

Manuscript version: Author's Accepted Manuscript

The version presented in WRAP is the author's accepted manuscript and may differ from the published version or Version of Record.

Persistent WRAP URL:

<http://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/140814>

How to cite:

Please refer to published version for the most recent bibliographic citation information. If a published version is known of, the repository item page linked to above, will contain details on accessing it.

Copyright and reuse:

The Warwick Research Archive Portal (WRAP) makes this work by researchers of the University of Warwick available open access under the following conditions.

Copyright © and all moral rights to the version of the paper presented here belong to the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. To the extent reasonable and practicable the material made available in WRAP has been checked for eligibility before being made available.

Copies of full items can be used for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge. Provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.

Publisher's statement:

Please refer to the repository item page, publisher's statement section, for further information.

For more information, please contact the WRAP Team at: wrap@warwick.ac.uk.

Theorising about democracy

Michael Saward

What we see depends on how we look. What we see as important in democratic theory depends on the lenses we look through. Different lenses bring into focus different actors, institutions, questions and problems. They embody, reinforce or produce different worldviews and assumptions. In short, different lenses enact different methodologies. To generalise, I will argue that the lens that brings conventional democratic theory into view is more restrictive than it need be – and more optional that it is often thought. Productive alternative views are available using different or adjusted lenses, enabling the viewer to see more types of social phenomena, practices and media as part of a different or more diverse set of contributions and resources to theorizing democracy.¹

After discussing the core topics of democratic theory and the consequences of deploying conventional and alternative methodological lenses, I examine how using different or adjusted lenses can bring to view alternative – and for democratic theory, often unconventional - methods and assumptions. In that context, I discuss one specific example: how methods and assumptions at the heart of design theory can act as prompts for theorising about democracy in new and promising ways.

The topics of democratic theory

Democratic theory can reasonably be argued to consist of a wide yet bounded set of topics:

- The meaning of democracy
- The value or justification of democracy
- The appropriate political community or communities for democracy, or the appropriate contexts for democracy
- The nature and extent of individual rights and constitutionalism for democracy
- Political equality as a foundational principle, for example as embodied in the electoral principle
- The nature, place and quality of deliberation, participation and decision in democracy

¹ Work on this topic has been funded by a Major Research Fellowship from The Leverhulme Trust.

Each of these topics denotes a variable field of rich debate. A given example of work in (or on) democratic theory might interpret, mix or rank these very differently to a second one. The justification of democracy, for example, has pitted foundationalists against fallibilists, consequentialists against deontologists, proceduralists against substantivists, and absolutists against relativists². In the age of Bolsonaro, Erdogan, Orban and Trump, arguably questions of justification fold into debates about democracy's very meaning (a conjecture for another time). Nonetheless, this set of six topics captures the conventional range of democratic theory at a general level³. In recent years, the primary focus has been on deliberation, representation, and democracy's epistemic qualities.

At a general level, the conventional lens, when trained on one or more of these core topics, involves bringing certain methodological characteristics to bear on the latter. These characteristics can be summarised as follows.

1. An emphasis on normativity - establishing that democracy is a good or the best form of government with an assumption that a single-best argument is, in principle, available. In its strongest form, this emphasis becomes an *equation* of political theory with normative political theory (see for example List and Valentini 2016).
2. An emphasis on abstraction from particular spatial and temporal contexts, not least on questions of definition and justification. A general and often implicit sense of the modern or the contemporary as context underlines (rather than undermines) the point. It carries an implicit assumption that arguments that tend to the abstract are likely to be stronger and more adequate to the tasks of the field.
3. The view that foundational principles, above all that of political equality (or perhaps just equality), are crucial, and that in principle they have single best meanings.

² The mid-20th century was the heyday of grand theory discussions of democracy's 'justification' – Purcell (1973) remains an excellent overview.

³ Any of the six topics can be taken up by fundamental critics of democracy as well as by avowed democrats. Either can in principle contribute to theorising about democracy by so doing. To construct or positively contribute to a *specific* theory of democracy is a different thing. The latter necessarily involves respecting a democratic minimum, falling below which means that a model, vision or design does not qualify as democratic. The democratic minimum, in my view, consists of a specified community or unit, a conception of governance, political equality, individual freedoms, minimal citizen resources, and constitutionalisation of rights and rules. This set of components leaves plenty of room for interpretation, and for variations above the minimum. The first type of work is work *on* democratic theory. The second is work *of* democratic theory.

4. These views and emphases in addition to the importance of central concepts such as participation and deliberation prompt the conduct of a good deal of democratic thinking in terms of *models*.⁴
5. The theorist or observer adopting a standpoint of more or less unspecified externality to any one, or any group of, circumstances in which democracy may be constructed or practiced.
6. The use of stylized examples – isolated and adapted to the purposes of argument rather than explored in their real-world complexity. To cite the OED’s definition of ‘stylize’, examples are ‘conventionalized’ when viewed through the lens of convention.
7. An emphasis on institutional or structural features of politics, such as formal rules.
8. A focus on written academic work as theory’s vehicle, particularly in recognised political theory or related journals and books published by university presses and their commercial equivalents.⁵

A number of these methodological features overlap. A given theorist or observer addressing or working within the conventional approach invariably will enact a distinct mix of these emphases.

Using different lenses

A recent study of theorising as an activity in the social sciences noted that ‘theorising involved finding a perspective or “lens” through which a problem should be viewed and an invitation to see the problem in a new or revised way’ (Hammond 2018). ‘Revised’ ways of seeing democratic theory may be done by using a conventional methodological lens – for example, the ‘turns’ toward deliberative and then epistemic accounts of democracy in recent decades. But ‘new’ ways? Different or adjusted lenses are available; looking through them can bring new resources and methodologies to theorising about democracy (‘turns’ can equate to turning within a defined circle, or ever-decreasing circles). On this view, a notably wide and open-ended range of ideas, arguments, speculations or provocations about ‘democracy’ could reasonably be seen as potential contributions to theorising about

⁴ The use of models is near ubiquitous. David Held (2006), expanding upon the work of C.B. MacPherson (1977), states that each model is ‘essentially an analytical device’ that captures ‘a body of ideas’ at the heart of (e.g.) the ‘classical’, the ‘liberal’, or the ‘deliberative’ approach to democracy. Key models have included the competitive elite, participatory, liberal-representative, deliberative, associative, and cosmopolitan.

⁵ One could readily add to this list other characteristics, such as Western-centric orientation and a certain contiguity assumption.

democracy. Work need not be conventionally ‘theory’ in order to contribute to theorising. It need not offer a full or rounded theory of democracy, as opposed to asking pertinent questions, raising problems, or articulating potentialities with respect to democracy.

What avenues (or potential avenues) of thinking about democracy may be opened up if different or adjusted lenses are used to look at the topics at the heart of democratic theory? I link the following points to the numbered characteristics of conventional approaches outlined above.

1. Treating normativity differently – or indeed largely setting it aside or delaying its treatment. Democracy’s value may be seen as a contingent matter, depending contextual variables and discourses. It may be seen as an emergent property. An assumption of one-best argument for democracy’s absolute or comparative justification may be set aside in favour of its plural values.
2. Viewing democracy through the lens of alternative temporal and spatial contexts. Unconventional temporal contexts may for example include the ‘everyday’ and the episodic. Spatial contexts may include the non-contiguous (such as democracy in disjointed collectivities, e.g. the diasporic) and the contested (such as democracy in or for places shared by indigenous and settler communities). The assumed strengths of would-be acontextual perspectives can be questioned, and the importance of cultural, linguistic and historical context taken seriously. [Explicit acknowledgement of context tends to occur in passing and is often not problematized, as for example in Gutmann and Thompson: ‘Although we believe that the principles are relevant for societies other than our own, we develop them in the context of American society’ (1996, 6-7).]
3. Accepting that principles such as equality and freedom have contested meanings in different contexts, and that tracing the contest of meanings is critical to democracy’s character and dynamics. A level of coherence of meaning in context, or of persistent lines of dispute over meanings, can become central to conceptions of democracy’s nature and value.
4. Adopting a creative scepticism about received models of democracy as starting points. Given the great variety of principles, institutions, orderings and sites of democracy, it is undesirable to ossify democratic theory into a limited set of abstracted models (even with evidence of innovative thinking within models). New lenses can help to detach particular mechanisms from the models that conventionally feature them – the

deliberative forum in the deliberative model, for example – and help observers to resist ‘straw man’ models (the so-called ‘aggregative model of democracy’ is arguably the most egregious example⁶).

5. Exploring alternative standpoints or perspectives from which to consider practices of democracy. This might for example draw on ‘standpoint theory’ – especially versions stressing its pluralistic rather than epistemic insights (e.g. Hekman 1997) - resisting the adoption of would-be omniscient or above-context perspectives. It may involve embracing varied lived experiences of democracy in and across contexts.
6. Drawing on detailed or immersive examples of political practice, aiming for a degree of fidelity to actual events and people’s understandings of them. This alternative view may also involve a commitment to exploring multiple contrasting or comparable examples of practice. Both the detail and the multiplicity militate against the selective and reductive use of stylized examples in theoretical work. As Schaffer (1998) has demonstrated, the meaning and force of ‘democracy’ changes, and sometimes transforms, as it emerges from or takes root in different countries, cultures and languages.
7. Trying out different or adjusted lenses may bring into focus that which produces or sustains formal rules, structures or institutions, rather than starting analysis with the latter. In this way, it may bring to the fore underlying practices of or pertinent to understandings of democracy, and the meanings of those practices to those who carry out or experience them.
8. Opening up to the contributions of different types of work, carried by different outlets and produced in written work outside democratic theory conventions. This may include opening up to using work in non-written forms such as physical objects or performances.

This list is, of course, a selective snapshot of an open-ended range of ways of approaching the core topics of democratic theory.

Sources of methodological innovation

Thus through different lenses the core topics making up democratic theory can be seen anew in ways that are broadly methodological. Wider and less conventional views can add to our

⁶ Young (2000) is one example of a prominent democratic theory text that assumes the straightforward existence of an ‘aggregative model’. She cites no advocates when describing this ‘model’.

current or conventional perspectives, or else disrupt, disquiet or ‘defrost’ accepted conceptions (Mattingley 2019, drawing on Arendt). This implies that democratic theorists may need to attend more to, or borrow more from, methodological perspectives outside their field – some of them radically outside. So let us turn (too) briefly from the nature of new thinking to its possible sources and vehicles.

Picture an inner circle containing conventional methodologies of democratic theory. We can map a number of potential sources of innovation (along the lines outlined above) in four concentric circles around this core (opening up the ‘lens’ through which the work of democratic theory is viewed by four steps, if you will). The first circle outside the core contains certain parts of comparative politics and other fields of political science where explanations of democracy’s nature and value are sustained or contested (studies of institutions such as Brazilian elections for example). It is not a great stretch to argue that, for example, comparative work in the tradition of Lijphart should influence what is taken to be the core of democratic theory (see Hendriks 2010 for an excellent crossover example), encouraging renewed attention to democracy’s contextuality. The same may be true for closely focused accounts of local practices of ‘ordinary democracy’ (Tracy 2010), or the radically revised view of democracy’s temporality in Wolin’s (1994) episodic take on ‘fugitive democracy’. Relevant challenges to conventional democratic theory methodologies also emerge from recent work confronting methodological blind spots in comparative political theory – especially with regard to Indigenous practices and understandings (Rollo 2018; Little 2019).

The second circle consists of methodological perspectives from other academic disciplines, such as philosophy, cultural studies, law, anthropology and history. Up to a point, methodological innovations in the context of conventional democratic theory from some of these sources is familiar enough. Philosophers Joseph Carens (2004) and Michael Walzer (1994) speak to the power of contextual and situated work on democracy’s nature and value. Feminist standpoint theory can fruitfully unsettle conventional ideas of the theorist’s positioning, with or without strong epistemological assumptions (Hekman 1997). A close focus on local, informal, cultural practices is sometimes brought to bear explicitly on democratic theory by anthropological authors such as Geertz (2000) and Schaffer (1998), challenging assumptions around normativity and acontextuality as well as Western-centrism.

The third circle contains other forms of writing or speech. These could include for example biographies of key political figures who negotiate practices of ‘real existing democracy’ (Schmitter’s (2011) phrase) conveying inner workings and struggles in aspirant democracies. They might also include works of fiction, such as Jorge Luis Borges’ grappling with the vagaries of political representation in his short story ‘The Congress’ (2001) (see O’Neill 2001), or the vivid details of negotiating life in a democratic anarchist society in Ursula Le Guin’s science fiction novel *The Dispossessed* (2002).

Approaches from the fourth, ‘outer’, circle are interventions that take mostly non-written forms from other domains of practice such as performance, painting and sculpture. Examples from the outer circle will likely inspire the most scepticism from those working in the heartlands of democratic theory. Artworks, not least conceptual artworks whose main product is an idea conveyed or suggested by an object or action rather than the object or action itself, can prompt fundamental reflection on political concepts and issues. They can provoke debate, questioning and new possibilities in often distinctive ways by virtue of being artworks; thus they can contribute to theorising. For example, the performance art of Raivo Puusemp (1980) prompts questions about sincerity, effectiveness, and motivation regarding the democratic role of political representatives. And the video installation *Democracy* by Francesco Vezzoli (2007) drives home in a way that writing, arguably, cannot capture the troubling sense of composed isolation of the din of electoral politics from substantive citizen concerns⁷.

The democratic theory core and the four circles are illustrative devices only; there are no doubt other ways to represent such distinctions. Work in the outer circles may often be practice-based or ‘enactive’ (Rollo 2018). They are less abstracted from cases or contexts, less (or differently) ‘normative’, display little apparent intention to potentially contribute to a body of debate and knowledge called democratic theory, and/or involve practice that is not written (even if it is written *about*, like a number of Indigenous political understandings and the artworks noted above).

Theorising versus theory: the example of design

According to Hammond (2018), ‘Theorising is the process that leads to theory, theory is built, theorising is the process of building’. The work of theorising democracy can follow

⁷ I make this case more fully in Saward (2020).

many different strategies that adopt or adapt methodologies from the circles sketched in the previous section. Here, I describe briefly one such strategy – the effort to address democratic theory’s core topics in my own current work on ‘democratic design’. That work involves methodological appropriations from Design Studies in particular (and so is an instance of engagements in the ‘second circle’). The notion of design here draws on but goes beyond current democratic theory work on institutional or constitutional design. It is potentially an antidote to ‘models of democracy’ – it breaks models down to their components, combines them with new elements, in the name of producing more context-specific, often hybrid conceptions of democracy.

In my view, we need to regard democracy as a much more diverse set of practices and mechanisms than current democratic theory approaches suggest. A systematic approach to democratic design arguably requires reaching outside democratic theory, and even political theory. It requires engaging closely with design thinking (Cross 2011), a body of work normally located in university departments of art or design and sometimes in business schools (Brown and Katz 2009). Working on democratic design has also meant engaging with *practice theory*, more often associated with sociology and ethnography, to develop a new set of tools to think with (Nicolini 2009, 12). Both design thinking and practice theory convey a view of the political world as more dynamic and adaptable (and therefore ‘designable’) than current approaches in democratic theory.

If democratic theory sustains dominant views about what democracy is because (for example) it starts with the normative assumption that democracy ought to be *deliberative*, then design thinking’s challenge – dare to think what democracy *could* be - can be liberating. If democratic theory seeks certainty about democracy’s meaning and value, then design thinking’s precept of modelling within *uncertainty* (experiment with innovative institutions and monitor what happens), along with a certain humility (to design is normally to *redesign*) can be likewise. Design methodology also challenges a standard view of the theorist as omniscient observer, highlighting user perspectives and lived experience. In Design Studies, ‘co-production’ and ‘co-design’ are key guiding terms. Applied to thinking about democracy, this approach prompts the view that many actors, including ordinary citizens, can play a role in the design and re-design of political practices and institutions.

Design methodology does not centre on deduction or induction. It is not a search for one correct answer – for example, to the question ‘what structures of democracy will work best in

Scotland over the next decade?’ Rather, it mandates a search that involves experimentation, reflection, and an openness to revision. In this respect, it is a form of *abductive* reasoning. In the words of C.S. Peirce: ‘Deduction proves that something *must* be; induction shows that something *actually* is operative; abduction suggests that something *may* be’ (cited in Cross 2011, 27). There is no single best form of a democratic system because spatial, temporal and other contextual factors constrain in detailed ways what may be workable. Democracy can legitimately look and feel different – different institutions, practices and principles - from one context to another. Methodologically, this may involve extending some promising existing democratic theory methodological insights, for example Archon Fung’s pragmatic approach, which ‘begins in media res – with the social circumstances and especially the governance problems of particular societies as they are’ (Fung 2012, 610) - though of course the nature of the ‘circumstances’ and ‘problems’ remains open to debate.⁸

A design approach to democracy takes a contextual and pluralistic approach to normativity. For example, contextual approaches highlight how normativity *emerges* in time and space, opening it up in turn to radical value pluralism. Related to this, methods derived from the study of *performativity* in Cultural Studies and Performance Studies can highlight the ways in which principles such as equality and freedom are rooted in practice and invocation. Arguably, political principles are primarily things that we *do* – they are defined, adapted and applied *through* people’s practices in specific times and places - rather than acontextual norms.

Practice theory helps to problematize presuppositions about the solidity of institutions (Bueger and Gadinger (2014) have explored this path with regard to international relations). From the perspective of practice theory, political institutions exist by virtue of the (formal and informal) practices that create or sustain them. Influential definitions of ‘institutions’ tend to downplay the potentially disruptive and unstable effects of practice. Huntington’s definition of institutions as ‘stable, valued, recurring pattern of behaviour’ and March and Olsen’s as ‘a relatively enduring collection of rules and organised practices’ emphasise the stability or durability of institutions (Huntington 1968, 12; March and Olsen 2008, 1). Democratic design methodology needs to be attuned to institutional change and contingency, rooted in practices characterised only in part by their regularity.

⁸ See also the problem-based approach of Warren (2017).

Gaining new perspectives on democracy's possibilities by appropriating methodological resources from (for example) design thinking, practice theory, and performativity theory holds out the promise of breaking through restrictive subject boundaries. Such appropriations, *because* they involve methodological shifts in the context of democratic theory, provide tools to mount challenges to received wisdom. Theoretical innovation demands methodological innovation, even among researchers for whom 'methodology' has not traditionally been a primary focus. Methodologies matter - methods are active (Lury and Wakefield 2012), drawing attention to some phenomena and away from others.

In short, there are times in ongoing and complex debates, such as those about the forms and values of democratic governance, when it is necessary to look at the field's core topics through new lenses, taking stock of key assumptions and making new connections. A diverse ecology of ideas and approaches is a healthy ecology; more ways of theorising democracy can mean more rigorous critical appraisal of any one approach, and therefore more robust democratic theory.

References

- Borges, J.L. (2001), *The Book of Sand and Shakespeare's Memory* (London: Penguin)
- Brown, T. with B. Katz (2009), *Change by Design* (New York: Harper Business)
- Bueger, C. and Gadinger, F. (2014), *International Practice Theory: new perspectives* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan)
- Carens, J.H. (2004), 'A contextual approach to political theory', in *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 7, 2
- Cross, N. (2011), *Design Thinking* (London: Bloomsbury)
- Fung, A. (2012), 'Continuous institutional innovation and the pragmatic conception of democracy', in *Polity* 44, 4
- Geertz, C. (2000), 'The world in pieces: culture and politics at the end of the century' in C. Geertz, *Available Light* (Princeton: Princeton University Press)
- Gutmann, A. and Thompson, D. (1998), *Democracy and Disagreement* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press)
- Hammond, M (2018), "'An interesting paper but not sufficiently theoretical": What does theorising in social research look like?' in *Methodological Innovations* 11, 2
- Hekman, S. (1997), 'Truth and method: feminist standpoint theory revisited', in *Signs* 22, 2
- Held, D. (2006), *Models of Democracy* (second edition) (Cambridge: Polity)

- Hendriks, F. (2010), *Vital Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press)
- Huntington, S.P. (1968), *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven: Yale University Press)
- Le Guin, U. (2002), *The Dispossessed* (London: Gollancz)
- List, C. and Valentini, L. (2016), 'The methodology of political theory', in H. Cappelen, T. Szabo Gendler and J. Hawthorne (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophical Methodology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press)
- Little, A. (2019), 'The politics of Makarrata: Understanding indigenous-settler relations in Australia', in *Political Theory*, OnlineFirst doi.org/10.1177/0090591719849023
- Lury, C. and Wakeford, N. (2012), *Inventive Methods: The happening of the social* (London and New York: Routledge)
- MacPherson, C.B. (1977), *The Life and Times of Liberal Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press)
- March, J.G and Olsen, J.P. (2008), 'Elaborating the "new institutionalism"', in S.A. Binder, R.A.W. Rhodes and B.A. Rockman (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Political Institutions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press)
- Mattingley, C. (2019), 'Defrosting concepts, destabilizing doxa: Critical Phenomenology and the perplexing particular', in *Anthropological Theory* doi.org/10.1177/1463499619828568
- Nicolini, D. (2009), 'Zooming in and out: studying practices by switching theoretical lenses and trailing connections', in *Organisation Studies* 30, 12
- O'Neill, J. (2001), 'Representing people, representing nature, representing the world', in *Environment and Planning C: Government and Policy*, 19
- Purcell, E.A., Jr. (1973), *The Crisis of Democratic Theory: scientific naturalism and the problem of value* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky)
- Puusemp, R. (1980), *Beyond Art: dissolution of Rosendale, NY* (Highland Art Agents) (reprinted by Project Press, Grazer Kunstverein and Utah Museum of Contemporary Art, 2012)
- Rollo, T. (2018), 'Back to the rough ground: Textual, oral and enactive meaning in comparative political theory', in *European Journal of Political Theory* doi.org/10.1177/1474885118795284
- Saward, M. (forthcoming 2020), *Making Representations* (Rowman and Littlefield/ECPR Press)
- Schaffer, F. (1998), *Democracy in Translation* (Cornell: Cornell University Press)
- Schmitter, P. (2011), 'Diagnosing and designing democracy in Europe', in S. Alonso, J. Keane and W. Merkel (eds), *The Future of Representative Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press)
- Tracy, K. (2010), *Challenges of Ordinary Democracy: A case study in deliberation and dissent* (University Park: Penn State Press)
- Vezzoli, F. (2007), *Democrazy* (Milan: Electa)

Walzer, M. (1994), *Thick and Thin: moral argument at home and abroad* (Notre Dame and London: University of Notre Dame Press)

Warren, M.E. (2017), 'A problem-based approach to democratic theory', in *American Political Science Review* 111, 1

Wolin, S. (1994), "'Fugitive democracy'", in *Constellations* 1, 1