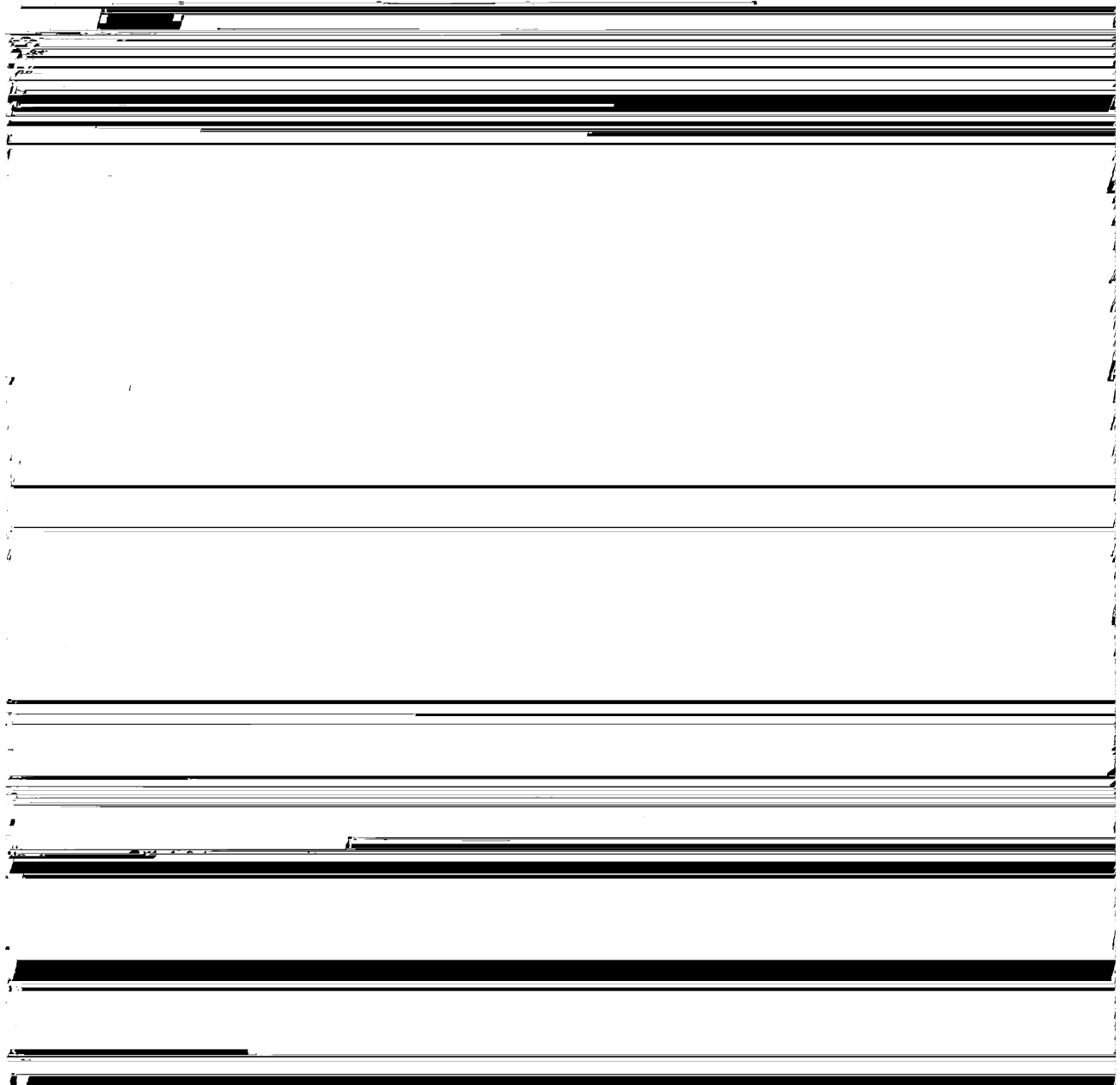


Participating in the Political Process

by

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Public participation in the political process is as important to the health of a liberal democracy as representation, but until recently its many forms, apart



ment of the community will allow; and that nothing less can be ultimately desirable than the admission of all to a share in the sovereign power of

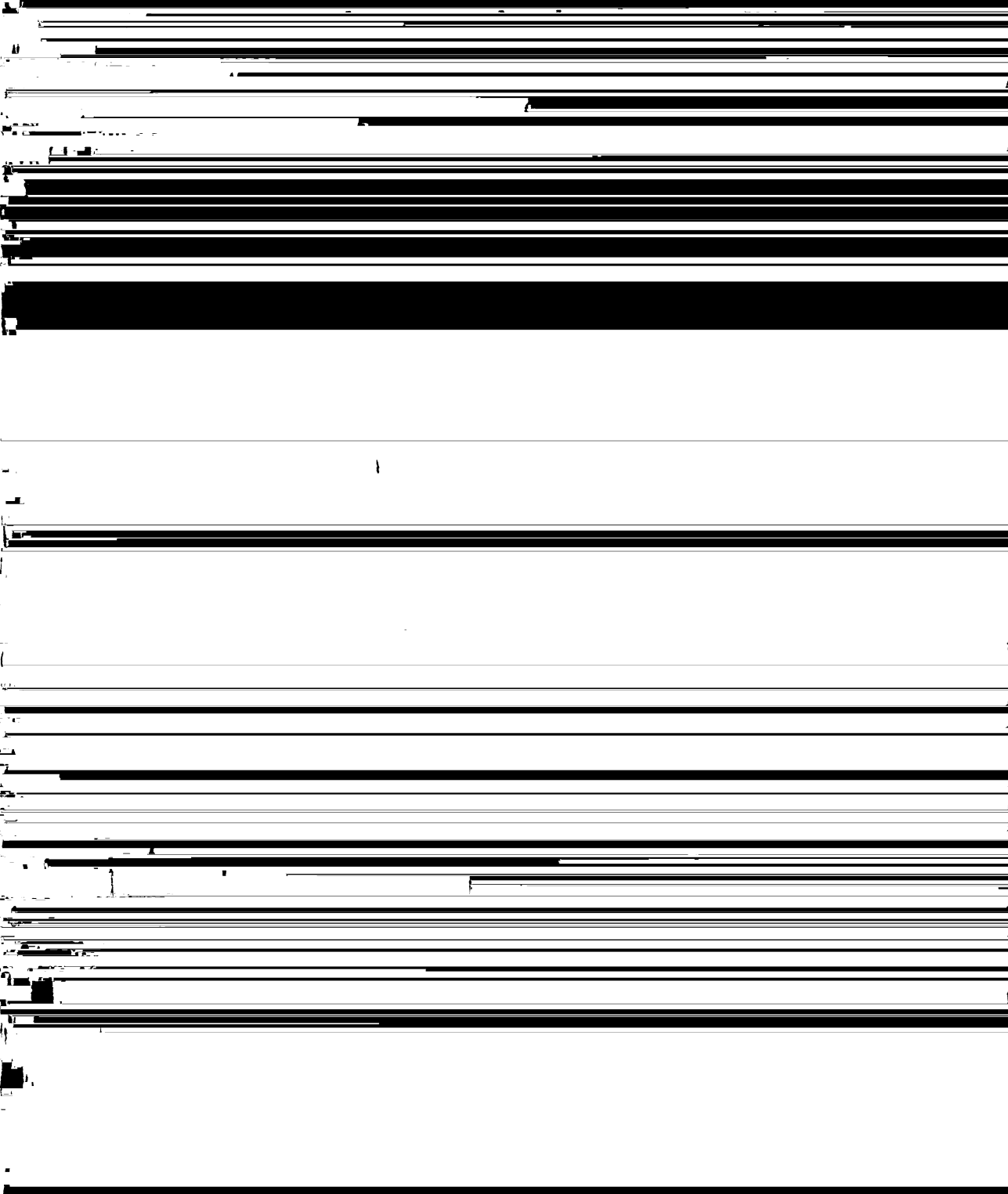
the State. But since all cannot, in a community exceeding a single small town, participate personally in any but some very minor portions of the public business, it follows that the ideal type of a perfect government must be representative.¹

Apart from the act of voting at the polls, which, since the advent of universal suffrage, has been the object of a good deal of concern, political participation has been taken for granted or it has been con-

sidered with outright suspicion. Theorists have stressed the fact that not all kinds of participation are equally valuable and that a high rate of participation may be an indication of political stress or may result from compulsion. Therefore, there has been little attempt made to improve upon existing mechanisms of participation or to devise new mechanisms. In good laissez-faire fashion, it was apparently assumed that optimum participation would automatically result from the absence of interference with individual motivations to participate. Indeed, Western liberal political institutions have evolved in a shape more or less consciously designed to discourage direct personal involvement in the political process.

By contrast, Communist philosophy, while virtually bypassing the

and ill-inspired as it may sometimes be, the search by Western specialists in Communist countries, notably Yugoslavia, for models which might inspire liberal democracies is one manifestation of this new awareness of the increasing importance of participation. A more promising manifestation is the recent increase of interest in the forms



dimensions of political participation. This will make it possible, then, to formulate a reasoned judgement on the existing situation and to indicate some promising orientations for reforms.

Dimensions of Political Participation

It is commonplace to say that pluralism is a central characteristic of modern liberal society. It is surprising, therefore, to find that students of political participation often overlook this trait and restrict their investigations to the more formal and manifest categories of participatory behaviour, such as voting at the polls or activities closely

related to voting.³ Yet, to be in a position properly to assess the dimensions of participation, we must surely recognize the manifold character of the phenomenon and take into account all the relevant

components of the political process, not merely its most obvious manifestations.

One can suggest many varieties of political participation which are available to individuals:

— Exposing oneself to political stimuli.

— Engaging in discussions on public issues with relatives, friends, or

full breadth of the dimensions of political participation, certainly an analytical categorization would be preferable. Any differentiation

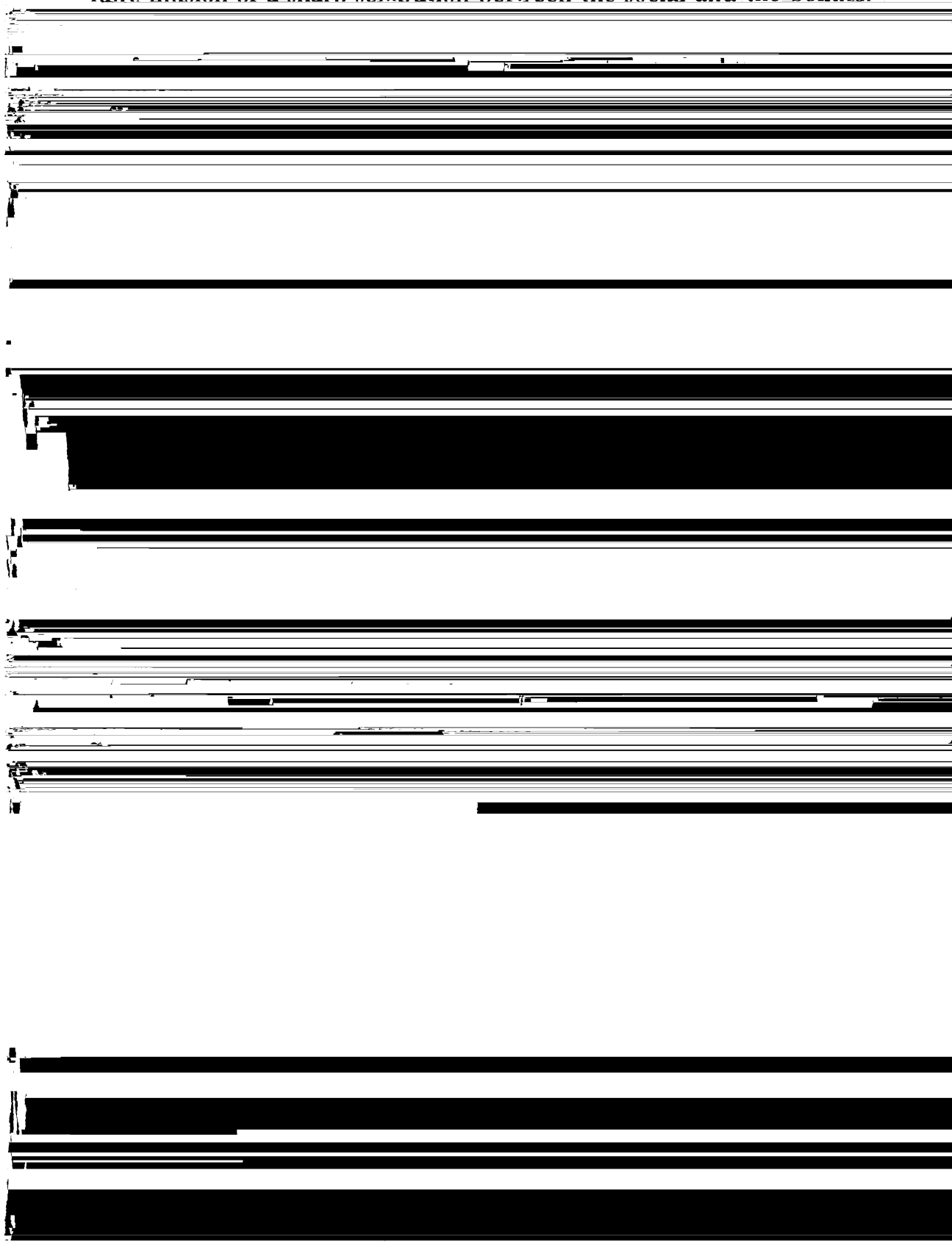
unsatisfactory. However, in the preceding list, four different levels

of political participation are clearly recognizable: the level of partici-

- 1) *At the ecological level:* dimension of locality (whether large city, small city or country). Other variables at that first level might be climate and physical geography.
- 2) *At the demographical level:* ethnicity, sex, age, marital status.



faire illusion of a sharp separation between the social and the political



imum for individuals who live in large cities, are white, male, between
25 and 60 years of age and married, who have ready access to media

activities, political participation then must be considered a quasi-professional activity. Depending on the criteria of evaluation used in different studies, even in such a developed country as the United

the true significance of the faults in the present situation and to allow

the corrective potentialities in our social system to develop to the full. Liberal thinkers may formally acknowledge the eminent position of political participation as a value and as a concept, but they have failed to give that notion the kind of practical recognition which is required if we wish political democracy to retain some concrete meaning for

tioning of the various participation mechanisms—values related to

sentations, delegation, majority rule, responsibility and self-determination.

Such a synthesis should be mindful of the sociological dimension of political participation. It is worth mentioning at this point that the main forms of political participation in liberal democracies were invented before the advent of industrial technology and the development of the welfare state. One can then—indeed one must—raise the question whether those forms are adequate to the tasks they are called

in the direction of further increase of governmental activities until it
begins to become overwhelming. Thus it is important that we search

without ceasing for ways of increasing and intensifying direct political
participation. Unless appropriate means for redress are applied, this

that, and similar questions are necessary prerequisites for the clarification

But there is another dimension to this question of the purpose of
the... which it will be even more important to examine

mechanisms of participation. Proposals for grafting these mechanisms

on to liberal societies, however, are unacceptable because they fail to take into account the considerable difference in the social system and levels of development. In any case, just as the economic success of co-operatives has brought about a rapid decline in active participation

among the membership, so has the consolidation of the socialist system

more so as it is possible that they contain more potentiality for real participation than the more traditional forms. If, with this end in view, we were to initiate a systematic search into the conditions of pressure-group activities, into the development of currents of public opinions and into the potentialities of advisory committees, we might bring new light to the whole question of political participation in liberal societies. An excellent example is found in the case of advisory

as my hope that research may be intensified in that field of political science and philosophy.

NOTES

1 John Stuart Mill *On Liberty and Considerations on Representative Government* P. R

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