# Infrastructures of Democracy: Lewinian Group Dynamics and the Management of Social Change (1930s-1940s)

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## 1. Introduction[1]

A conventional understanding of infrastructure conceives of it as "a broad range of systems and services that support or sustain the function of the economy and society, including roads, railways, utility grids, and telecommunication networks."[2] Contrary to a broader understanding that may also take into account language, media, standards, and the like as infrastructure shaping and shaped by our daily lives, this narrow definition highlights its material and technical aspects: Infrastructure is understood as "an ensemble of tangible institutions designed for the anonymous population at large and around which an everyday practice has established itself."[3] However, including the less tangible, and taking up AbdouMaliq Simone's notion of "people as infrastructure,"[4] in this article I explore an aspect of infrastructure ignored by a classical approach, namely infrastructures of sociality that are built and conceived not by technical but by social engineers. More particularly, I will consider the social configuration of the small group as explored by the social psychology of the 1930s and 1940s as an infrastructure of democracy.

In his seminal paper, Simone extends the notion of infrastructure to "people's activities" and the "economic collaboration" of the seemingly marginalized inhabitants in what appear to be the urban ruins of Johannesburg. By engaging with "complex combinations of objects, spaces, persons, and practices," Simone suggests, the resident's activities create "conjunctions" that turn into an infrastructure—"a

1 This paper draws on Nora Binder, *Kurt Lewin und die Psychologie des Feldes. Zur Genese der Gruppendynamik* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2023 forthcoming).

2 Dirk van Laak, "Infrastructures," *Docupedia-Zeitgeschichte*, 20.05.2021: 2.

3 Van Laak, "Infrastructures," 5.

4 AbdouMaliq Simone, "People as Infrastructure: Intersecting Fragments in Johannesburg," *Public Culture* 16, no. 3 (2004): 407–429, 407.

platform providing and reproducing life in the city."[5] In this historiographic article on the invention of group dynamics by renowned German-Jewish social psychologist Kurt Lewin (1890–1947) during the 1930s and 1940s in the US,[6] I want to trace how the small face-to-face-group was made productive as a similar sort of infrastructure conjunction. Instigated by experimental techniques of social psychologists and characterized by the interactions of group members in specific settings, the small group was discovered as a means of establishing a "democratic" pattern of behaviour, as well as allowing for a genuinely "democratic" management of social change. The small group was found to be the perfect starting point for "re-educating human behaviour and social relationships"[7] in accordance with democratic values and can thus be qualified, as I argue, as an infrastructure of democracy.[8]

Recently, Jan-Werner Müller has pointed out the role of intermediary institutions—like political parties and the free press—as liberal democracy's critical infrastructure that assure that citizens can use their democratic rights and reach out to each other.[9] In the 1930s and against the backdrop of rising authoritarianism and the threat of Nazism, Lewin and his allies identified another dimension critical to a functioning democracy: the behavioural patterns of its citizens as displayed in daily interactions. Lewin had witnessed that democratic institutions alone were not able to guarantee the persistence of the Weimar Republic. Hence, after immigrating to the US, and fully in line with Deweyan thought prevailing there, he stressed that society should not be classified as democratic by only considering "isolated elements of conduct, rules or institutions." More importantly, Lewin's highly influential group

5 Simone, "People as Infrastructure," 408.

6 On the work of Lewin and his field-theoretical approach, cf. Binder, *Psychologie des Feldes*.

7 Leland Bradford, Jack R. Gibb, and Kenneth D. Benne, "Preface," in *T-Group Theory and Laboratory Method: Innovation in Re-education*, eds. Leland Bradford, Jack R. Gibb, and Kenneth D. Benne (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1964): vii–x, vii.

8 The terms "democratic" and "autocratic" are adopted here, but are also clearly identified as designations employed by the historical actors. In retrospect, Lewin's students have been critical of their use of the terms, which seemed so "natural and appropriate" to them at the time. Decades later, the "colorless" terms of "role 1" and "role 2" appeared more scientifically correct to Lippitt and White than "democratic" and "autocratic" in order to describe the behavior of the group leader. However, the "vagueness" of the concepts "with so many different meanings attached to them, and so many values" had prompted them to find at least "one concrete meaning of democracy." Ralph K. White and Ronald Lippitt, *Autocracy and Democracy. An Experimental Inquiry* (New York: Harper, 1960): 8–12. Because of its conspicuous reference to democracy and its values, Nikolas Rose has convincingly called early social psychology a *Science of Democracy*, cf. Nikolas Rose, "Social Psychology as a Science of Democracy," in *Inventing Our Selves: Psychology, Power, and Personhood*, ed. Nikolas Rose (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998): 116–149.

9 Cf. Jan-Werner Müller, "Liberal Democracy's Critical Infrastructure. How to think about Intermediary Powers," *SCRIPT'S WORKING PAPER* 16 (2022): 3–24.

psychology, which led to the foundation of the *National Training Laboratories* in 1947, defined democracy by its corresponding "larger *pattern* of group life and the group *atmosphere*," concluding that "it is the actual *group dynamics* that counts."[10]

These critical dynamics of the "democratic group" were first explored by Lewin and his team in their famous Democracy Experiments (1936–1940). Conceptualized as an educational infrastructure of democracy, the "group setting" was found to lend itself particularly well to enabling and reproducing forms of what they termed "democratic" patterns of behaviour. Such crucial forms of "democratic interaction" like objective discussion, participative decision-making processes, and cooperative action could be experienced and practiced here. While the experiments found that autocracy could be imposed upon the group that adapted to it quickly, democratic behavioural patterns had to be actively learned "by a process of voluntary and responsible participation."[11] Furthermore, changes in perceptions, habits, or attitudes that were deemed necessary to the survival of democratic societies could be brought about especially well within the democratic group. In the spirit of a *science of democracy* (Rose), as a science in the service of democracy, Lewinian social psychology set out to efficiently steer and make resilient a democratic society at war.[12]

By carefully leading "democratic" groups, Lewin and his allies intended not only to bring about German re-education after the war and to ensure a resilient homefront during wartime, but also to reduce alcoholism and to alleviate intra- and inter-group conflicts in a US-American society still affected by the Great Depression and struggling with racial discrimination[13] Or, in Lewin's words: "There is no hope for creating a better world without a deeper scientific insight into the function of leadership, of culture, and of the other essentials of group life. Social life will have to be managed much more consciously than before if man shall not destroy man."[14] While Simone's study of "people as infrastructure" in inner-city Johannesburg seeks to point out the "unregulated encounters" and "the conjunction

10 Kurt Lewin, Ronald Lippitt, and Charles E.Hendry, "The Practicality of Democracy," in *Human Nature and Enduring Peace*, ed. Gardner Murphy (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1945): 295–347, here 302 f.

11 Cf. Kurt Lewin, "Cultural Reconstruction," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 38, no. 2 (1943): 166–173, 169.

12 On the qualification of early social psychology as a science of democracy, see Rose, "Social Psychology as a Science of Democracy."

13 Cf. Kurt Lewin, *Resolving Social Conflicts: Selected Papers on Group Dynamics* (New York: Harper, 1948) and Kurt Lewin, "Forces Behind Food Habits and Methods of Change," in *The Problem of Changing Food Habits* (Washington D.C.: Bulletin of the National Research Council, 108, 1943), 35–65.

14 Kurt Lewin, "Psychology and the Process of Group Living," *The Journal of Social Psychology* 17 (1943): 113–131, 114.

of heterogenous activities" emanating from and bearing on "flexibly configured landscapes,"[15] early group psychology and the "educational technology"[16] of group dynamics were particularly influential proponents of democratic social engineering. Reaching its zenith between 1918 and 1947, and grounded in late 19th-century progressive education, pragmatic philosophy (both of which are exemplified in the works of John Dewey), and the emerging social sciences, democratic social engineers sought to reconcile social control and planning with the involvement and democratic participation of its subjects.[17] The need of elaborate forms of social steering seemed even more pressing to Lewin after World War II and the use of atomic bombs. If society wanted to win the race against "the destructive capacities set free by man's use of the natural sciences,"[18] the social sciences urgently needed to be applied to practical issues. Accordingly, the social sciences needed to start their own infrastructuring work to counterbalance the effects of the technical and military infrastructures from the realm of the natural sciences. In Lewin's eyes, it was a question of human survival.

## 2. The Democratic Group in the Laboratory

In its effort to preserve an efficient democracy and secure its robust functioning, Lewinian social psychology carried out pioneering work. In their influential Democracy Experiments (1936–1940) carried out with school children at the *Child Welfare Research Station* at the *University of Iowa*,[19] Lewin and his student Ronald Lippitt brought the social figuration of the group into the psychological laboratory for the first time and treated it as an object of experimental manipulation. Wholes such as the group and the complex relationships of the person to his/her environment—previously rejected as mysticism and banished from the laboratory by prevailing behaviourist ex-

15 Cf. Simone, "People as Infrastructure," 409.

16 Leland Bradford, Jack R. Gibb, and Kenneth D. Benne, "Two Educational Innovations," in *T-Group Theory and Laboratory Method. Innovation in Re-education*, eds. Leland Bradford, Jack R. Gibb, and Kenneth D. Benne (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1964): 1–14, 1.

17 Cf. William Graebner, "The Small Group and Democratic Social Engineering, 1900–1950," *The Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues* 42 (1986): 137–154.

18 Kurt Lewin, "Frontiers in Group Dynamics: Concept, Method and Reality in Social Science; Social Equilibria and Social Change," *Human Relations* 1 (1947): 5–41, 5.

19 On those groundbreaking experiments, see Kurt Lewin, "Preliminary Note," *Sociometry* 1, no 3 & 4 (1938): 292–300; Ronald Lippitt, *An Experimental Study of the Effect of Democratic and Authoritarian Group Atmospheres upon the Group and the Individual* (MA Thesis: Iowa City, 1938); Ronald Lippitt, "Field Theory and Experiment in Social Psychology: Autocratic and Democratic Group Atmospheres," *American Journal of Sociology* 45, no. 1 (1939): 26–49; and Ronald Lippitt, *An Analysis of Group Reaction to Three Types of Experimentally Created Social Climate* (PhD Thesis: Iowa City, 1940).

perimental social psychology, which held on to methodological individualism—were now elevated to the status of legitimate objects of investigation.[20] Only Lewin and his team made the sustained attempt to establish the group as an autonomous phenomenon that can't simply be investigated in terms of individual psychology, while simultaneously opening up the atmosphere and dynamics of the group as a field of intervention.

The small group was discovered as early as the late 1910s for democratic social engineering and conquered the social sciences in the 1930s.[21] It promised to be a genuinely democratic social figuration: As a "miniature society,"[22] as a mediation between the individual and society, between personal freedom and adaptation, the small group was predestined for decidedly democratic techniques of governing individuals "*in terms of their freedom*"—a form of government characteristic to liberal democracies.[23] In contrast to its predecessor in the history of ideas, the concept of the amorphous and irrational mass, the social figuration of the group opened up new possibilities of steering due to its supraindividual, but nevertheless manageable, social structure. Thus, not long after immigrating to the US, the Jewish psychologist evolved into one of the most important founding figures of social psychology. Laying the foundation of many emerging fields, including organization development and the new managerial approaches of the human relations movement, as well as processes of planned change, the infrastructure of the democratic group still resonates today, and its direct successors like the "team" are with us up until now.[24]

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20 Cf. Floyd Henry Allport, *Social Psychology* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1924). Allport's powerful formulation of experimental social psychology had subscribed to methodological individualism, according to which individual psychology provided the means to study social psychological phenomena. Consequently, it was not the group but the individual that was "real" and to be studied in experiment.

21 Cf. Graebner, "The Small Group and Democratic Social Engineering, 1900–1950," and Nikolas Rose, "Social Psychology as a Science of Democracy."

22 Bradford, Gibb, and Benne, "Two Educational Innovations," 1.

23 Cf. Nikolas Rose, "Introduction," in *Inventing Our Selves: Psychology, Power, and Personhood*, ed. Nikolas Rose (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998): 1–21, 16. Building on Foucault's studies in governmentality, Nikolas Rose showed how Lewinian group psychology sought for ways "[…] of making democracy operable through procedures that could govern the citizen in ways consonant with the ideals of liberty, equality, and legitimate power." Rose, "Social Psychology as a Science of Democracy," 118.

24 Following Burnes and Cooke, the original core components of OD are T-groups, action research and participative management. All have strong ties to the work of Lewin and his colleagues, cf. Bernard Burnes and Bill Cooke, "Review Article: The Past, Present and Future of Organization Development: Taking the Long View," *Human Relations* 65, no. 11 (2012), 1395–1429; Gilmore Crosby, *Planned Change: Why Kurt Lewin's Social Science is Still Best Practice for Business Results, Change Management, and Human Progress* (New York: Productivity Press, 2020); Klaus Antons and Monika Stützle-Hebel, *Feldkräfte im Hier und Jetzt. Antworten von Lewins Feldtheorie auf aktuelle Fragestellungen in Führung, Beratung und Therapie* (Heidelberg:

Starting in 1936, Lewin and Lippitt investigated the functioning of group life under experimental conditions. By leading two recreational groups of six school children, Lippitt sought to explore "democratic" and "autocratic" group dynamics. In accordance with the holistic field-theoretical approach developed by Lewin since the 1920s,[25] the children's group in the Democracy Experiments was considered "as a whole, existing in a larger social field with many overlapping dynamic relationships."[26] It was not defined by the criterion of the similarity of its members, but, according to the relational epistemology of Lewinian social psychology, by the criterion of the interdependence of its components. As with a Gestalt approach, each part proved to be dependent on the other parts; if one part changed, the overall structure changed accordingly.[27]

In the experiment, the members of each group came together for a 30-minute session to make masks twice a week over a period of six weeks. Lippitt 'acted' as the leader in both groups. In his dual role as experimenter and embodiment of the leader, it was up to Lippitt to create two significantly distinct atmospheres in the two children's groups through two different leadership styles—an autocratic and a democratic one.[28] Depending on the atmosphere as stimulated by a specific leadership style, the group member's behavior varied strongly: In the "democratic" group (D-group), the children's interactions were observed to be cooperative, objective, friendly, motivated, and responsible; in the "autocratic" group (A-group), children tended to be aggressive, less accessible to instructions from the leader, less independent in their work, and more competitive. In this group, there was also an incident in which the children took out their pent-up aggression due to their own powerlessness vis-à-vis the autocratic leader on one child, who was treated as a scapegoat and soon left the group during the series of experiments. The difference in atmosphere, the corresponding patterns of interaction, and the "relations of interdepen-

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Carl-Auer Verlag, 2015); and Bernard Burnes, "Kurt Lewin and the Harwood Studies: The Foundations of OD," *The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science* 43, no. 2 (2007): 213–231.

25 On Lewinian Field Theory, see Kurt Lewin, *Grundzüge der topologischen Psychologie*, eds. Raymund Falk and Friedrich Winnefeld (Bern: Hans Huber, 1969 [1936]) and Binder, *Kurt Lewin und die Psychologie des Feldes*.

26 Lippitt, "Field Theory and Experiment in Social Psychology," 27.

27 On the Berlin school of Gestalt Theory, see Mitchell G. Ash, *Gestalt Psychology in German Culture, 1890–1967: Holism and the Quest for Objectivity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

28 The sociotechnical set up of experimental groups and their respective pattern of human interrelations in the Lewinian laboratory rests not only upon the leadership, but also upon the careful design of the group's environment: namely the stage and the props. Cf. Nora Binder, "Künstliche Fälle. Inszenierungen in der Sozialpsychologie Kurt Lewins," *Mittelweg* 36, no. 28/29 (2020): 68–91.

dence" (Interdependenzverhältnisse) in the children's groups were soon understood as their specific group dynamics.

*Figure 1: Picture of the Club Setting.*


Lippitt, *An Analysis of Group Reaction to Three Types of Experimentally Created Social Climate*, 26.

In the course of the experiment, the democratic group not only proved to be clearly superior in terms of the satisfaction of its members. Contrary to all concerns about the efficiency of a less directive guidance of children, the members of the democratic group were just as productive as the children in the autocratic group, and their masks were even strikingly creative in design. The children in this group were motivated and enjoyed their work, which they kept on doing even when the group leader left the room. On the contrary, the members of the "autocratic group" immediately stopped working on their masks when let alone. They even tended to destroy their work products, fully in line with the aggressive atmosphere observed there.

Having argued that the "democratic group" had been made productive by Lewinian social psychology as an infrastructure of democracy, an infrastructure in the broader sense—which transcends a classical definition concentrating on its technical and material features—I now want to raise the question of its workings as an educational infrastructure. What is this infrastructure of sociality made of? How does it operate? By what means does it form a specific conjunction providing,

reproducing, and altering human behaviour and social relationships? In order to do this, I briefly turn to present definitions of infrastructure and show how the use and understanding of the small "democratic" group by Lewinian group dynamics relied on central features that are commonly associated with the workings of infrastructure, especially infrastructure's relationality or connectivity and its generativity.

## 3. The Democratic Group as Infrastructure

Current research on infrastructure agrees that "given the heterogeneous character of systems and institutions referenced by the term," it is difficult to provide a singular definition of infrastructure. "Perhaps," as Paul Edwards suggests, infrastructure "is best defined negatively, as those systems without which contemporary societies cannot function."[29] However, there is also agreement that infrastructures are the "connective tissues" and the "circulatory systems" of modernity.[30] As such, infrastructures continuously produce and structure social relations, enabling certain activities and inhibiting others. Meanwhile, they also display a double relationality: An infrastructure brings together various elements that form its internal multiplicity while simultaneously displaying "connective capacities *outwards*."[31] Finally, and unless they break down, infrastructures "reside in a naturalized background"[32]—their seamless functioning is taken for granted.

In what follows, I take up the above-mentioned characteristic traits—*relationality* and *generativity*—and see how they apply to the workings of the democratic group in Lewinian social psychology. I argue that in the case of Lewinian group dynamics it is the interplay of the group's relational features (the group as Gestalt as well as an interface between the individual and the larger social structure) and its generative capacity (regulating interactions within the group, reinforcing certain behavioural patterns, inhibiting others, re-adjusting the relationships of the individual group member to itself, to other members, and to a larger social context) that account for its exploitation as a powerful infrastructure of democracy from the 1930s on.

29 Paul N. Edwards, "Infrastructure and Modernity: Scales of Force, Time, and Social Organization in the History of Sociotechnical Systems," in *Modernity and Technology*, eds. Thomas J. Misa et al. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), 185–225, 187.

30 Cf. Edwards, "Infrastructure and Modernity," 185.

31 Penelope Harvey et al. "Introduction: Infrastructural Complications," in *Infrastructures and Social Complexity: A Companion*, eds. Penelope Harvey et al. (London: Routledge, 2017), 1–22, 5.

32 Edwards, "Infrastructure and Modernity," 185.

## Generativity: Democratic Re-education and Processes of Planned Change

In the Democracy Experiments the atmosphere and the existing group dynamics proved to be markedly relevant to action. They sustained and transformed the activities of children within it. As one episode during the first experiment showed, the atmosphere exerted a highly "contagious" effect on them, so that newcomers soon adapted to the prevailing dynamics. In order to study the conditions of political change, the experimental set up had planned that two children would switch from one group to the other during the course of the experiment. When Sarah went from the A-group to the D-group she was unaccustomed to the democratic group dynamics and a little irritated at first. However, Lewin soon realized that her behaviour "mirrored very quickly the atmosphere of the group."[33] No one had explicitly taught Sarah how to acquire a democratic attitude or how to display a democratic form of interaction. Rather, Lewin insisted, the change took place "*deeper* than the verbal level"[34]—it happened below the level of reflection by "the growing of the child into a cultural atmosphere."[35] Accordingly, the atmosphere and dynamics of the group were characterized by their affective and unconscious effects on the group members.[36] Despite being highly effective, the democratic atmosphere went largely unnoticed by Sarah and the other children.

The atmosphere's invisibility can be understood as an essential quality of infrastructure. Susan Leigh Star has stressed the fact that infrastructure is "part of the background for other kinds of work."[37] It is in line with this observation that group dynamics as an infrastructure hardly comes to light, though it deeply affects the acting, feeling, and thinking of subjects in it. Following Star, infrastructures often become visible upon breaking down or when they constitute a barrier to someone. The latter was true in the case of Sue, who was "transplanted" from the D-group to the A-group. She fundamentally disliked the restricted space of free movement in the autocratic atmosphere and decided to rebel against its leader.[38]

Lewinian social psychology profited from the atmosphere's contagious effect. Unlike propaganda or psychological methods, which address the person either in

33 Kurt Lewin, "Experiments in Social Space," in *Resolving Social Conflicts: Selected Papers on Group Dynamics*, ed. Gertrud Weiss Lewin (New York: Harper, 1948 [1939]), 71–83, 80.

34 Kurt Lewin, "The Special Case of Germany," in *Resolving Social Conflicts: Selected Papers on Group Dynamics*, ed. Gertrud Weiss Lewin (New York: Harper, 1948 [1943]), 43–55, 49 (emphasis mine).

35 Kurt Lewin, *Psychological Conditioning of Children* (Manuscript), Bentley Historical Library, ISR RCGD Director's Files, Box 26, 2.

36 Cf. Lewin, "The Special Case of Germany."

37 Susan Leigh Star, "The Ethnography of Infrastructure," *American Behavioral Scientist* 43, no. 3 (1999): 355–492, 380.

38 Cf. Lippitt, *An Experimental Study*, 93–95.

an anonymous or in a personal way as an individual, the sociotechnical procedures of group dynamics approach their experimental subjects as members of a democratic group, in a social situation. By addressing the individual as part of a "social field" of interpersonal relations, the techniques of group dynamics promised efficiency in two ways: On the one hand, the group approach benefited from the assumed enhancing effects within groups, in which the contagion logic of mass psychology found its continuation. In other words, the Democracy Experiments made an early use of group pressure. Lewin had observed that the standards and values of the group acquire an independent value, begin exerting a pressure of conformity, and in this way function as a central force field that keeps the individual "in line with the standards of the group."[39] Thus, not every single individual needed to be personally re-educated, the group's own pressure towards conformity would reinforce the change carefully planned and initiated by the group's leader. Or, as Lewin put it in 1943: "[I]t is easier to affect deeply the personality of 10 people if they can be melted into a group than to affect the personality of any one individual treated separately."[40]

On the other hand, the group method held out the prospect of rapid transformation: By addressing the individual person as a member of a small group, Lewinian social psychology hoped to reach and mobilize "large masses" in a short time.[41] Be it the re-education of Nazi Germany after the war or the nutrition education of American housewives during war time, it was through democratic leadership in small groups that altering patterns of behaviour were envisioned. Might not all of Nazi Germany be culturally reconstructed by reproducing democratic leaders? This model was proposed by Lewin in 1943 for his post-fascist former homeland: "It seems to be possible by training democratic leaders and leaders of leaders to build up a pyramid which could reach large masses relatively quickly."[42] Societies should be reformed from the bottom up, supported by many small leaders raising new leaders via the democratic group's educational infrastructure. Accordingly, the group was soon tapped by the Lewinians as a "cultural island," as an infrastructure of sociality in which behavioural changes could be brought about, instigated, and controlled particularly well and quickly.[43]

Finally, Lewinian experiments with democratic groups brought forth the notorious three-phase model of change that informs processes of planned change, even up until today.[44] It rests upon two distinct but interrelated features of the group that are

39 Lewin, "Frontiers in Group Dynamics," 14.

40 Kurt Lewin, "Psychology and the Process of Group Living," 113.

41 Cf. Kurt Lewin, "Cultural Reconstruction," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 38, no. 2 (1943): 166–173, 172.

42 Lewin, "Cultural Reconstruction," 172.

43 Cf. Lewin, "Psychology and the Process of Group Living."

44 Cf. Bernard Burnes, "Kurt Lewin and the Planned Approach to Change: A Re-appraisal," *Journal of Management Studies* 41, no. 6 (2004): 977–1002.

crucial to its central and generative role in processes of planned change: The social figuration of the group can serve as an amplifier, and thus provide stability, while at the same time being in constant movement, an almost imperceptible but continuous transformation, a "quasi-stationary equilibrium" as Lewin called it, following Gestalt theorist Wolfgang Köhler.[45] If human interaction was to be successfully changed, Lewin's three step model of planned change prescribed the following field-theoretical procedures: The existing force field had to be loosened up by "(a) transferring a quasi-stationary equilibrium into a fluid situation; (b) changing the strength or direction of the forces so that a new level is reached where the intended processes result; (c) establishing circumstances which keep the constellation of forces at that new level. Otherwise, the group will not retain its new mold."[46] As this model makes clear, despite its democratic ethos and the participatory involvement of group members, the Lewinian management of change rests upon well-trained and experienced leaders. Group leaders are in charge of arranging the constellation of psychological forces in the field that are decisive for a successful procedure. Hence, the group remains a carefully planned infrastructure of democracy managed by the social engineer who is in charge of setting up a democratic atmosphere critical to processes of planned change.

## Relationality: The Group as "Miniature Society" and Ecological Environment

The small face-to-face group is so prominent in the context of procedures of democratic social engineering not least because it promises to create new relations that are directed *outwards*, namely a specific relationship between the individual and society: As a "miniature society," the small face-to-face group was meant to serve as an interface between the micro- and the macro-levels of society. As the group dynamics pioneers of the *National Training Laboratories* recall:

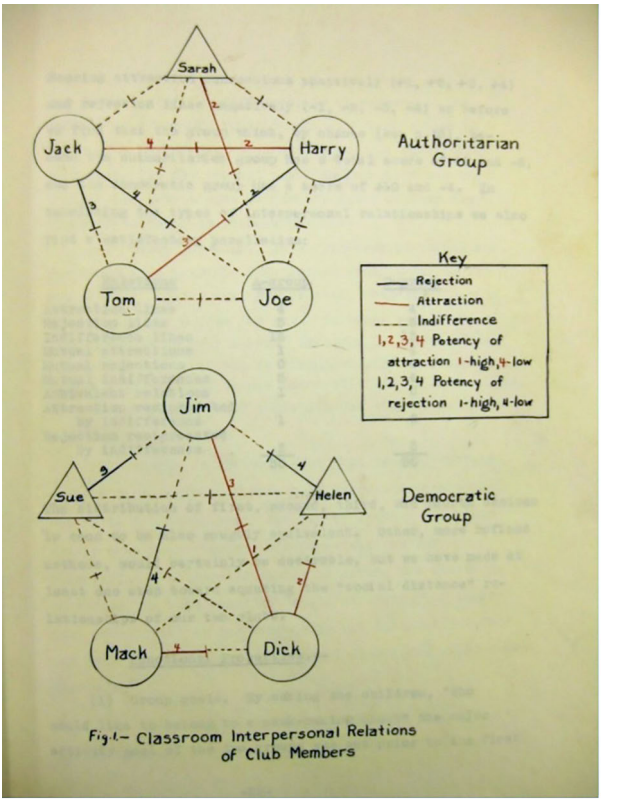
> The founders of the first laboratory saw the group as the link between the individual person and the larger social structure. They saw the group, therefore, as a medium for serving two sets of interrelated functions: the re-education of the individual toward greater integrity, greater understanding of himself and of the social conditions of his life, greater behavioural planning and achieving changes

45 The concurrence of stability and continuous movement that characterizes the organization of the group as a social field may also count as an important characteristic of infrastructure in general, which only at first glance may appear solid and stable, but is instead continuously transforming, adapted, in decay, etc.

46 Kurt Lewin, "Constructs in Psychology and Psychological Ecology," in *Authority and Frustration*. Studies in Topological and Vector Psychology III, eds. Kurt Lewin, Charles E.Meyers, and Joan Kalhorn (Iowa City: Iowa University Press, 1944): 3–29, 20.

both in himself and in his social environment; and the facilitation of changes in the larger social structure upon which individual lives depend.[47]

*Figure 2: Classroom Interpersonal Relations of Club Members.*




Lippitt, *Democratic and Authoritarian Group Atmospheres*, 28.

But more important still, the sociotechnically-built group creates new *internal* relationships between the group members and the leader. As a result, it produces a new and distinct holistic overall pattern of human interrelations (which Lippitt attempted to grasp with the means of sociometry, cf. Lippitt's diagram, Figure 2). Within Lewinian social psychology, the group is conceived of as a Gestalt, a structure or system of interdependent parts. This suprasummative feature of the experimental group—seized by the terms of "democratic" or "autocratic" atmosphere and

47 Bradford, Gibb, and Benne, "Two Educational Innovations," 5.

group dynamics—opened up new spaces for indirect democratic government. According to the prevailing group dynamics, the quality and structure of the human interrelations within the group differed strongly—either facilitating or exacerbating processes of planned change. In the laboratory, Lewin had discovered and explored the greater "openness" of the person in the "democratic" group. While an autocratic atmosphere tended to elicit resistance towards the leader, the democratic group fostered cooperation between its members and with the leader. Thus, integrating a person into a "democratic" group enabled the prospect of reaching the person's "deeper layers."[48] As a result, the group as a re-educational infrastructure was not only operating in a certain environment, but was itself conceived of as an ecological environment for the individual, a "social field."[49]

In order to "improve social practice in the spirit of science and democracy,"[50] Lewinian group dynamics subsequently linked the individual's acting, thinking, and feeling to the environment of the group. Lewin implemented what one could call an infrastructural regime of the self by closely intertwining the self and the social environment of the group. Contrary to the turn-of-the-century regime where the self related to itself in terms of an "autonomous subjectivity"[51] and in which the inner life was thought of as removed from outside influence, the subject of group dynamics is opened up and becomes interconnected. In the re-educational practices of group dynamics, the self and its inner reality get inextricably linked to the environment and to the mutual relations with other members of the group. The individual becomes an integral part in the Gestalt sense of the infrastructure of sociality named "group."

Shortly before Lewin's premature death, his attempt to explore the "democratic" group as an infrastructure for engineering social change culminated in the invention of the so-called Training-, or T-group. The T-group was formed and tested as an even more refined infrastructure of democracy, or more precisely, as a "basic method of laboratory learning about self, group, and interpersonal relations."[52] This powerful tool of "self-re-education" remains relevant today,[53] since the Training-group systemically links the relationship its members have to themselves and to the social world with the other group members' perception and reality. Having transferred the cybernetic concept of feedback from the realm of control engineering to the social sciences, *Macy Conferences* member Lewin devised a technique we have come to call

48 Lippitt, *Democratic and Authoritarian Group Atmospheres*, 209.

49 The group and its setting are explicitly named as a "social field" in Lewin, "Frontiers in Group Dynamics," 14.

50 Bradford, Gibb, and Benne, "Preface," vii.

51 Cf. Dominik Schrage, *Psychotechnik und Radiophonie. Subjektkonstruktionen in artifiziellen Wirklichkeiten 1918–1932* (Fink: München, 2001), 8.

52 Kenneth D. Benne, "The Process of Re-education. An Assessment of Kurt Lewin's Views," *Group & Organization Studies* 1, no. 1 (1976): 26–42, 30.

53 Benne, "The Process of Re-education," 30.

"feedback" as a means of communication in the T-group.[54] By implementing a process of giving and receiving feedback in groups, it seemed possible to align people's actions with the needs of the group or the prevailing group standards as instigated by a leader. The T-group was supposed to make people aware of how their behaviour affected others and how their behaviour was reflected by others, as well as to become better sensitized to human interrelations in general. By realizing the discrepancy between self-evaluation and the assessment from the group, the group members were prompted to adjust their conduct accordingly. It was through feedback from the environment that trainees were called to observe themselves continuously and to evaluate and optimize their own actions. This method of experiential learning has had a lasting impact, and has constituted intersubjectivity as an object for rational management, up until today. It marks the dawning of a "cybernetic anthropology" (Rieger) characterized by extensive mechanisms of self-reflexiveness and self-regulation ascribed to humans as its object.[55]

## 4. Concluding Remarks

After its heydays in the 1930s and 1940s, the small group continued to serve as an infrastructure of democracy beyond the 1950s. It was during the 1960s that the T-group came to use in Germany for the purposes of democratic self-re-education.[56] It was in the same decade that famous humanistic psychologist Carl Rogers qualified the intensive group experience as pioneered by Lewin and then flourishing in the United

54 Under the auspices of the Josiah Macy Jr. Foundation, the epoch-making Macy Conferences continued the cross-disciplinary collaboration started during World War II, and extended it into the Cold War era. With the help of such new terms like "information" and "feedback," an interdisciplinary group of physicists, mathematicians, psychologists, psychiatrists, anthropologists, sociologists, and engineers had begun in 1946 to discuss a universal theory of regulation and control. On the famous Macy Conferences, cf. Steve J. Heims, *The Cybernetics Group* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991) and Claus Pias (ed.), *Cybernetics: The Macy Conferences 1946–1953, Vol. 1 & 2* (Diaphanes: Zürich, 2004); on Feedback, cf. Ulrich Bröckling, "Über Feedback. Anatomie einer kommunikativen Schlüsseltechnologie," in *Die Transformation des Humanen. Beiträge zur Kulturgeschichte der Kybernetik*, eds. Michael Hagner and Erich Hörl (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2008): 326–347.

55 Cf. Stefan Rieger, *Kybernetische Anthropologie. Eine Geschichte der Virtualität* (Suhrkamp: Frankfurt am Main, 2003).

56 Cf. Maik Tändler, "Therapeutische Vergemeinschaftung. Demokratisierung, Emanzipation und Emotionalisierung in der ‚Gruppe', 1963–1976," in *Das Selbst zwischen Anpassung und Befreiung. Psychowissen und Politik im 20. Jahrhundert*, eds. Maik Tändler and Uffa Jensen (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2012): 141–167.

States "as perhaps the most important social invention of this century."[57] But more and more the interest in the small group as a genuine infrastructure of democracy started to fade. Instead, with the T-group model as promulgated by the *National Training Laboratories* from the 1940s on, as well as with so-called encounter groups, the emphasis shifted from the urgent need of democratic social engineering prevalent during the 1930s and 1940s to an interest in personal growth and emotional expression in the 1960s. The same was true for the democratic leadership style that had come out of the Democracy Experiments: It began to lose its direct reference to democracy and became the model for a participatory leadership in industry instead that was meant to reconcile worker's satisfaction with industrial efficiency.

Back in the psychological laboratory, Lewin and Lippitt had discovered the small group as an infrastructure of democracy because small groups allowed for an indirect and participatory approach to elicit individual and social change. By playing an autocratic and a democratic leader, they created a specific connectivity between the group members as well as between the members and the leader. In the case of the democratic group, this newly established pattern of human interrelations was especially favourable to processes of planned change that could be enhanced via the group's standards and norms. The group leader did not have to state the objectives in a direct manner or lecture the group members on their purposefulness. Instead, the democratic group leader started a discussion, secured the participation and involvement of all group members, and steered the group's processes carefully in the right direction—always paying attention to the forces in the group's field and their wanted or unwanted effects. Meanwhile, the democratic group's friendly atmosphere, the cooperative and appreciative quality of its human interrelations, were crucial to the process of democratic re-education that took place on a less conscious and more affective level and profited from the "openness" of the democratic group's members. By creating a democratic pattern of human interrelations in groups that could be drawn upon in order to bring about behavioural change, Lewinian group dynamics explored the small group as a genuine infrastructure of democracy. Merely visible, the dynamics of the small democratic group—its affective atmosphere, the specific pattern of human relations—established new connections inwards and outwards, thus generating social, cultural, and individual change. A thoroughly relational concept, much like the concept of infrastructure,[58] the small group in the Lewinian Gestalt sense can indeed be understood as an infrastructure of sociality.

This specifically indirect form of social steering is one of the reasons why critiques were soon levied against Lewinian group psychology. Max Horkheimer, head of the Frankfurt School in exile, feared that the latter had given up on the idea that

57 Carl R. Rogers, "Interpersonal Relationships: U.S.A. 2000," *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science* 4, no. 3 (1968): 265–280.

58 Cf. Star, "The Ethnography of Infrastructure."

the subject played a role in history and suspected that he was merely aiming at manipulating individuals with the help of "psychological methods of administration."[59] After carrying out a successful change experiment with housewives in 1942, Lewin, too, felt compelled to state that their increased consumption of hitherto rejected innards was in no way the result of "manipulat[ing] the group by high-pressure sales talk."[60] Instead, he insisted, it was out of their own motivations that the housewives had decided to adjust their food habits to the potential rationing of meat while ensuring a continuous supply of protein by integrating entrails into their diet.[61]

Not surprisingly, group dynamic's afterlife took place less in the context of a genuinely democratic re-education than in the consulting industry and in organisation development. The small group and democratic leadership evolved into an infrastructure of participatory management. Democratic leadership, as it had emerged from the Democracy Experiments and was made fruitful for Action Research, gradually discarded the adjective "democratic" in the context of industrial psychology. In the famous management theory of Lewin's colleague and collaborator at the *Massachusetts Institute of Technology*—Douglas McGregor's classic *The Human Side of Enterprise* from 1960[62]—democratic leadership eventually merged into a participatory management style. Fully in line with the ideals of the human relations movement, it was supposed to perform its useful services in industry and business, promising to meet the challenge to both boost productivity and ensure worker satisfaction.

59 Max Horkheimer, "Letter to Theodor W. Adorno, November 24, 1944," in *Gesammelte Werke. Briefwechsel 1914–1948* (Bd. 17), eds. Alfred Schmidt and Gunzelin Schmid Noerr (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1996): 606–607.

60 Lewin, "Forces Behind Food Habits and Methods of Change," 63.

61 Cf. Lewin, "Forces Behind Food Habits and Methods of Change."

62 Cf. Douglas McGregor, *The Human Side of Enterprise* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1960).