The preceding chapters have, in our estimation, sparked a new critical and empirically grounded dialogue about the practice of participation, its pitfalls, and its promise. Inasmuch as we have selected contributions for the variety of perspectives they offer on participation over time, across particular contexts, at different scales, and with varying technologies, we conclude this volume not with a final verdict on the limitations of the new public participation in producing equality. Instead, we hope to provide readers with a more grounded sense of the opportunities and unintended consequences that participation might enable in a contemporary context of severe structural inequalities. In this respect, we end with more questions than we started with.

As such, in this conclusion, we briefly sketch four areas that we think provide fertile inspiration for new research on participation, based on common themes and surprising correspondences in the assembled contributions.

1. Investigating How Cultural Discourses around Participation Are Embedded in Historically Specific Political Environments

Much of the work in this volume documents contests over the valorization of participation. To be sure, this is not a new insight. James Morone points out that these contests intrigued Madison: “Consensus about (or ‘unperplexed pursuit’ of) the public good is ‘more ardently to be wished for than seriously to be expected.’”1 David Mathews argues that “democracy has many meanings, and debating its meaning is one of the characteristics of a democracy.”2 But far too often, scholars have failed to unpack the varied meanings of participation. In many ways, the apparent stability of the concept as a popular idea is part of its value to authorities. But as we see in the cases here, meanings and anxieties about power embedded in the concept shift over time in interesting ways. As Baiocchi and Ganiuza argue, the concept entails “profound ambiguities,” and scholars have too often gotten caught up in debates over what is or isn’t “really” participation rather than investigating what the debates themselves tell us about the way
“true” participation can be used to reframe or contest authority. Some readily dismiss corporate-sponsored participation as “astroturfing”—the kind of dismissal that would prevent the nuanced analysis that Walker undertakes in understanding, for example, the very real coalitions between major corporations and preexisting local community organizations that may result. Even as its promoters endeavor to ensure that the new public participation is “transparent” and “accountable,” as Eliasoph notes, it remains slippery and multivalent. Attempts to construct “authentic participation” may make participation more marketable, as seen in Lee, McNulty, and Shaffer’s chapter, even as they limit the range of concerns thought to entail the public good. This is a long way from the assumption (described in the introduction) that participation simply is a public good in and of itself.

2. Recontextualizing and Historicizing What Is Really “New” about the New Public Participation

The accounts offered by Kreiss, Baiocchi and Ganuza, and McQuarrie provide excellent examples of research that historicizes the development of particular modes of participation through the interactions of institutional actors and stakeholders. Baiocchi and Ganuza, McQuarrie, and Eliasoph draw attention to the roles of academics, politicians, advocacy professionals, and experts in promoting participatory forms like participatory budgeting and Asset-Based Community Development. It is important to realize that participation is often framed as “new” when in fact, as our introduction and these contributions show, many aspects of participation, and even many critiques of participation, have long-standing traditions in American life. How did William Jennings Bryan’s database of millions of voters differ from technologies of managing voter participation today, as Kreiss asks and answers in his contribution? Posing such questions can put participation more squarely “in its place.” But the study of the institutionalization of participation in particular contexts can also contribute to our understanding of participation as a set of practices and discourses that may be decoupled from their original settings and, in Baiocchi and Ganuza’s case, travel around the world with “dizzying” speed. Investigating how the surface features of participatory tools or devices may remain constant, while their uses and meanings transform in translation, can provide a scholarly perspective on the ways in which participation moves and changes in dynamic and contingent fashion.

3. Tying the New Public Participation to Larger Trends in the Reinforcement of Inequality in the Present Moment

As chapters by Eliasoph, Lee and colleagues, Martin, and Walker demonstrate, case studies of participatory governance may neglect the forest for the trees. Empowerment practices may, counter to one’s intentions, contribute to the demobilization of publics, the marginalization of the needy, or the reinforcement of the authority of exist-
ing elites. Participation enhances the legitimacy of institutions and their authority at moments when these are ripe for question—when failures of institutions to secure social rights at the most basic level are laid bare. Public recognition of the limits of participation in transforming the social order has produced widespread cynicism and skepticism. In order to leverage opportunities created by unfolding fiscal and political crises for challenging inequalities, we must understand the new public participation in broader macroeconomic and political terms. Participation under neoliberalism has taken a unique shape, but it is not enough simply to say that participation has been “neoliberalized,” as Baiocchi and Ganuza warn us. The current participatory moment has been shaped by neoliberal authorities, progressive critiques of power, public resistance to managed participation, and authorities’ attempts to respond to those critiques. With this understanding of how progressive impulses are deeply inscribed in contemporary forms of institutionalized participation, remedies for reclaiming the power of participation to effect social change seem much less straightforward.

4. Reevaluating the Continuing Promise of Participation
Despite Mixed, Complex Results

Finally, many of the contributions to this volume offer hope for those interested in progressive social change to produce a just society. A more realistic, pragmatic sense of the limitations of participation can provide leverage in understanding the real opportunities it may afford—and especially in moving beyond facile dismissals of the ironies of the “top-down” grassroots efforts described in this book. As Vallas and colleagues, Meyer and Pullum, Schleifer and Panofsky, and Polletta show, there is indeed potential in participation, particularly in the ways that activists themselves have readily adapted tactics to account for the reshaping of participation and have made unusual alliances with elites and institutional sponsors. This finding challenges those critics who would catalogue a long line of participatory failures or frame participation as simply the latest or newest form of “tyranny.” Even in the empowerment projects described by Eliasoph, the hopeful “prospectancy” entailed in institutionalized engagement can lead, in a roundabout way, to change. Polletta argues that advocacy for deliberation by institutional sponsors holds promise, while both Schleifer and Panofsky and Vallas and colleagues document creative convergences and pragmatic strategies to take advantage of new opportunities in a putatively democratized world. As Meyer and Pullum note, populism and establishment resources have been linked in many different ways over the course of the last two hundred years, and the alliances negotiated between the grassroots and elites are “inherently unstable”: “Both successes and failures will strain these connections, and what emerges is likely to be more chaotic and unfocused than what has come before.” In this still very much undetermined, often confusing welter of possible futures, we find rich and exciting potential. Assessing this promise in light of the critiques made in this volume should provide scholars with plenty of fodder for future research.

It should also provide us with a better understanding of the unique movement of
contemporary society and politics. As Charles Postel notes in a catalogue of the changing perspectives of Americans on the legacy of the populists over the 20th century, ideas about the populists shifted in response to changing anxieties of the age about power and interests. In the 21st century, it is useful to remember that future analysts may see the new public participation in a very different light than we have here. As such, the contributions in this volume are a first attempt to situate the relationship between our participatory strivings and deep ambivalence about power and the public interest in the present moment.

NOTES

2. Quoted in McIvor, Barker, and McAfee (2012: vii).