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Futures in common: Democratic life beyond the crisis

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This chapter argues that democratic life must be expanded in order to tackle the challenges of the century ahead. Let me start by unpacking this proposition. By ‘democratic life’ I mean the range of practices and assets that are the foundation for active citizenship: education, resources, wellbeing, inclusion, participation, deliberation, influence. In a nutshell: the kind of things that a person needs to be part of life in democracy.

By ‘the challenges of the century ahead’ I mean those challenges driven by epochal forces like the climate emergency, rapid ecological decline, the biotech and infotech revolutions, welfare state reforms, robotization, population displacements and an intricate net of inequalities and economic failures. This chapter therefore argues that our chances of governing desirable futures rest on developing an expanded form of democratic life.

We have come to think about politics as party politics and democracy as electoral democracy. This narrow scope given to democratic life overlooks how the economy provides (or hinders) the foundations for active citizenship. It also ignores how current political institutions often struggle to provide the public goods that citizens expect from a democratic system.

The last decade has seen a democratic recession worldwide, only 5% of the global population lives in a ‘full democracy’ (The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2016; 2018) and levels of public dissatisfaction have reached record highs in countries like the UK (Foa et al., 2020). Yet, support for democracy remains popular across the world: people still love the idea of democracy but despise many of its current practices (Escobar and Elstub, 2019). Currently dominant versions of democracy and the economy are long due an upgrade. Both the institutions of the state and the market have shown their strengths and limitations, highlighting the need for a strong civil society capable of democratising existing processes and generating new ones.

Pandemic times have thrown into relief the cracks in the foundations of economic and political life. Covid-19 has been a shared event, but certainly not a shared experience. Everyone’s situation has been unique, and we must pay attention to differences and

inequalities across communities of place, interest and identity. Complex solidarity is the best antidote to bogus unity or destructive populism.

What are we learning from the public health crisis? It is clearly magnifying pre-existing crises. A recent report by Scotland's Urban Regeneration Forum (SURF) concludes:

The evidence is that the crisis has increased the gap between the haves and have-nots and laid bare the fragility of social and economic mores. If wealth is the greatest shield from infection and serious illness, then disadvantaged communities are the most exposed. (SURF, 2020, 19)

There has been early research into how communities have responded to the current public health crisis. For example, reports by SURF, the Scottish Community Alliance and the Scottish Community Development Centre have mapped the landscape of experiences at the frontline of community life, including a wide range of initiatives to address fundamental challenges: food insecurity, mental health, social exclusion, poverty, homelessness, unemployment, substance abuse, digital illiteracy, etc.

The frontline of civil society, the community sector, has shown what it can do with limited resources. It is creative and resilient, but also under siege: constantly plugging the gaps generated by the state-market combo (Henderson et al., 2018). Growing economic inequalities are mirrored -and indeed fed- by growing power inequalities and, as a global study by Dalton (2017) has shown, there is a growing gap between 'the politically rich' and 'the politically poor' across the world. The result is a range of democracies that struggle to be democratic, and economies that struggle to be economic, especially for the long term.

Reimagining and remaking

Transforming the institutions of political and economic life is a long-term enterprise that requires urgent short-term action. Fortunately, some work is already under way. There are various fields of practice founded on the notion that reimagining democracy entails a remaking of society, politics, culture and the economy. In this piece, I would like to highlight two such fields, namely: *democratic innovations* and the *social commons*.

Democratic innovations are processes or institutions where politics and policymaking are conducted directly by citizens rather than only by intermediaries or representatives (Elstub and Escobar, 2019). There are various types of democratic innovations, including some now entering mainstream politics and governance i.e. mini-publics, participatory budgeting, digital crowdsourcing. These processes share in common that they embody a transition from a democracy where citizens are mainly occasional voters or protesters, to one where they are also decision-makers and co-producers. Let's briefly unpack some examples for illustration.

Scotland has been increasingly experimenting with mini-publics and participatory budgeting over the last decade. Mini-publics are processes where citizens are selected through civic lottery (hence reducing the self-selection bias that reinforces political inequalities) and supported to deliberate in an informed manner in order to produce a considered judgement

or recommendation. Citizens juries and citizens' assemblies are amongst the most popular forms of mini-public (Escobar and Elstub, 2017).

Scotland has for example hosted citizens juries on wind farm development, health inequalities, realistic medicine, land management and public service reform (What Works Scotland, 2017). More recently, the Citizens' Assembly on the Future of Scotland has been brought together to consider how to tackle constitutional challenges such as Brexit and now also the recovery after the pandemic. In the winter of 2020, another mini-public will get under way: the Climate Citizens Assembly legislated for by the Scottish Parliament to put citizens at the centre of public deliberation on how to tackle the climate emergency.

There are great hopes for these new processes, as imperfect as they are bound to be, given that they are embryonic institutions that will need development and refinement. The role of citizens' assemblies in unlocking key political issues in Ireland (e.g. equal marriage, abortion) is often offered as an example how mini-publics can play a crucial role in democratic decision-making. There are other remarkable cases across the world (see www.participedia.net) but also evidence that mini-publics can lose their transformative potential when they are badly designed or misused.

Participatory budgeting (PB) is another democratic innovation that has gained momentum in Scotland in the last decade. Originating in Brazil as it transitioned from dictatorship to democracy, PB spread quickly across the Global South, before becoming mainstream in the Global North. The idea is deceptively simple: PB is a process where citizens decide how to spend public funds. But there is more to it: PB is an innovation that forces a disruption in established forms of governance, opening space to change the power dynamics and redefine the relationship between citizens, communities and institutions (Escobar, 2020).

After 30 years travelling the world (over 11,000 localities have engaged in PB), some countries are seeking to institutionalise PB. Scotland is a pioneer in this area. After hosting over 200 PB processes since 2010, there is now an agreement between the Scottish Government and COSLA (Convention of Scottish Local Authorities) that by 2021 all local authorities will allocate at least 1% of their budgets through PB. It's too early to take stock of the actual impact of PB in Scotland. But there is currently a sense that we are at a crossroads: PB could fizzle out under the hospices of local authorities, becoming formulaic and transactional, rather than transformational (O'Hagan et al., 2019). Or PB could become a trojan horse for participatory democracy to remake our institutions from the bottom-up and the inside-out (Escobar et al., 2018).

Beyond these examples there are myriad other democratic innovations, particularly in the new digital public sphere. We now approach the capacity to create more complex, engaging and deliberative online spaces. Everyone is now a digital citizen, wittingly or unwittingly: either an active citizen navigating the troubled waters of online life, or as a passive subject to the commodification and use of personal data to inform how you are governed and marketed.

We have now seen digital innovations across the world, from the constitution-making process in Iceland, to parliamentary innovations in Finland and crowdsourcing policy in

Madrid. We now also know that the quality of dialogue and deliberation online can be designed for. The potential is remarkable. Take for example the case of Virtual Taiwan (vTaiwan), which is co-led by the government of Taiwan and civil society. Amongst other things, vTaiwan has developed the capacity to crowdsource legislation and enable public deliberation at scale (through an algorithm that maps key arguments). This has been deployed with some success on relatively small policy areas, but it's now moving to the mainstream and the capacity developed through these platforms is credited with helping to manage the pandemic swiftly and effectively.

Democratic innovations operate mainly in the spheres of political life. To affect economic life, we must also pay attention to another strand of contemporary transformative practice: the social commons (Henderson et al., 2020a). The paradigm of the commons originated in historical arrangements based on the shared ownership and management of assets such as common pastures, waters, and other natural resources. They were held in common, and this community-based form of governance thus became known as *the commons*.

The crucial contribution of the commons is that they provide an alternative form of social organisation that goes beyond the dualism between state and market. This has inspired a revival of the ideals and practices of the commons across a range of social domains (hence the *social commons* label) from culture to energy, from digital space to land management and education, and from physical assets to intellectual capital. These are all assets and activities held *in common*, that is, community-own and community-managed.

In Scotland, there has been some foundational work done over the last few decades, growing the space for a mutualist-social economy, increasing community ownership, fostering social enterprises, supporting community development trusts and, to a lesser extent, experimenting with workplace democracy and cooperatives. Some of our recent studies (Henderson et al., 2018; Henderson and Escobar, 2019) show how *community anchor organisations* provide a range of social and democratic goods, from public services to environmental action, from housing to transport, and from anti-poverty work to renewable energy.

Community anchors therefore show the potential for an economy of the commons that expands to counterbalance the economies of the state and the market. This would go some way towards changing undemocratic economies and practicing the 'economics of arrival' proposed by Trebeck and Williams (2019). Beyond community ownership and empowerment, developing a 'wellbeing economy' also entails giving citizens new roles in the construction of markets and finances: not just as consumers and employees, but also as co-producers and decision makers through innovations in employee ownership and workplace democracy.

There is much potential for Scotland to invest in strengthening its community economy (Henderson et al., 2020b). There is a growing network of community development trusts running everything from housing to renewables, transport services and various land and urban assets. There is also a vibrant social enterprise sector and an incipient set of mutualist institutions for community-led finance. With some protection from the hostilities of operating on an unequal footing with public sector and private companies, the community

sector could contribute to transform our economy while doing a lot of good at the heart of communities. Augmenting their infrastructure, investment, capacity and coordination can help to generate micro-networks with potential macro-economic power (i.e. local-transnational, digitally-enabled, democracies and economies).

In sum, democratic innovations and the social commons can make powerful contributions to reimagining and remaking public governance and the economic system. They are important scaffolding for a broader programme of large-scale reform comparable to the advent of the welfare state a century ago. That is the generational challenge faced by those who care about collectively governing towards desirable futures.

Desirable futures

The beginning of this new century has been marked by global upheaval and contention, but also by new solidarities and visions for democratic life. History does seldom repeat itself, but certain patterns do. The subversion of power inequalities represents one of the greatest historical drivers of change.

Change sometimes is only possible in testing times. As Roberto Unger puts it, our societies have become addicted to change through crisis. We need to build a system that can change in ordinary times and break the pattern of change through shock. Those who suffer the most in such transitions tend to be those who most need the change.

If policies and decisions fall short from meeting the challenges of our time, let's not assume that other decisions and policies will do. Instead, let's change institutions and decision-making processes so that they are more inclusive, diverse, informed and effective. Otherwise, power inequalities will keep (re)producing entrenched inequalities in health, wealth, education and income. Institutional reform may sound boring, but it contains the seeds of desirable futures.

We must reform politics so that it's not just about party politics; and we must expand democracy so that it's more than electoral democracy. We must also shift from economies of scale and accumulation to economies of scope and imagination, while democratising workplaces and economies.

We are currently undergoing a period of both challenge and renewal on a global scale. In this context, Scotland has the potential to become a strong democratic polity. There are foundations laid across the country, albeit many are under siege. A switch in this direction is not contingent upon independence or the union –the case for democratic innovation and the social commons remains urgent regardless. The challenge of governing democratically in the next few decades requires an enlarged, deeper form of democratic life.

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