Beyond Deliberative Systems
Pluralizing the Debate

Hans Asenbaum

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della Porta, Donatella. 2020. *How Social Movements Can Save Democracy: Democratic Innovations from Below.* Cambridge: Polity.

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Kioupkiolis, Alexandros. 2019. *The Common and Counter-Hegemonic Politics: Rethinking Social Change.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

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Normative democratic theory with a focus on civic engagement is increasingly interested in how participatory instances connect into democratic systems (Dean, Rinne, et al. 2019; Elstub et al. 2018). The deliberative perspective has pioneered this debate and proposes a systemic view that observes how everyday talk and media discourses connect deliberative forums including parliaments, mini-publics, and protest formations (Mansbridge 1999; Mansbridge et al. 2012). While various approaches within the deliberative systems debate can be differentiated (Owen and Smith 2015), they commonly understand deliberative qualities as distributed within a broader system and focus on scaling up democratic deliberation through the transmission from the public to state institutions (Chambers 2012; Dryzek 2009).

Beyond the increasing refinement of deliberative systems (Curato et al. 2019; Hendriks et al. 2020; Smith 2016), a discussion has emerged about the systemic nature of democracy more generally (Dean, Rinne, et al. 2019). Michael Saward, for example, criticizes "deliberation's dominant hold on the imagination of democratic theorists" and asks, "if a systemic view is what matters to our thinking about democracy, why is

Democratic Theory
doi: 10.3167/dt.2022.090106
Volume 9, Issue 1, Summer 2022: 87–98
ISSN 2332-8894 (Print), ISSN 2332-8908 (Online)

https://doi.org/10.3167/dt.2022.090106 Published online by Cambridge University Press
Democratic Theory 9-1 Summer 2022.indb 87 5/19/2022 9:05:41 AM

it not the democratic system, rather than the deliberative system, that is the focus?" (2021: 22). This pragmatist approach suggests stepping back onto a meta level and theorizing democracy without the blinders that different perspectives in democratic theory impose (Warren 2017). Recently, democratic theorists situated in the participatory tradition have entered this debate. Inspired by Carole Pateman's (2012) argument that participatory democracy needs to connect several participatory sites within an institutional structure – such as the participatory budgeting processes in Porto Alegre – several scholars are currently exploring the systemic connections in large-scale democratic innovations (Dean, Boswell, et al. 2019; Parry et al. 2020). Beyond the connectivity between various democratic innovations, the debate about participatory systems also highlights the interaction between social movements and state institutions and hybrid online/offline modes of engagement (Bussu 2019).

The contributions pragmatists and participatory democrats make to the debate initiated by deliberative democrats draw attention to the wealth of theoretical perspectives within the scholarship on civic engagement. This raises the question of what other perspectives in democratic theory have to contribute to systems thinking. To this end, I will review the systemic concepts offered by four recent books: Albert Dzur's *Democracy Inside: Participatory Innovation in Unlikely Places* (2019), Donatella della Porta's *How Social Movements Can Save Democracy: Democratic Innovations from Below* (2020), Marie Paxton's *Agonistic Democracy: Rethinking Political Institutions in Pluralist Times* (2020), and Alexandros Kioupkiolis's *The Common and Counter-Hegemonic Politics: Rethinking Social Change* (2019). These four accounts of democracy are situated in participatory, agonistic, and transformative perspectives. While each account focuses primarily on individual participatory sites, they also put forward systemic concepts. In this essay, I distill the notions of democratic systems in each of these accounts and put them into conversation with each other. Looking through these multiple perspectives, I argue, we can observe how the rich variety of democratic spaces together forms a vivid democratic ecosystem. To make this argument, I first introduce the notion of democratic ecosystems. Then, I interrogate the systemic thinking in recent works on participatory, agonistic, and transformative democracy. Finally, I bring them together to deepen the concept of democratic ecosystems.

Introducing Democratic Ecosystems

So far, concepts of democratic systems are either situated in one of the many normative perspectives that democratic theory offers or located on

https://doi.org/10.3167/dt.2022.090106 Published online by Cambridge University Press
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a meta level outside any particular perspective. Since their emergence, modern normative democratic theory has been divided into "models of democracy" with each model proposing a competing vision of what democracy should look like (Held 1987). These kind of "model wars" (Dean, Gagnon, et al. 2019: xii) have facilitated different imaginations about democratic systems, resulting in deliberative and participatory versions. Pragmatist theorists, in contrast, suggest that perspectives conceal more than they enable us to see (Saward 2021). They argue for theorizing democracy afresh by stepping out of these perspectives. This does not mean leaving the normative mission of democratic theory behind but rather treating it more flexibly and innovatively (Dean, Rinne, et al. 2019).

I find value in both approaches. Pragmatists are right to criticize the limitations of single models. At the same time, their solution of taking a step int an apparently norm-free zone appears problematic. I worry about the lack of normative clarity that models provide. To contribute to this debate, I propose a third option, a multiperspectival approach that asks what the application of several perspectives can contribute to the systems debate (Asenbaum 2021a). This allows for overcoming the narrowness of single models while at the same time affording rich normativity (see Parkinson 2012: 9; Smith 2019: 581). I argue that employing a pluralism of perspectives, acknowledging subjectivity, and actively engaging in perspectival shift sheds light on a constantly evolving democratic ecosystem.

By speaking of *democratic ecosystems,* I build on Sonia Bussu's (2019: 74) observation that "invited and invented spaces of citizenship are continuously interrelated in a participatory ecosystem" and Erik Olin Wright's (2013: 9) understanding of society as an ecosystem that can be transformed through real utopias. The notion of democratic ecosystems also benefits from Jane Bennett's (2010: 103) work on vitalist materialism, which observes that "a political system … has much in common with a dynamic natural ecosystem." But why should we understand democratic systems as *eco*systems? In what sense are these systems lively?

The answers to this question are manifold (e.g., the vivid nature of human interaction, the life of democratic institutions) and cannot be addressed within the constraints of this essay. My modest contribution is to pursue one proposition: one factor that animates a democratic system is its key feature of bringing together the multiple perspectives of its participants. Each participant in a democratic ecosystem brings a different perspective, rooted in different life experiences. In coming together, these perspectives change as participants empathizes with each other's views (Scudder 2020). Hence, the perspectival shift between normative democratic theories I suggest here as an academic exercise emulates the perspectival shifts we all practice every day by moving through different

https://doi.org/10.3167/dt.2022.090106 Published online by Cambridge University Press
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positions in the system, listening to different stories, changing our views, and doing so as we progress through the different stages of our lives. This everyday perspectival shift is one important factor that animates our surroundings. Hence, perspective-taking through theory triangulation allows us to perceive the vitality of democratic ecosystems.

Rather than speaking of models of democracy, I understand those different debates in democratic theory as perspectives. In my view, they do not so much have the function of proposing competing normative programs, akin to the political agendas of parties. Rather perspectives in democratic theory provide us with a starting point from where we look, without predetermining what we see (Young 2000: 148). This understanding is inspired by feminist standpoint theory and its application in democratic theory (Mansbridge 1991; Young 2000: 121–153). Theory triangulation, then, allows us to rotate between different positions and look from different angles.

Within the bounds of this essay, I take a first step toward conceptualizing democratic ecosystems. Based on the reviewed books, I distinguish five features that characterize democratic ecosystems. First, democratic ecosystems encompass a wide variety of participatory sites including social movement, work, and digital spaces. Second, democratic ecosystems potentially pervade every aspect of life. They extend into every interaction between human and nonhuman animals, technologies, and their natural environment. Third, the connectivity within democratic ecosystems is constituted by the lived experience of interactivity of participants. Their emerging and expiring relationships contribute to the vivid and morphological nature of the system. Fourth, the vitality of the system further depends on both design, which attempts to structure and fix interaction and unforeseen connections, which emerge organically and spontaneously. Fifth, the lively nature of democratic ecosystems is founded on radical subjectivity, with each democratic subject experiencing the system from different positions. These individual perspectives are not fixed. Subjects constantly cycle through different perspectives in different contexts, stages of their lives, and when they meet others and empathize with them.

Participatory, Agonistic, and Transformative Systems

Albert Dzur (2019) situates his analysis in the participatory perspective (Barber 2003; Dacombe 2018; Pateman 1970). By focusing on democratic professionalism, he highlights how professionals working in schools, the criminal judicial system, and public administration already realize participatory democracy here and now. Positioning these participatory

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innovations between state power and social movements, Dzur claims: "Because we are normally looking for formal politics or social movement activism we do not tend to see everyday makers as democratic agents, but they are. They may not be proposing laws or challenging policies, but they are making public institutions more transparent and more responsive to human needs" (20). This entails not only opening established institutions but also the creation of new ones.

Dzur conceptualizes the systemic connectivity between the participatory instances he analyses through the notion of a civic *Umwelt,* the German term for environment. A civic Umwelt marks a region or place, such as the US city of Decatur, Georgia with a pronounced participatory culture, where various participatory events happen all the time. While some of these events might be more regular, it is the spontaneous and experimental nature that defines a civic Umwelt. Dzur contrasts this kind of "pop-up democracy" with the structured, controlled, and insular nature of deliberative forums. In a civic Umwelt, through the constant invitation to participate, "A recursiveness is at work: being involved in Decatur is easy, fun, and meaningful. As you become involved in one sort of event, you form connections that encourage further involvement" (109–110). Hence, the experiential interactivity with other people and the forming of new relationships is at the core of a civic Umwelt.

Here, it is not so much institutional arrangements as the lived experience of encounter that defines democracy. This kind of connectivity emerges not only between participants but between participants and power holders: "The kinds of participatory democratic innovations I endorse are efforts at sharing power and responsibility that go beyond asking elites to make better law or policy or rulings *for us*; they ask elites to work *with us*" (130–131). According to Dzur, this collaboration between citizens and the state should not replace social movement protest, which forms an important part of the participatory culture in a civic Umwelt.

That social movements are not always in opposition to the state, but form constructive connections, is the primary focus of della Porta's (2020) account (see also Hendriks et al. 2020). Like Dzur, della Porta situates her analysis in the participatory perspective but in contrast to Dzur, she highlights the compatibility of participatory and deliberative democracy. Through the notion of "democratic innovations from below," she attributes two crucial democratic functions to social movements: first, they push the state to open spaces for civic participation, and second, they create their own democratic spaces. These two functions are connected: "progressive social movements experiment with democratic innovations in their internal practices …, which are then the basis of proposed changes in democratic governance" (14). Della Porta illustrates

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this with cases of social movements' engagement in participatory constitution-making, referendum campaigns, and movement parties.

Crucially, while such movements might assume a protest position, they also collaborate with the state, thus forming interactive networks as part of a democratic system. Often, activists become members of formal state institutions and, in so doing, shift their experiential perspective. The state then might try to co-opt movements but also constructively draw on their expertise. State institutions sometimes even ally themselves with movements and push for change from within the governmental structure: "the boundaries between institutional and non-institutional activities are quite porous, since social movements experiment with different conceptions of democracy also acting within institutions … [they] have often penetrated the black box where institutional decisions are made" (144). Hence, democratic innovations "need the development of progressive coalitions between institutional actors and social movement actors" (149).

The understanding of connectivity within a democratic system can further be deepened through Alexandros Kioupkiolis's (2019) work on the commons. His "common democracy" is situated in the recently emerging transformative perspective in democratic theory that seeks to fundamentally reconfigure societal relations toward emancipation (Hardt and Negri 2017; for an overview, see Asenbaum 2021b; Tambakaki 2017). In the transformative perspective, "the commons are embraced as a project of radical democratic change that will prevail over neoliberal capitalism and top-down elitist politics" (Kioupkiolis 2019: 128). Kioupkiolis explores various commons such as the Ancient Greek polis, Wikipedia, and the 2011 movements of the squares (Gerbaudo 2017). Although one might expect profound skepticism of state-citizen collaboration from Kioupkiolis's transformative account, he suggests grassroots movements' critical engagement with the state. Movements can colonize the state apparatus as movement parties or through participatory budgets. They need "both to craft an independent institutionality and to 'occupy' representation in state institutions in order to induce deep democratic transformations under actual conditions" (232).

What the commons perspective offers is an understanding of the entire societal, political, and economic system as an integrated democratic system. Commons are not simply political institutions; they are societal formations that affect how we work and how the economy functions. Commons thinking is indicative of "a broader paradigm shift that is presumably capacitated today by network society and new technological developments. This opens up the horizon of a commons-based society, whereby the commons will not be confined to small-scale communities and local ecosystems but will occupy centre stage in economic, political

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and social life" (51). Rather than cordoned-off, specialized domains, both work and politics would be characterized by transparency, sharing, and collaboration enabled through crowdsourcing and broad participation.

The kinds of connectivity described in the accounts above extend far beyond formal state institutions. This point is deepened through the agonistic perspective (Honig 2013; Mouffe 2013; Wenman 2013). Mary Paxton (2020) proposes to strengthen connectivity in democratic systems through an agonistic ethos, which is cultivated by means of institutional design. She argues that "it is through institutional design that we are able to bring agonistic democracy to life" (2020: 13). Her conception of agonistic democracy brings together contestation and mutual respect. Hence, "it is imperative to develop institutions which allow for the exchange of difficult political disagreement, whilst simultaneously cultivating a culture of respect, recognition and understanding for the other" (2). In conceptualizing agonistic citizens' assemblies, participatory budgets, and a Contestation Day (modeled after Ackerman and Fishkin's [2004] Deliberation Day), she argues that the main difference of these agonistic spaces to established deliberative forums is constituted by their far reach. Paxton criticizes deliberative forums along similar lines as Dzur, as meticulously designed processes that are sharply demarcated from the outside world. In contrast, agonistic innovations aim to engender an agonistic ethos that pervades society.

This networked character of Paxton's agonistic spaces as part of a democratic system is afforded by her engagement with new institutionalism. New institutionalism suggests thinking about habits, norms, unspoken rules, discursive structures, and thinking patterns as informal institutions. The core feature of an institution is not its formalization but its regulatory function. Hence, the institutional features of culture and discourse become apparent. Informal institutions pervade every aspect of society. In this sense, democratic innovation denotes the remaking of everyday interaction and thinking patterns in a democratic fashion.

With this approach in mind, Paxton calls for an agonistic ethos that far extends beyond the bounds of participatory institutions. Citizens assemblies, participatory budgets, and the Contestation Day are not only, or even primarily, sites for political decision-making. Rather, they are democratic spaces where an agonistic culture of critique and scrutiny is nurtured and where, through the engagement with a plurality of viewpoints, their own particularities are recognized. Thinking informal institutionalization further, Paxton argues that an agonistic ethos should be cultivated through media discourses that report on democratic innovations and thus connect to citizens who did not actively take part. Furthermore, pop culture is a crucial medium of an agonistic society with TV shows, podcasts, and popular music spreading agonistic values such as diversity, inclusion, and contestation.

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Toward Democratic Ecosystems

By extracting the systemic conceptions of these four accounts of democracy, we can surmise what participatory, agonistic, and transformative systems look like and what they contribute to the ongoing deliberative systems debate. Dzur and della Porta's books read like complimentary accounts. Like Pateman (2012) and Bussu (2019), they highlight the crucial interrelations of social movements with governmental institutions, which may be of a more collaborative or a more contentious nature. Crucially, participatory systems constitute an organically emerging sphere of participation. They focus on local, embodied, face-to-face engagement, in contrast with the large-scale transmission processes of deliberative systems (Boswell et al. 2016; Niemeyer 2014). While the debate about participatory systems also entails an argument for addressing structural inequalities (Pateman and Smith 2019), this is not its central concern. Transformative systems, in contrast, focus on the interconnection between and democratization of economic, societal, and political configurations. They rethink the very principles that current societies are built on and suggest moving from current competition to collaborative commoning. The poststructuralist foundations of agonistic democracy, finally, allow us to envision agonistic systems as pervading every aspect of our lives. Agonistic values of inclusion and contestation are diffused through our everyday communications. The contestation of inequalities is not merely the domain of governments. It needs to take place in everyday interactions.

While each of these perspectives make a valuable contribution to the systems debate individually, together they provide an opportunity for perspectival shifts. I follow Graham Smith in arguing that "the theoretical enterprises of deliberative, participatory, agonistic and other approaches to democracy differ in significant ways. It is precisely where these different theoretical lenses offer *alternative perspectives on the same object of study* that we can gain novel insights" (2019: 581, emphasis added). I have argued that perspectival shifts animate the objects we look at. In looking through the kaleidoscope of democratic theory at democratic systems, we can see what I call democratic ecosystems. The participatory, agonistic, and transformative perspectives discussed above together highlight five features of democratic ecosystems.

1. Democratic ecosystems include a large variety of democratic spaces from collaborative educational programs in prisons to digital commons such as Wikipedia and instances of pop-up democracy. They may include democratic sites in unlikely areas such as the arts, sciences, and play (Asenbaum and Hanusch 2021). By looking through the various lenses of

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democratic theory, we can see the manifold democratic spaces that make up a democratic ecosystem. Each lens affords seeing some of these spaces more clearly. Beyond the discovery of new participatory sites, pluralizing perspectives also enables us to see established spaces in a new light. We can now understand the agonistic qualities of citizens' assemblies, for example, and redesign them accordingly.

2. Democratic ecosystems extend beyond fixed institutional settings. They pervade everyday life and even thinking patterns. Commoning, understood broadly, includes the process of commonly constructing our world in cocreating relationships between humans and between humans, nature, and technology. Agonizing the media, art, culture, and digital connectivity is a crucial part of civic engagement. Democratic innovation becomes an everyday task, a self-reflective exercise, and a transformative project.
3. The connectivity that constitutes democratic ecosystem consists of experiential interactivity – the lived experience of encounter. The system grows, expands, or shrinks where humans come together and interact with nature and technology in a democratic manner, which includes both benign cooperation and contentious protest.
4. The system is kept alive through the parallel movement of fixity and contingency. While humans intentionally designing spaces for democratic interaction, these spaces come into being, change, and form connections in unforeseen ways. Rather than insular, controlled experiments, democratic innovations can emerge organically through democratic professionals or social movements and form part of a civic Umwelt.
5. Planned design and spontaneous connections are never experienced the same by different people, who constantly cycle through different perspectives. By meeting others, hearing their stories, and empathizing with them, they see the object of discussion and the system itself from multiple angles of their lived experience. This radical subjectivity means that we perceive democratic ecosystems and everything in them as constantly changing.

I propose that the subjectivity that animates democratic ecosystems is also reflected in the perspectival approach to democratic theory. The participatory, agonistic, and transformative accounts of democracy in the four books discussed above are a testament to the plurality of democratic theory (Gagnon 2018). This plurality, in turn, is a core value and a strength of democracy itself (Dean, Gagnon et al. 2019). Assuming different positions is a necessity for democratic engagement (Saward 2019). It allows us to experience the pluralism that animates the ongoing, and global, democratic project.

Hans Asenbaum is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Centre for Deliberative Democracy and Global Governance at the University of Canberra. He holds a PhD from the Centre for the Study of Democracy at the University of Westminster in London and is a co-convener of the Participatory and Deliberative Democracy

https://doi.org/10.3167/dt.2022.090106 Published online by Cambridge University Press
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specialist group of the Political Studies Association (PSA). His research interests include identity and inclusion in new participatory spaces, digital politics, and theories of radical democracy. Hans' work has been published in the *American Political Science Review, Political Studies, New Media & Society,* and *Politics & Gender.*

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