domination that demand practices oriented towards transformation and social change.

Bearing in mind therefore all these concerns, the research question is refined and nuanced, crystalizing into: How is the participatory embeddedness of the Feminist Subaltern Counterpublics related to the idea of democratic deepening? And in order to answer the research question, we will make use of the three dimensions of embeddedness: practical, spatial and temporal.

### 3. Methodological approach

#### 3.1. Research design: methodological strategy based on revealing cases

The research strategy is based on the selection of two revealing cases (Ragin 2004) of Feminist Subaltern Counterpublics: the first one embedded in the community of Ripollet (Catalonia) and the second one in the municipality of Etxebarri (Basque Country). More specifically, both cases are integrated with the communities and have come to intersect their struggles to the point of making them permeable with the institutional agenda of the local governments of *Decidim Ripollet* (2015–2023) and *La Voz del Pueblo* in Etxebarri (1991–present).

It is therefore selected – first of all – a Feminist Subaltern Counterpublic that links its claims with the local government of *Dedicim Ripollet* as a revealing case in the Metropolitan Area of Barcelona (2015–2023), specifically in the “large” municipality of Ripollet, of about 36,000 inhabitants. The reasons behind this choice is that this Feminist Subaltern Counterpublic builds alliances with *Decidim Ripollet*, an organization object of institutionalization processes (Ureta 2022) formed by a set of collective agents and social movements: (i) the COP-CpR, a rupturist force with representation in the City Council since 1979 that emerges from union struggles and for the rights to health, education and solidarity; (ii) *En Comú Podem Ripollet* as a political party with a shorter trajectory (iii) *Alternativa de Catalunya*, a confederation of “alternative, combative and class-based”

unions, (iv) the social movement *Procés Constituent* (v) *Mai Més Antifeixista* as a local movement for Historical Memory (vi) the *Front d'Alliberament Gai*, in favour of the struggles for the rights of the LGTBI+ collective; (vi) as well as people on an individual basis who participate in social movements. Among them, the active spokesperson of the *Plataforma Antideshaucios* of Ripollet and Cerdanyola del Vallès; activists from the Ripollet feminist movement –members of the Feminist Subaltern Counterpublic – or diverse profiles within the Ripollet cultural and associative arena.

In parallel, we take into consideration a Feminist Subaltern Counterpublic as a revelatory case active at the municipal level in Etxebarri, a medium-sized town in the Metropolitan Area of Bilbao (13,000 inhabitants) governed by *La Voz del Pueblo*. It is an organization that also comes from institutionalization processes (Ureta 2022). Due to the fact that since the 1960s, it has been working in the town as a revindicative urban movement, combating socio-cultural deficiencies given the institutional neglect. The feeling of grievance and collective struggle crystallized in the Association of Families and – later – in the Popular Assembly (1990) which promoted several protest actions that solidified in *La Voz del Pueblo*, an institutionalized organization which in 1991 reached the local government.

Therefore, I select two established Feminist Subaltern Counter-Publics operating within municipalities governed by the movement-parties *Decidim Ripollet* and *La Voz del Pueblo*, political organizations arising from social movements which have been object of processes of institutionalization.

### 3.2. Data collection

The design is multi-method with a combination strategy (Bericat 1998, 107) where the results of the application of qualitative techniques – personal, holistic and semi-structured in-depth interviews – serve as a preliminary step to apply subsequent qualitative techniques: a direct observation and a focus group.

First, two in-depth interviews (E1; E2) were conducted with activists from both Feminist Subaltern Counterpublics, which allowed us to build relationships of trust and credibility with the key informants. All this allowed us to get “into the field” in order to apply the techniques of direct observation and focus group.

In combination, a direct observation (O1) was applied in the Subaltern Feminist Counterpublic of Ripollet, a suitable technique for: (i) its pluralistic understanding (Blatter and Haverland 2012); (ii) because it is an exploratory work (Ízcara-Palacios 2014) and because it allows (iii) a direct immersion (Ruiz-Olabuénaga 2007) in the social and dynamic world (Ízcara-Palacios 2014) working on the ground where real life unfolds.

Finally, a focus group (G1) was implemented in the Feminist Subaltern Counterpublic of Etxebarri. A technique defined by the “generation of pre-existing real micro-situations” (Bloor *et al.* 2000, 22) configured around a specific topic (Callejo 2001, Ízcara-Palacios 2014). It allows collecting data and interpreting them in order to know the discursive frames (Bloor *et al.* 2001, 17), to set itself up as a vehicle for public participation and democratization of knowledge (Bloor *et al.* 2001, 18). As well as a means for collective mobilization and social transformation (Farquhar 1999, Bloor *et al.* 2001); since resorting



to this technique allows “giving voice” to groups traditionally excluded/expelled from the public and official deliberative sphere (Morgan 1996).

### 3.3. *Techniques of information analysis*

Processes of (i) immersion (Bloor *et al.* 2000); (ii) simplification (Ízcarra-Palacios 2014) and (iii) theoretical operationalization have been followed, taking into account the dimensions of participatory embeddedness: the practical, spatial and temporal dimensions.

Once this work has been carried out, a cross-case data analysis is applied, promoting dialogue between commonalities – significant connections – and divergences in the processes of participatory embeddedness of two Feminist Subaltern Counter-publics in municipalities where the hybrid organizations *Decidim Ripollet* and *La Voz del Pueblo* govern (Yin 1981, 108; Khan and Vanwynsberghe 2008). The cross-case analysis allows developing and relating concepts (Eckstein 1975, Ragin 2004); demonstrating that the effects in the selected cases are in fact sufficiently similar to be treated as part of the same phenomenon, due to their “mutual illuminations” (Khan and Vanwynsberghe 2008, 5).

Information gained from rich holistic cases is thus put at the service of broader objectives (Khan and Vanwynsberghe 2008) producing analytical generalizations (Borman *et al.* 1986, 48; Miles and Huberman 1994) and new emerging knowledge (Khan and Vanwynsberghe 2008, 4–5). Since the role of Feminist Subaltern Counterpublics in the construction of participatory embeddedness has not been analyzed yet, this undoubtedly represents a contribution that can be extrapolated to other contexts.

## 4. Research findings

### 4.1. *Feminist Subaltern Counterpublics in Ripollet and Etxebarri*

The non-mixed Feminist Subaltern Feminist Counter-public called *Asamblea de Dones* of Ripollet was born in 2019: it is a space configured by complex identities of 30 women whose ages range from thirty to fifty years old. All the participants recognize being traversed by the sex/gender power system by detecting “the difficulties of political participation and conciliation for women” (E1). While – on the other hand – the non-mixed Feminist Subaltern Counter-public *Iñurtxi* emerged in 2012 as a feminist movement of reference in Etxebarri and is characterized by building a non-mixed political space of about 15 women between 40 and 50 years old.

Both Feminist Subaltern Counterpublics build spaces that emerge from the community and go beyond the moment of deliberation to consistently advance towards processes of political change sustained over time from a gender perspective. This is due to the fact that – on the one hand – the *Asamblea de Dones* of Ripollet is an active space which holds frequent meetings and whose nature is retroductive as it comes from the feminist movement (bottom-up) but at the same time is supported by *Decidim Ripollet*, which legitimizes this alternative public as a decision-making space integrated into the structures of the organization.

Meanwhile, the *Iñurtxi* of Etxebarri is also solid in defensive and offensive dynamics, a mechanism that has an irruptive nature as it emerges from the community of Etxebarri, but – unlike what happens in Ripollet – this Feminist Subaltern Counterpublic is not part

of the internal reticular structures of *La Voz del Pueblo*. However – and despite the fact that *Iñurtxi* (Etxebarri) has a more autonomous relationship with respect to *La Voz del Pueblo* –; its participants claim to feel required and to work on initiatives that are gradually being taken into account: “We are the critical voice, because we have to be, but we also collaborate with the local government and we take advantage of this collaboration” (G1).

Likewise (iii) the *Asamblea de Dones* of Ripollet operates as a double space (i) of care practices “where we all feel very comfortable, as a family” (O1) or “like at home” (O1) “where it is not difficult for us to participate. We feel better” (O1); and as (ii) a political organization aimed at mobilization and protest action, since its members propose to feminize and stretch the potentialities/possibilities of their participation embedded at an organizational, substantive and operative level. Since the Subaltern Feminist Counterpublic *Iñurtxi* (Etxebarri) is also situated in the discursive coordinates of (i) “being among us and taking care of each other” (G1) as a space of trust and mutual support that makes participation more inclusive in terms of practices; but also as (ii) feminist action movement in the municipality: “We are the critical voice, all day long claiming” (G1) in relation to the institutionalization of the feminist agenda.

#### 4.2. Dimension regarding practices: the public/private separation in the face of integration, politicization and amplification

The authors (Bussu *et al.* 2022) analyze the practical dimension of participatory embeddedness by considering not only the formal design, but also the informal integration practices. However, this paper – by adding a gender-sensitive critical perspective – points out how breaking with the public/private tension makes it possible to delve even deeper into informal and formal integration practices. In this way, we can indeed consider “structures traditionally linked to the domestic sphere – such as care or one’s mood” – (Martínez-Palacios 2017, 53) and which the dominant discourse of participation had relegated to private matters “erasing histories, experiences and material realities” (Weisser 2008, 614).

First, the informal practices of integration made visible after separating the public/private spheres are addressed. Both Feminist Subaltern Counter-Publics emphasize “the personal experience to question the distinctions between what is considered public and what is considered private” (Weisser 2008, 614) validating affection, intimacy and emotion in participation. To this end, the *Asamblea de Dones* of Ripollet begins the day with a space enlivened with snacks, which helps to make participation appetizing “to begin calmly, but with motivation” (O1). Before each meeting, the *Iñurtxi* activists from Etxebarri share their own products. All this as a way of supporting and relieving moments of “unburdening” (G1) where they “get close” by sharing their concerns, and where they also build practices of care and affection. It is also a way to receive and connect with the most recent activists who have been progressively joining the Feminist Subaltern Counter-Public (G1).

The participatory process continues with lengthy and in-depth introductions aimed at informing – above all – about the “vital moment that women activists are going through and their relationship with participation, which leads them to reflect on their degree of commitment and expectations, as well as their own doubts about participating” (Ureta

2022, 155) allowing them to “express insecurity and fear (...) and emotional expressions” (Martínez-Palacios 2017, 49). A moment of trust that operates as “discharge” and as “encouragement” in which activists find understanding and support: “Now you are comfortable. Before, if you went out and participated in other mainstream spaces, it required an effort to say, well, what I am going is valuable or... Am I still going to say four silly things? In this case, you stayed at home” (G1).

By separating the public/private distinction of participation and recognizing emotionality, displays of affection, eye contact, first-person narratives and rhetoric, practices previously displaced to the realm of the personal are politicized. Integrating new legitimate ways of participating, expanding the very idea of taking part. For example: during one participatory process in the *Asamblea de Dones* of Ripollet, a woman was explaining a project by interweaving it with her personal experience related to functional diversity, when she began to cry while other women participants showed her affection in the form of hugs. While in *Iñurtxi* (Etxebarri), another woman expressed an emotional situation regarding her son to gradually politicize her discourse from an individual and personal narrative to a public, collective and structural proposal, which is also an object of struggle.

For this reason, all activists highlight the importance of the role of Feminist Subaltern Counter-Publics, which allows identifying and politicizing “many negative feelings that women previously felt privately and individually regarding their participation and that were related to various forms of exclusion” (Martínez-Palacios 2017, 51).

Secondly, informal integration practices are combined with the formal design of the participatory space, and which is also oriented to deconstruct the public/private categories; that is: to feminize these alternative spaces. Firstly, the *Asamblea de Dones* of Ripollet has a nursery space with games and a caregiver in charge of the activists' children, helping to ensure that motherhood does not “swallow women in the domestic space, excluding them from the public sphere” (Martínez-Palacios 2017, 47) and that they can thus reconcile work and family life.

Secondly, attractive days and times are established for the activists: the women of Ripollet state that they meet “on Saturday mornings” (O1) and “we have pre-set times for coming and going, so that we can organize ourselves better” (O1). The feminist space *Iñurtxi* (Etxebarri) also takes good care of the days and times of the meetings “so that we all have time” (G1) and also assumes other types of measures to facilitate the participation and inclusion of women. For example, going to pick up the activists at their homes to accompany them together to the participatory space: “Shall we meet at the corner to head down?” (G1) with the aim of facilitating, since it is a measure that breaks down the distinctions between what is considered public affairs and those practices that had been relegated to the private sphere.

Overcoming the public/private distinction of participation, therefore, makes it possible to feminize spaces for subalternized activists to politicize informal and formal practices of integration previously excluded from mainstream participation. On the one hand, informal practices allow women to explore their issues on their own terms, giving “greater appreciation to the roles of emotion, narrative and rhetoric as valuable elements of civic reasoning” (Karpowitz *et al.* 2009, 577) and the sharing of emotions linked to personal moments. On the other hand, the practices referred to the formal designs of the

participatory space have allowed concrete measures that address “pains” that kept women confined to the private space, favouring reconciliation between work and family life.

The intersection of informal and formal practices interpreted from a gender perspective makes it possible to: (i) legitimize more inclusive forms of participation – narrative, rhetoric, emotion –; (ii) politicize problems previously considered personal; and (iii) broaden the public sphere by integrating traditionally subalternized subjects into the political process. These logics encourage participation mobilized from the community to “take root”, progressively connecting embeddedness with democratic deepening.

#### 4.3. Spatial dimension: influence and social power

Second, both Feminist Subaltern Counter-Publics are analyzed in their spatial dimension; that is: how they “influence a variety of decision-making spaces and how they connect these decision-making spaces to the broader civil society by incorporating social power” (Bussu *et al.* 2022, 138). Therefore, the focus is on spaces of mutual collaboration between community mobilization – Feminist Subaltern Counterpublics – and institutions – local governments of *Decidim Ripollet* and *La Voz del Pueblo* – oriented towards decisions with repercussions in the broader civil society.

In this sense, the degree of influence of the Feminist Counterpublic on *Decidim Ripollet* is greater, since the *Asamblea de Dones* has an organizational connection with this organization – although it stands as an autonomous apparatus– and the proposals that emerge from the feminist movement are recognized and included in the political project of the local government of Ripollet (see temporal dimension). That is why the influence of the *Asamblea de Dones* leads *Decidim Ripollet* to generate spaces of mutual collaboration and decision: (i) participation of women from the alternative feminist space in the local government, which translates into explicit political intentionality to make women of the Subaltern Feminist Counterpublic visible in the institutions; (iii) for which a specific council of Feminisms has been built as a space of mutual collaboration, decision and political reference (Gelambí 2015, 48) to influence the broader political process, as well as the (iv) The Women’s House of Ripollet (2021) and the (v) Feminist Training School, inclusive and open spaces that connect community and institution in order to collaborate, decide, design and co-produce public policies (Gelambí 2015, 48).

However, the degree of influence of *Iñurtxi* in *La Voz del Pueblo* is lower, since it is not part of the structure of *La Voz del Pueblo* and –therefore– has a lower degree of recognition: (i) “it does not have activists of the feminist movement who are also militants or institutional representatives, nor does it recognize the work from below through its own council of Feminisms” (Ureta 2022, 158). An idea that is related to (ii) scarce feminist training aimed at people with political responsibilities (Gelambí 2015, 51) which derives in less permeability of the institution towards demands with a gender perspective. However, *La Voz del Pueblo* does accept and promotes mutual collaboration with this feminist space through –mainly– (iii) the hiring (since 2019) of an Equality technician in charge of implementing the Equality Plan together with the feminist movement. The Equality Plan stands as a space to carry out “a pedagogical process, understanding from the different areas what it means to work from a gender

perspective” (Gelambí 2015, 48). Which “is done with certain solvency and political and technical responsibility” (E2).

The opening of the aforementioned spaces of mutual collaboration and decision with influence on the broader political process build “spaces of hybridization between community and institution” (Serra and Ubasart 2019, 70) that pursue to integrate and root in the community “alternative ways of doing politics” (Röcke 2014, 167). The mobilization of the Feminist Subaltern Counterpublics intersects with the permeability of *Decidim Ripollet* and *La Voz del Pueblo*, as these are organizations that come from processes of institutionalization of social movements (see methodological section). Therefore, both local governments are sensitive to integrate, extend and articulate the social struggles embedded in the community through spaces of influence and decision, since they come from the same vindicative arena. This shows that the processes of institutionalization of social movements that have crystallized in the organizations *Decidim Ripollet* and *La Voz del Pueblo* do not have to produce the paralysis of collective action. In this case, the opposite occurs, since the institutionalization of spaces acquires here an orientation towards participatory embeddedness: recovering, reinventing and rooting participatory structures that hybridize the mobilization of counter-power with the transformative capacity of institutions in the broader political process.

#### *4.4. Temporal dimension: effectiveness of “participatory products” and accountability*

The practical and spatial dimensions already addressed produce temporal embeddedness; which not only focuses attention on the institutional consistency of the participatory process, but on how sustainability over time manifests itself productively across different policy cycles (Bussu *et al.* 2022, 137) and encompassing “several issues rather than being limited to a single policy issue” (Bussu *et al.* 2022, 138).

It is important to know if broad problems politicized as unjust in both Feminist Subaltern Counterpublics and transferred to spaces of mutual collaboration between community and institution are finally resolved by local governments after their entry into the institutional agenda. This idea is related to whether the concerns discussed within both alternative publics and mobilized in spaces of mutual collaboration pass some filters to be transformed and implemented through public policies.

The Asamblea de Dones of Ripollet succeeded for the 2019–2023 electoral cycle in getting *Decidim Ripollet* to incorporate the strategy of gender mainstreaming in the set of public policies (Gelambí 2015, 46; Noel 2019, 113). At the programmatic level, these are the concrete actions that have come to be implemented as public policies emerging from the feminist movement: (i) within the “social justice” section, the creation of a Women's House and a Feminist Training School; days of visibility for women athletes, linking the “lilac feminist protocol with the LGTBI+ aggression protocol and promoting transversal knowledge of feminist policies in all councils, creation of a self-defense group, recognition and approach to other women's spaces, policies aimed at women in housing emergencies, spaces of rest and relief for women caregivers and opening time exchange banks (O1)” (Ureta 2022, 159).

Feminist public policies in the section named (ii) “democracy” include: decentralization of spaces for participation, empowerment policies for women who work in the Municipal Market under a masculinized management, construction of women's spaces

with a gender perspective in the neighborhoods to discuss participatory municipal budgets, use of non-sexist language and training in feminism for public servants and other workers of the local administration (O1) (Ureta 2022, 159). Meanwhile, in the programmatic block of (iii) “local development”, feminist proposals have been included, such as the implementation of “safe bus stops, as well as internal night bus, improved lighting in parks and adaptations of public space for people with functional diversity and different life cycles” (O1).

For its part, La Voz del Pueblo does not follow the same intensity and pace in relation to the effective resolution of the problems raised by the feminist movement and the incorporation of the gender perspective in public policies throughout different political cycles. First, the Feminist Subaltern Counterpublic of Etxebarri criticizes the fact that the local government relegates feminism to a single Department (Alfama *et al.* 2014, 79 cited in Gelambí 2015, 43) without applying the idea of gender mainstreaming. However – little by little and gradually – the proposals of the feminist movement are being reconciled with the public policies of the municipality sensitive to the gender perspective. Specifically, by working on the Equality Plan in the municipality on four axes: (i) empowerment of women; (ii) fight against sexist violence; (iv) governance with a gender perspective; and (v) highlighting the value of care, which means “co-responsibility and placing life at the center” (G1).

A task that has been subject to ruptures and discontinuities and in which La Voz del Pueblo has recognized the demands of Iñurtxi. Today, “we have already devised the campaign of the purple hands – in each hand there were three names of murdered women – and then a bigger campaign was launched. The fact is that we went with that idea and it has been a powerful campaign” (G1) that crosses with the initiative of the victims' account in the town square. “Little by little we are going to be taken more into account. Although we are always going to be the critical voice – that is what we are there for – we can also get a lot out of it by collaborating” (G1).

Gradually, the work of the Feminist Subaltern Counterpublic is being recognized in Etxebarri: actions such as “Wikimakumeok; this opened many doors for us and we promoted it ourselves: a project in which women referents throughout history were introduced in Wikipedia, starting with women from here, from the town itself” (G1); in addition to “feminist self-defense workshops” (G1), “workshops on sexuality with both boys and girls, separately” (G1); “workshops on fears for mothers” (G1); “the talks Yes I love myself” (G1); “projects we have for girls to study in Baltistan” (G1); “we are also working with microcredits in a project with women in Ghana; I mean, we help other women to get ahead” (G1) (see Ureta 2022, 161).

Therefore, and despite the differences between the two Counter-publics, the two cases have in common – with different intensity and pace – “connecting social movements with public policies and both with democracy” (Ibarra *et al.* 2002, 9). Or, more precisely, with the rooting and deepening of democracy. It will be in the coming years when further studies will analyze the true impact and scope of the work of both Feminist Counter-publics in collaborative spaces together with Decidim Ripollet and La Voz del Pueblo in relation to feminist public policies and which are now in a phase of co-design and implementation. In this sense, accountability or the return to the community of the results and effects of public policies stands as a key practice to favor the survival and

sustainability over time of participatory spaces – in this case the Feminist Subaltern Counterpublics – throughout different political cycles.

## 5. Final thoughts

### *5.1. Implications of the participatory embeddedness of Feminist Subaltern Counterpublics in relation to democratic deepening*

This paper began by problematizing how the literature had interpreted the idea of institutionalization in a restrictive and negative way in relation to democracy. It then included a shift that contemplates how institutionalization oriented towards participatory embeddedness can indeed engage with projects of democratic deepening. How? By looking from the bottom up and paying attention to how the mobilized community transfers its transformative aspirations to the institutions. The challenge has been to answer how and in what sense participatory embeddedness is related to democratic deepening, also including the gender perspective. A concern condensed in the following question: How is the participatory embeddedness of the Feminist Subaltern Counter-Publics related to the idea of democratic deepening? And in order to answer the research question, the three dimensions of embeddedness – practical, spatial and temporal – have been used (Bussu *et al.* 2022).

The cross-case analysis of both Feminist Subaltern Counterpublics allows us to understand in what sense the institutionalization oriented to participatory embeddedness contributes to democratic deepening from a gender-sensitive point of view. This main contribution of the article is detailed according to the dimensions of embeddedness – practical, spatial, temporal –.

At the practical level, the feminist spaces analyzed break with the public/private tension and are recognized as inclusive spaces through the “welcoming that enables the development of formulas to improve and sustain participatory projects over time” (Martínez-Palacios 2017, 126), rooting the intersection of informal and formal practices. Specifically through the (i) legitimization of more inclusive forms of participation – narration, rhetoric, emotion –; (ii) the politicization of problems previously considered personal and (iii) the amplification and extension of the public sphere by integrating subalternized subjects traditionally excluded from the political process. These tendencies encourage mobilized participation to take root in the community, progressively connecting with democratic deepening.

At the spatial level, the opening of “spaces” of mutual collaboration and decision making with influence in the broader political process – Council of Feminisms, Women's House, Feminist Training School and spaces of cooperation to work on the Plan of Equality – have integrated and embedded in the community processes of politicization. Since the mobilization of the Feminist Subaltern Counterpublics hybridizes with the porosity of *Decidim Ripollet* and *La Voz del Pueblo*, organizations that come from processes of institutionalization of social movements. Therefore, both governing movement-parties have been sensitive to integrate, extend, accompany and articulate the social demands embedded in the community through spaces of influence and decision. This shows that the processes of institutionalization of social movements do not necessarily delve into the death of mobilizing counter-power action. This work demonstrates an opposite

tendency, as the institutionalization of spaces acquires here an orientation towards embeddedness: recovering, reinventing and rooting participatory structures that intersect critical popular mobilization with the transformative capacity of institutions in the broader political process.

At the temporal level, this work maintains that only if embeddedness is produced through practices and spaces can temporary embeddedness be established. Therefore, the focus has been on the institutional consistency of the participatory process and sustainability over time in productive terms. Where the broad and heterogeneous concerns discussed within the two Subaltern Counter-Publics are mobilized in spaces of collaboration, co-design and co-production to be subsequently transformed into public policies. In the case of the Ripollet *Asamblea de Dones*, public policies related to the sections “democracy”, “social justice” and “local development” have been co-designed and co-implemented, including the gender mainstreaming strategy. While in the case of *Iñurtxi* (Etxebarri) feminist public policies have been co-designed and co-implemented through the municipality's Equality Plan, in addition to other initiatives emanating from the Counter-public itself: purple-hands campaign, victim-account, empowerment workshops and workshops against male violence, among others.

In addition, it is argued that the idea of accountability is indispensable for the temporal dimension. That is: the return to the community is essential in order to sustain over time and throughout different political cycles the embedded participation, as it keeps alive the dynamic intersection between community and institution. It is a way of feeding back the connection between social movements and institutions through public policies, which is linked to embeddedness and democratic deepening.

Therefore, how can the negative effects of institutionalization be neutralized in order to deepen democracy, taking into account the gender perspective? By focusing on projects that pursue and facilitate participatory embeddedness. Where – on the one hand – social mobilization is oriented to the reinvention of participation; while – on the other hand – work is rediscovered in spaces together with the institutions integrated in the community in a sustained way over time.

First, the gender perspective contributes by explaining how embedded participation can be reinvented: separating the public/private spheres that allow for the legitimization of more inclusive forms of participation – narrative, rhetoric, emotion –; politicization of problems previously considered personal; and amplification and extension of the public sphere by integrating subalternized subjects traditionally excluded from the political process.

Secondly, through the construction of spaces for mutual collaboration with institutions. Especially if these institutions are permeable to social struggles due to their hybrid character, coming from processes of institutionalization of social movements. That is: processes of institutionalization of social movements can generate trends that encourage mobilizing power through the creation of joint spaces capable of influencing the broader political process. This is an idea that challenges traditional interpretations of institutionalization processes.

Thirdly – and only if embeddedness has been produced in terms of practices and spaces – temporary embeddedness can be produced: sustainability of the participatory process



in productive terms. Where the broad and heterogeneous concerns of social agents are mobilized in spaces of collaboration, co-design and co-production to be subsequently transformed into public policies. The cycle closes with community accountability on how these demands have been transformed into public policies and their effects; in order to rekindle the momentum and the flame of community participation.

### *5.2. Recommendations, challenges and future lines of action related to participatory embeddedness*

The contributions of this research therefore lead us to rethink the theoretical operationalization of participatory embeddedness and its relationship with democratic deepening. In the first place, the introduction of the gender perspective narrows the connection between embeddedness and democracy. Secondly, it is useful to consider the effects of the processes of institutionalization of social movements in relation to the dynamism of collective action in the analysis of embeddedness. Third, the original authors of embeddedness (Bussu *et al.* 2022) had constructed its practical, spatial and temporal dimensions in an analogous way. However, from now on it is recommended not to treat these categories equivalently, since the dimensions produce complex effects and interrelationships, which in this work have materialized as follows: only the embeddedness of practices and spaces can produce temporal embeddedness. In other words: embedded participation sustained over time requires the prior mobilization of spaces through highly inclusive practices.

In spite of all these potentialities, the fact that the operationalization of the proposal (Bussu *et al.* 2022) is diffuse and not theoretically “embedded” can lead to overlaps and porosities. This makes it difficult to understand how each of the dimensions works, since they are not mutually exclusive. That is: the boundaries that define the practical, spatial and temporal dimensions are blurred and this generates greater opportunities for theoretical-empirical development; but also some limits – such as for example, the fact that the spatial dimension overlaps with the space dimension. That is why it is necessary to understand that the dimensions of embeddedness form a heuristic and flexible tool, which are articulated in an integrated, holistic and original way in each work. What is relevant is not to “anchor” the dimensions through closed definitions, but to generate dynamic links and interrelations that weave a coherent narrative of what embeddedness implies.

Finally, we can conclude that there is the challenge of continuing to move towards scaling up processes (Blanco *et al.* 2018, 19), transferring the emerging feminist public policies that emanate from the bottom through networks and multilevel policy learning processes that transcend the local level. Therefore, to further deepen from participatory embeddedness to the impact on public policies, it is necessary to introduce the idea of democracy-driven-governance, where the institutional link aspires to have a broader scope that “goes beyond *ad hoc* spaces to re-imagine governance processes, by incorporating citizen participation in existing institutions” (Bua and Bussu 2021, 719) at the supra-municipal level. It would be about “thinking locally and acting globally” (Blanco *et al.* 2018, 19) based on an irruptive turn of governance on a large scale, of high resonance and in terms of democratic deepening.

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