

SOWING SEEDS OF DEMOCRACY

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As we navigate a changing world marked by rapid technological advancements, political radicalization, growing geopolitical hostilities, and a planet on fire, one might easily forget the value, power, and beauty of democracy with its capacity for renewal. Yet, periods of profound change carry deep ambivalence as they hold both the potential for democratizing democracy and the risk of it crumbling under the weight of these changes. In this time of great unsettledness, the future of democracy hangs precariously in the balance: in 2023, democracy declined in 42 countries (V-Dem Institute, 2024). As the pillars of democracy — ranging from the freedom of expression, the integrity of elections, the rule of law, to the protection of civil liberties — are eroding, this book aims to sow seeds that can help reclaim, reinforce, and complement these vital elements in the face of modern autocratization.

Among all known political forms, democracy has the best chance of steering technologies to work for the public good, uniting democratic-minded people of all kinds, and keeping the planet habitable. The urgency of contemporary problems calls on us not to sideline democracy as less important than the “real issues,” but instead to reevaluate its essence, to embrace its spirit anew, and to reinvigorate the very foundations upon

which democratic societies thrive. Without fundamental changes to the way it is practiced, the democratic way of life will not be able to continue in the wake of the transformations to come.

Building on this observation as a starting point, the analyses and respective proposals in this book aim to demonstrate that democracies are hampered in responding to the challenges of the present not in virtue of being democratic, but rather because they are not democratic *enough*. We thus attempt to present some ideas on how to possibly revive democracies, and how to develop democratic counter-narratives, accompanying recent analyses that have profoundly shown us “how democracies die” (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2019) or “how democracy ends” (Runciman, 2018).

Of course, a range of approaches already aims to renew democracy, most prominently in the form of democratic innovations that seek to deepen citizen engagement (Elstub and Escobar, 2019; Smith, 2009). They explore ways to engage citizens in political processes and address democratic deficits, often attempting to find solutions for concrete policy problems at hand. This includes such formats as mini-publics, citizen assemblies, participatory budgeting, and deliberative forums. Each of these approaches has its merits, particularly for preconfigured settings. We take a slightly different and rather organic perspective in this book, aiming to encompass approaches that may primarily address the unconfigured democratic spaces.

Each essay in this book sows a democratic seed. Each of these seeds carries the capacity for renewal, just like the DNA resting in a natural seed. This capacity comes from an abundance of knowledge worked out over time, compressed into a packed bundle of possibilities for future flourishing. These seeds thus emerge from existing ecosystems of knowledge as the authors demonstrate. Our proposals aim to open space for academic and practical conversations around ideas that mostly remain at the edges of mainstream discussions of democratic renewal. As with all seeds, some may take root and develop, receiving enough resources and care, while others will not find such hospitable conditions.

Just as a tree must produce many seeds so that a new tree may arise, the future of democracy is in better hands if manifold perspectives on its renewal are offered. We deliberately adopted a multi-perspective approach,

embracing heterogeneity to foster a rich dialogue across various forms of knowledge. As Maya Angelou once famously put it: “In diversity there is beauty and there is strength,” be it cultural, biological, or democratic diversity. The book comprises this diversity in three sections: seeds for reorientation, seeds for repair, and seeds for the new.

The first section, “Seeds for Reorientation,” serves as the foundation, offering ideas that challenge the traditional knowledge underpinning mainstream concepts of democracy. Ece Temelkuran sets the tone by arguing that in these harsh times, what we need is not hope — which she interprets as a paralyzed response to the present — but rather “faith.” She suggests that secular faith is more practical and grounded than hope, as it embodies the patience and determination required to do the “thankless work” demanded by our current circumstances.

In his essay “Compassionate Governance and Attaining Flourishing in Democracy,” Andrej Zwitter also emphasizes that an emotional shift is necessary for reorienting our democracies. Drawing on Aristotle, he argues that compassion and agape are crucial for recalibrating democratic representation to serve the “most vulnerable, not the most powerful.” Zwitter believes that this approach can counter the overly materialistic and rationalist limitations of democracy, paving the way for both individual and collective flourishing.

Madhulika Banerjee's essay “Democracy Between Plural Knowledge Systems” provides a path for reorientation in this regard, investigating the planetary crisis in the context of modern production systems and their impact on the environment. She emphasizes the need to acknowledge and integrate non-modern knowledge systems, which historically operated with a deep respect for the planet. These knowledges could offer potential solutions to the planetary crisis by revitalizing local, diverse, and democratic production practices. She therefore suggests the democratization of the relationship between scientific and non-modern knowledge.

Minna Salami calls for a turn to sensuous knowledge in her essay “Intersections & Interventions: Black Feminism in the Age of the Polycrisis.” She draws parallels between the intersecting oppressions faced by Black women and the multiple crises confronting our planet. On the basis of these parallels, she introduces the transformative potential of

Black feminist thought to reshape our understanding of reality, power dynamics, and agency. Central here is the role of embodied knowledge, expressed through poetry, music, and the arts, in providing a deeper understanding of the present and its challenges.

While it is important to recognize that new forms of colonialism are currently evolving, such as China's approach to its neighboring states and particularly in Africa, it is equally important to understand how previous forms of colonialism still impact contemporary societies. Tobias Müller's essay focuses in that regard on the significance of oppressed groups to properly frame a progressive democratic politics. In "From Climate Coloniality to Pluriversalizing Democracy," Müller argues that addressing climate justice requires acknowledging the historical impacts of colonialism and extractivism on society's relationship with the planet. He advocates for a pluriversal approach, rooted in indigenous and feminist knowledge, to tackle climate injustice and prevent further harm to marginalized groups. Müller stresses the importance of a democratic response that challenges Eurocentric norms, extends representation, and supports grassroots movements for planetary repair.

Louis J. Kotzé takes up Müller's call, and in his essay "Sustainable Development Cannot be the Future We Want" challenges the concept of sustainable development, critiquing it as a neoliberal invention that is in conflict with democracy. Kotzé contends that sustainable development is used as a superficial response to the deeper causes of ecological decline. The essay argues that the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), despite their ambitious aims, are hindered by their foundation in sustainable development dogma, which fails to provide the radical transformations needed to address the planetary crisis in a democratic manner.

Complementing the broad and idealistic perspectives of the first section, the essays in the second section, "Seeds for Repair," focus on contemporary democratic practices and explore how democracy can be rejuvenated from within. Grounded in the constraints of our present reality, these essays are primarily concerned with revitalizing existing democratic institutions.

In "Tackling Discursive Polarization: Welcome Radical Ideas but not Aggression!," Michael Brüggemann discusses how journalism and digital platforms contribute to discursive polarization within societies,

emphasizing the harmful impact of polarized debates on democratic decision-making and societal cohesion. He suggests that media outlets and digital platforms should shift their focus towards highlighting common ground, bridging differences, and featuring constructive voices. He further argues for the adoption of practices such as constructive journalism, solutions-oriented reporting, and algorithmic curation that promote substantive dialogue and depolarization while still allowing space for radical ideas and critical debates. But it is not only journalism and social media platforms that can address harmful polarization and rising autocracy: universities can also play a central role in repairing democracy.

John Aubrey Douglass investigates this power of universities in “Universities as Truthsayers,” particularly in the context of rising neo-nationalist movements and autocratic-leaning governments. Douglass focuses on universities in liberal democracies and discusses their potential to combat negative perceptions, engage with local communities, and contribute to socioeconomic prosperity. He emphasizes the importance of universities as sources of truth, knowledge, and rational thinking, suggesting that they should expand their research portfolios, improve communication strategies, and play a vital role in shaping public discourse.

If building common ground is important when it comes to ideological polarization, “commoning” is seen as equally important for repairing a polarized political economy. The underlying analysis, that the wealthy and powerful should not have more to say in a democracy, is key to Isabel Feichtner’s essay “Socialization as a Counter-Right to Democratize and Reclaim the Common,” in which she explores how law can contribute to a democratic social-ecological transformation. Feichtner discusses transformative law and its connection to social practice, highlighting two promising projects: commoning and socialization. Commoning involves collective self-organization for equitable provisioning and non-destructive value production. The movement to socialize housing in Berlin is investigated as an example of a transformative counter-right, potentially democratizing society through the emergence of a new common.

In “Dethroning Elections: Why the Future of Democracy Requires New Ways of Picking Leaders,” Max Krahe argues that elections, which have become synonymous with democracy, can actually undermine democracy’s core principles. Krahe contends that elections create a hierarchy

by focusing on candidates rather than voters, leading to division and a distinction between leaders and the electorate. He examines the historical shift from sortition (random selection) to elections, driven by arguments for selecting capable rulers and preventing instability, but emphasizes that elections favor the wealthy and foster psychological and societal issues such as apathy, pride, and rage. Krahe suggests that a combination of sortition and experimentation could offer a more genuinely democratic and inclusive alternative to elections.

This critique of representative democracy is shared by Bruno Leipold. In “Instructing our Representatives: An Argument in Favor of the Imperative Mandate,” he joins Krahe’s call to critically examine representative democracy by highlighting the prevalence of politicians’ broken promises and their alignment with corporate interests. Leipold argues that the current understanding of democracy as representative government lacks accountability, since representatives often disregard their constituents’ wishes once elected. He discusses the historical concept of the imperative mandate — which emphasizes binding representatives to the instructions of their constituents — and suggests various ways to implement it, such as Constituency Assemblies.

The third section, “Seeds for the New,” deals with emerging phenomena for which no blueprints for democratizing exist. This section offers unconventional ideas that may add to, substantially alter, or even break away from existing democratic practices and institutions.

Without a doubt, this kind of new phenomenon is embodied in the recent expansive usage of large language models (LLMs). In “Generative AI and Democracy,” Judith Simon examines the rapid rise of Generative AI and its implications for democracy. She discusses the capabilities of Generative AI to produce high-quality text, images, and videos, highlighting its potential for deception and manipulation. The problems of deception are categorized into four aspects: deception about human interaction, deception about AI capabilities, deceptive results generated by AI, and deception as the result of integrating AI into other services and products. Simon emphasizes the need for a multi-faceted approach involving legal, technical, and other measures to address the challenges posed by Generative AI, including labeling content, promoting transparency, and fostering education that encompasses an understanding of AI’s impact on society.

Avoiding the danger and using the advantages is also what Rahel Süß argues for in her essay “Experimental Democracy for the Digital Age.” She discusses the impact of predictive technologies on democracy, highlighting the risks of pre-emptive strategies and the loss of an open future. She proposes a model of experimental democracy as a way to renew democracy in the digital era. The model aims to empower citizens in shaping the digital future by shifting power, building sustainable digital communities, and opening up opportunities for experimentation. Süß suggests using technology to challenge, build, and scale power, focusing on community experiences and inclusivity, ultimately aiming for a future-opening democracy organized around the principles of plurality and conflict.

Novel technologies are also a prerequisite for what Frederic Hanusch calls a “planetary democracy.” In his essay “Planetary Democracy: Towards Radical Inclusivity,” Hanusch argues for a shift in the concept of democracy to incorporate the planet and its interconnected forces. The need for radical inclusivity of both human and non-human is discussed, drawing parallels to historical struggles for civil rights and representation of marginalized groups. The establishment of planetary democracy involves recognizing non-human entities’ interests, utilizing advanced technologies like sensors and machine learning to communicate with them, and experimenting with new democratic institutions that encompass more-than-human agencies to keep the Earth habitable.

Such an account goes well beyond currently established anthropocentric democracies, requiring imagination, which is at the center of Maki Sato’s essay “Incorporating Futures into Democracy: Imagining More.” In this essay she challenges the limitations of conventional future predictions based on past trends and numerical modeling, proposing an approach that embraces creativity. Sato discusses the necessity of considering the perspectives of future generations, non-human entities, and the planetary commons in decision-making. The concept of an “imagined community” is expanded over time to create a sense of belonging to a shared ideal future, prompting citizens to collaboratively design and backcast from that vision.

Even though such imagination is targeted at the far future, it is based in the here and now, within and through our existing bodies; a circumstance that requires greater attention as Anna Katsman not only envisions but enables us to experience in her essay “An Art of Association:

Democracy and Dance.” She presents the concept of contact improvisation as a practice that fosters democratic values through physical interaction and collaboration. The practice involves entering a space with others and engaging in movement based on mutual sensing, trust-building, and shared agency. Through non-verbal communication and responsiveness, participants create a dynamic environment that mirrors democratic principles of mutual respect, cooperation, and equal participation, challenging conventional structures of democracy and fostering an embodied sense of togetherness.

Lastly, László Upor’s essay on “Think Future, Act Present: Dreams of Creative Democracies” emphasizes the importance of social movements as transformative agents in repairing and revitalizing democracies. Upor therefore draws parallels between the interconnectedness of the human body and society, asserting that social movements are vital to repairing and regenerating the sensitive fabric of democracy. He highlights the power of collective action in raising awareness, creating community, and effecting change, while also emphasizing the need for adaptability, imagination, and collaboration to address the complex challenges facing societies today. After all, this is a call to action for everyone to practice democracy anew.

Understanding and enacting democratization in the sense advocated for by these seeds means that varying approaches can and should exist next to one another: the more diverse the democratic fabrics become, the more resilient they are. Again, not all seeds will take root. Some of the essays are meant more as provocations for thought and experimentation, rather than proposals for direct implementation. The aim is to stimulate thought and practice around these issues. Only through the democratic process of testing these ideas in a public space will it become clearer which will take off. And as uncertainty is constitutive for democratic futures, different approaches must be tried, without aiming for a master approach that outcompetes all other approaches. Just as seeds become plants, the essays in this collection also form an ecosystem that is closely connected, composed of interacting parts. In most cases, the approaches nurture rather than harm each other, such as sustainable digital democracy enabling planetary democracy and vice versa. Yet in other cases, we might

find rivalries when, for example, the recognition of climate coloniality demands even more fundamental changes than a comprehensive reform of existing representative and electoral democracies.

Quick fixes and one-size-fits-all solutions rarely succeed in the complex task of democratizing democracies. Instead, the emergence of new democratic practices is promising when these practices are curated and tailored to the histories and aspirations of a society. Our approach is thus closely aligned to what Albert Hirschman named possibilism: “an approach to the social world that would stress the unique rather than the general, the unexpected rather than the expected, and the possible rather than the probable” (Hirschman 1971, p. 28). In that respect, this book is an invitation. May these essays ignite debate, inspire us to transcend the confines of pessimism and complacency, and motivate us to cultivate seeds of democratic futures in our daily lives and beyond.¹

1 This book grew out of conversations among fellows at THE NEW INSTITUTE in 2022–23, most of whom were part of “The Future of Democracy” program.

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