

INTRODUCTION

Concluding remarks in conversation with Graham Smith

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Abstract

Conclusions of the Special Issue ‘Trajectories of Democratic Innovations’.

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The Special Issue *Trajectories of Democratic Innovations* illustrates how democratic innovations (DIs) have developed in different ways across European countries, Latin America, and Australia. Their trajectories in space and time vary considerably. A core achievement of this collection is its highlighting of the diversity of these trajectories and practices. The range of theoretical and methodological lenses adopted by the authors further reflects this diversity, offering a multi-faceted picture of both the field and the scholarly debate.

In recognition of this diverse patchwork of contributions to the main theme of this Special Issue on the trajectories of DIs, we invited Graham Smith, who was among the first to propose the much-celebrated definition of DIs (Smith 2009),¹ to comment on some of the issues emerging from the papers. While conversing with Graham, we were particularly interested in connecting the past to the future of DIs and DI-based research by highlighting cross-cutting and underlying questions shared by the contributing authors. To this end, the conversation not only problematised the uses made of the concept of DIs, as well as the ‘tunnel vision’ that can generate skewed understandings. Sometimes we focus too much on the design and lose the big picture. Sometimes we do not know how to grasp empirical findings from less familiar fields. Sometimes we are reluctant to entertain different disciplinary perspectives. All this can make our collective work potentially poorer.

Graham emphasises existing ‘legacy’ problems in this field of study but enthusiastically stresses how times are changing, and new scholars are bringing new perspectives. More ‘political realism’ will be beneficial to enable stronger connections between DIs and the centres of power. If we are to understand the impact of these practices, we need to zoom out from the design and place DIs within their broader sociopolitical environment, which includes social and activist forces. This Special Issue is timely because it helps a more structured debate on what has been done so far by embracing the complexity of these practices. Complexity that, in some cases, means disorder. But, as Graham stated, it is the disorder where ‘the excitement, the change and the differences emerge’.

¹Smith, G. (2009) *Democratic Innovation: Designing Institutions for Citizen Participation*. Cambridge University Press.

We first asked Graham whether the analysis of trajectories may motivate a reflection on the concept of DIs itself. We wondered – is there a need for a more consensual definition of DIs, or is such diversity inherent to the nature and scope of DIs?

Graham Smith: *I have said before that I actually do not think the term “democratic innovation” is very helpful. As someone who bears some responsibility for its popularity, I believe that this is partly because of that focus on innovation. Innovation tends to be attractive. Yet, the definition of innovation is really challenging. What is innovative in one context may not be in another. The classic example here is direct democracy in Switzerland, where this is part of the political DNA, but in most other European countries it is still an emerging (and innovative) practice. So, while the term has become commonplace, I think it is problematic. What most people working in this field are interested in are participatory democratic institutions that have effects that actually make a difference. We need to have a stable definition of the form of these institutions, but also at the same time need to analyse their effect. When this field of study exploded, we arguably became too obsessed with the design of participatory spaces and too often missed the point about their impact. We may have developed another way of engaging citizens that has no material impact on politics. I think there is a challenge here because of the slippage between the social science desire to classify and the normative set of commitments that many people in this field have to work to try to understand the conditions under which citizens can have an effect on the decisions that affect their lives. There is slippage between those two things.*

In this Special Issue, the authors attempt to systematise knowledge and offer an overview of different practices by nurturing a macro-perspective on a highly complex phenomenon – something that is often missed in the current literature. We asked Graham whether he thinks there is any added value in going beyond single case studies in this field.

Graham Smith: *There absolutely is a need for that. Generalising from cases which tend to be exemplary, either in the way they are designed or their impact – or complete failure to have impact – means that we have a skewed understanding of the field of practice. So large-N studies are really significant. Yet, they can come at the cost of abstraction. We need a healthy balance between different approaches. Most people in this field in the early days came from political theory, and we were not particularly methodologically sophisticated. Case studies were a natural way of working and of exemplifying particular theoretical ideas. The result is that we often get a distorted view of what’s out there. Let me give you an example. The amount of literature at the moment about deliberative mini-publics, about citizens’ assemblies – and I work and write on this too – is just extraordinary given how relatively marginal they are in political terms. The way that some people write about them as if they are now empowered institutions that are somehow subverting governments, etc., is just astonishing because it is so far away from reality. Those sorts of obsessions can emerge based on a few case studies. Academics have this capacity to focus on something, often forgetting the broader context and environment. So, for me, a lot of the academic debate at the moment around citizens’ assemblies is really misplaced and unhelpful. We could say the same thing about participatory budgeting a decade or so ago. Suddenly everybody was focused on that form of engagement. Some of the most commonly used forms of participatory processes are co-governance and co-production technologies, which almost no one writes about in our field. But that is the day-to-day reality of what is happening out there. And some of these processes really have a meaningful impact. Yet, we are not looking at them systematically. The balance is somehow out of kilter. I think that reflects the focus on innovation. As I said earlier, if something is not that new, we tend not to look at it. But we should, because it is more pervasive.*

The Special Issue also contributes to gaining insights into how DIs have developed through time in different countries and regions of the world, with a focus on Europe. We believe that the inclusion of articles about Australia and Latin America is an added value to make this debate less Western-centric, but there is still much to do in this respect. We asked Graham what we can learn from a global perspective on DIs.

Graham Smith: *You are absolutely correct about the sort of dynamics at play here. This has to do with the relative resourcing of researchers in different parts of the world. It has to do with the political economy of universities, their funding and priorities, etc. We might point to the interest in participatory budgeting from Latin America as a counterexample. But the work of colleagues from that region who have analysed the range of participatory activity, of which participatory budgeting was only one element, was almost completely ignored by people outside the region. Obviously, participatory budgeting was a very important part of what was happening, but it does not make sense to focus on that alone. More recently, colleagues have begun to raise important questions about the export of deliberative mini-publics directly into spaces, particularly in the Global South, where there are already participatory and deliberative traditions. This may become another form of unwelcome democracy promotion.*

When I was a PhD student, I could never find a panel at conferences to present my work. There was no Democratic Innovation section, no Participatory and Deliberative Democracy section. It was really awkward. Slowly, I began to meet other people like me working in this area who also could not find a place to share their work. We began to meet and organise. And then it mushroomed. But if you look at the early people working on democratic innovations, they tended to be really influenced by deliberative democracy, coming out of traditions of participatory democracy, and looking for cases that exemplified the ideas they were working with. But we often missed some of the more traditional participatory work which was being done in other fields, like in urban studies, development studies or geography, and I think that did not help. There is a legacy problem, a sort of path dependency. It is just bizarre how self-referential academia can be.

Going back to my point about resourcing in universities, those scholars who are working in non-Western European, United States, or Australian universities simply have not had the resources, time, or language skills to get their work out there, and it gives us a really skewed perspective of the world and participatory activity. It is deeply problematic. I am partly responsible for this situation, so it is on people like me to, as much as possible, lift up and highlight work that tends to be marginalised in academic circles. We have got to open ourselves up to colleagues who are seeing the world in a different way. It is much easier for me to stay in my little cocoon and not be challenged. It is striking for me how few papers there are around decolonisation and DIs, or on issues around racial justice and democratic innovation. There are some really good researchers who are doing the work, but they're on the margins. It is starting to bubble up, and it needs to. It needs to be much more celebrated.

Among the lessons we learnt from the papers, we then asked Graham to comment on three main emerging questions that may contribute to future debate in this field. First, some papers make an explicit reference to the influence of political parties, others maintain a broader reference to the political system, and a few make an argument around the political power of other actors. Against the lessons learnt from these perspectives, we started from Graham's conceptualisation of DIs to ask him about the 'political' and its evolution through time.

Graham Smith: *There has been a lack of nuanced analysis of the relationship between established political actors and institutions and DIs. For example, there is only a handful of studies about the attitudes of political elites towards assemblies. You could almost read them in one morning. Similarly, we are missing systematic studies of the interface between DIs and bureaucratic actors and processes. This can be explained somewhat by what we talked about before: the emphasis on design rather than the broader social and political context. Secondly, I think, a disposition or prejudice of colleagues in the field that is antithetical to established institutions. We are often interested in DIs because we're disenchanted with the way political parties operate, or how governments make decisions. I got into this area because I was so excited about the idea of citizens taking power over their lives. It was natural for me not to be that interested in established centres of power. But then you lack an analysis of the dynamics of what is happening and why many participatory institutions are marginalised or lack the effect that advocates hope for and expect. So, one explanation is the focus on design and the antipathy towards established centres of power.*

This is a blind spot and a terrible oversight in our work. So much of what happens in DIs is affected by those dynamics. Without a sophisticated understanding of those dynamics, we do a disservice to the citizens who are participating. I'm really interested in participatory institutions that can have political effects. But if you are interested in that, then you really need to be interested in the actions and practices of established political institutions. You have to understand under what conditions a space is made for participatory institutions by established political actors or claimed by social movement actors. We cannot understand other forms of participatory governance without understanding the interplay between established centres of power and people demanding alternative ways of doing things.

We have been so preoccupied by design! We know well how to run a climate assembly, but what we do not know is how to land them. Part of my work with KNOCA involves me working with commissioners and organisers in government and civil society. I make it very clear that it isn't just about organising citizen participation. There has to be an impact strategy and careful consideration about how to land this work. If you are not willing to think about that at the start, then there is no point in working with you. I think that is the kind of political realism that we really need to inject into the field.

Some papers try to connect DIs to the existing legislation, thus discussing whether and how the law has either positive or negative impacts on some practices. Accordingly, we asked Graham if he thinks that we know enough about the role of the 'rule of law' in this field.

Graham Smith: *I come from political science, and many of my colleagues do not always understand the intricacies of the way that legal and regulatory instruments can both enable and disable innovations. It is striking to me that there are a number of countries now where, for example, participatory budgeting is legally required by local governments, or participation is required under law at certain points, and that's seen as a gain. But when you look at the actual practice, it is reluctant politicians and reluctant civil servants running a process they do not really care about. There is very little effect and a double-edged sword. Having legal and regulatory frameworks can, of course, give licence to politicians who want to do things where they wouldn't be able to in other conditions. This goes back to your question about political power. It is really important to get good laws in place, but it is also really important to understand how they are going to be implemented and to work on that implementation. I think it is really difficult for activists in this space because getting the law (passed) is a huge success. But then comes the hard battle through the institutions of making that law stick and making that law actually do something. There is a danger of taking a formal approach of just acknowledging the existence of the law as if that is enough. We have got to get much more into questions about how these regulations and laws are being realised in practice rather than just their existence. Just looking at the law in isolation does not tell us that much.*

Only a few papers delve into the proactive role of organised civil society in the evolution of DIs, which resonates with evidence that research has been placing democratic institutions at centre stage in this field. We asked Graham, therefore, what he thinks about the actual power of citizens shaping DIs and the possible implications in a polarised society.

Graham Smith: *We have got an unhelpful division of labour within academia where we're interested in the design of processes, other academics are interested in the political power of established institutions, and another lot are interested in the exercise of social power through movements. That is deeply problematic. A few scholars have tried to make those relationships much clearer. Practically, I am very taken by the extent to which questions of democratic innovation or participatory governance are becoming more of a central tenet amongst civil society organisations that have traditionally been focused on achieving a particular substantive policy outcome. It feels like a broader recognition of the failings of democratic structures and practices, of which polarisation is one element. I think that is creating a context within which certain social actors who may otherwise have just been interested in their particular policy outcomes are getting very interested in questions about how we make decisions, and how we can make sure that the outcomes are fair and effective.*

It is interesting to me, for example, that the European Climate Foundation has become more interested in questions about democratic renewal as part of its agenda to achieve robust climate governance. They realise that without robust democratic structures and processes, they won't have any chance to get what they hope for. They see that the climate movement needs to be focused on those democratic questions. That is a fruitful dialogue and opening in the face of political polarisation. The democratic malaise that we're facing means that other actors are in the democratic innovation space. I think that can only be a good thing.

Finally, we asked Graham to comment on the future of DIs and reflect with us on what would need to change, theory-wise, in the conceptualisation of DIs.

Graham Smith: I am part of the past! There is a whole bunch of really interesting social scientists and political theorists who are coming through. They are the future. That is the exciting bit. I celebrate that so many more people are active in this space than 10 or 20 years ago. The future needs to liberate itself from people like me! Your question about DIs and what I would do differently makes me laugh because it gives the impression that I have a degree of power that I have never had. Ideas like DIs capture people's attention, and some ideas get picked up because they arrive at a particular moment. I have been fortunate. It is highly contingent. I often wish I had not used the term "democratic innovation". It has proved to be a fantastic term to bring people together, especially people who wouldn't usually be interested in this space. However, analytically, in social scientific terms, it is a pretty poor concept. And the space has been too dominated by a particular conception of deliberative democracy to the detriment of a broader canvas of participatory theory. That is unfortunate. And empirically, there's an unfortunate dominance of work on advanced industrial nations that is problematic because it has given a very skewed understanding and account of what's happening.

Theoretically and empirically, we need a richer canvas. This goes back again to a degree of path dependency. A lot of this work around DIs emerged at a time when people were very excited about theories of deliberative democracy. That meant that the way we looked at the field of practice was skewed so that a lot of interesting participatory activities were ignored from the start. Richer frameworks, which draw on very different traditions, help us see the world differently. The collection of articles in this Special Issue is really critical because not only does it account for how democratic innovations have developed in particular political contexts, but also how people have approached the field in very different ways. And that is to be celebrated. There is a danger when we try to place an order on something which is disordered because we are attracted to order. But disorder is where the excitement, the change and the differences emerge.

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