

Democratic innovation for change: A participatory corrective to deliberative hegemony

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journals.sagepub.com/home/pol**Oliver Escobar** 

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Abstract

The world faces social, political, economic, and ecological crises, and there is doubt that democratic governance can cope. Democracies rely on a narrow set of institutions and processes anchored in dominant forms of political organisation and imagination. Power inequalities sustain the (re) production of current ills in democratic life. In this context, what does the field of democratic innovation offer to the task of sociopolitical reimagining and change? The field has advanced since the turn of the century, building foundations for democratic renewal. It draws from various traditions of democracy, including participatory and deliberative streams. But there is concern that a non-critical version of deliberative democracy is becoming hegemonic. Deliberative theory generated useful correctives to participatory democracy – that is, a deeper understanding of the communicative fabric of the public sphere as worthy of democratisation; public reasoning as a bridge-builder between streets and institutions and a key precursor to democratic collective action. However, we argue that democratic innovation now needs a participatory corrective to strengthen its potential to mobilise capacity for change. We review emerging critiques in conversation with participatory ideas and practices, illustrating our argument with four gaps in democratic innovation that can become field-expanding dimensions to deliver emancipatory change more effectively: pluriversality, policy, political economy, and empowerment.

Keywords

capacity, deliberative democracy, democratic innovation, participatory democracy, social change

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Introduction: Does the field of democratic innovation need an intervention?

This article proposes an agenda to enhance the change-making potential of the field of democratic innovation. It is a contribution to the *Special Issue: Democratic Innovations Beyond the Deliberative Paradigm?* (alongside Curato and Calamba, 2025; Bussu et al. 2025; Asenbaum, 2025; Cunningham and Hammond, 2025).

In this article, we analyse four gaps in democratic innovation and reframe them as field-expanding dimensions that rekindle its critical edge. We draw on emerging work about the possibilities and limitations of the field for advancing economic, social, political, and ecological change. Our aim is propositional: the field needs a participatory revival to shore up its capacity for change. Fundamental to sustaining such theory of change is a dyad representing two inextricable pillars of democratic governance, which we refer to as legitimacy >< capacity. Our argument is that the hegemony of a system-affirming reading of deliberative theory in the practice of democratic innovation (Hammond, 2019; Smith, 2019) has foregrounded legitimacy over capacity. While both are necessary, we demonstrate how a participatory corrective can rebalance the skew towards legitimacy by recentring capacity as fundamental to change-making.

The field of democratic innovation covers practices, processes, and institutions that seek to ‘reimagine and deepen the role of citizens in governance processes by increasing opportunities for participation, deliberation and influence’ (Elstub and Escobar, 2019a: 11). We distinguish between *democratic innovation*, i.e., the field of practice, and *democratic innovations*, i.e., the processes and institutions that embody the practice (Escobar and Elstub, 2019: 4). By practice, we mean the ‘bundles of sayings and doings’ that make up a social field (Schatzki, 2002); or more prosaically: what people say and do as they work on democratic innovation. This is the realm of political and policy work, research, advocacy, institutional reform, activism, process design, facilitation, and so on – unfolding at the intersection of practice networks. In turn, *democratic innovations* are the processes that result from the practice of *democratic innovation*. These have attracted most attention and include ‘families’ such as participatory budgeting, collaborative governance, mini-publics, referenda, and citizens’ initiatives (Elstub and Escobar, 2019a).

Insofar as innovation implies change, the field is imbued with a change-making orientation. But the form and substance of that change vary. Some focus on political decision-making (Geißel, 2022; Smith, 2009) while others on transforming ‘lives, communities and systems’ (Escobar, 2020b). Yet others prioritise the reconfiguration of power across civil society and the state (Bua and Bussu, 2023) or economic democratisation (Vlahos et al., 2024). Our perspective aspires to leverage democratic innovation to change how political and economic power are distributed, and what kind of democracy is both imaginable and feasible. Accordingly, we advance a maximalist version of democratic innovation that seeks to expand its bandwidth – i.e., the range of approaches to change-making in the field.

Incapacities to face social, political, economic, and ecological crises warrant urgent change (Fraser, 2022). Support for democratic innovation often stems from dissatisfaction with the status quo. The field has grown through research and practice, inspiring those who seek alternatives, from moderate to radical. But is that hope misplaced? Can the hope live up to the hype? Some question the impact of the field (Jacquet et al., 2024), criticise its burden on citizens (Elliott, 2024), and argue that reformers should reject these practices because they are hopeless against socio-economic inequalities (Parvin, 2020).

We are cautiously optimistic, but acknowledge the field is developing amid rising socio-economic inequalities (Vermeiren, 2021) and global democratic recession, including growing dissatisfaction with democracy and governance incapacity as well as the rise of authoritarian populism (Foa et al., 2020). For democratic innovation to offer antidotes, change-making capacity must be foregrounded.

The field draws from theories including direct democracy, difference democracy, participatory democracy, and deliberative democracy (Smith, 2009: 4), although the last two are particularly influential. Deliberative scholarship is criticised for being too accommodating of the status quo (e.g. Hammond, 2019; Hauptmann, 2001; Pateman, 2012) and democratic innovation is criticised for becoming too tethered to deliberative theory (Asenbaum, 2022; Hendriks, 2023; Opitz, 2024). This constrains understanding of the field and its transformative potential. We start from Graham Smith's critique of 'deliberative hegemony' in democratic innovation:

Deliberative democracy has by now become the overarching theoretical framework within which much of the analysis of participatory processes takes place. Researchers attend predominantly to the deliberative qualities of participatory institutions over other considerations. (Smith, 2019: 579)

Democratic innovations are conflated with deliberative democracy in policy and civil society discourses, media coverage, and even scholarly accounts (e.g. Opitz, 2024). Moreover, because deliberative democracy is often reduced to mini-publics (e.g. Fujii Johnson, 2024), democratic innovations are sometimes narrowly understood as deliberative fora (e.g. OECD, 2021). This synecdoche – a rhetorical move where one part stands for the whole – reduces the actual diversity of the field (see Bua and Bussu, 2023; Elstub and Escobar, 2019b) to a single family of democratic innovations.

A collective intervention seems necessary. We join others seeking to retain the capaciousness of the field, while shoring up its change-making potential (Asenbaum, 2022, 2025; Bua and Bussu, 2023; Dzur, 2019; Elstub and Escobar, 2019b; Geißel, 2022; Hammond, 2020b; Hendriks, 2023). We illustrate four gaps – pluriversality, policy, political economy, and empowerment – that offer field-expanding dimensions towards change.

The next section covers foundations and critiques of the field. Then we situate the question of change with reference to the legitimacy >< capacity dyad of democratic governance. Finally, four gaps are considered for their potential to rekindle the critical edge of democratic innovation, before concluding on the change-making theme that animates the paper.

The field of democratic innovation: Foundations and critiques

Practices of democratic innovation are as old as the history of democracy, unfolding in forms of communal self-governance across continents since prehistorical times (Isakhan and Stockwell, 2012). The field of democratic innovation, however, is a contemporary development. References to 'democratic innovation' are found in feminist and local government works in the 1990s (Elstub and Escobar, 2019a: 16), and books on the political economy of democracy (Dryzek, 1996: 4) and democratic theory (Saward, 2000). Smith's (2009) 'Democratic Innovations: Designing institutions for citizen participation' galvanised the term and captured the zeitgeist of the turn of the century.

Although the field is young, there are signs of maturation: global overviews (Elstub and Escobar, 2019b), empirical assessments (Jacquet et al., 2024), and revisionist accounts (Bua and Bussu, 2023; Hendriks, 2023). The vernacular of ‘democratic innovation’ now spans policy, practice, and activism across institutions and civil society. The field provides a meeting point for actors, ideas, disciplines, and methodologies (Escobar and Elstub, 2019: 3). Therefore, the gaps illustrated later matter: this is a critical juncture for expansion, and path-dependency is powerful in a field where research and practice are entwined.

The field emerged from a confluence of streams in democratic theory and praxis (Saward, 2000; Smith, 2009), but participatory and deliberative streams are most prominent (Escobar and Elstub, 2019). Participatory democracy emphasises developing societies where social, economic, and political realms are imbued with participatory principles and practices. Key normative forces are citizens’ substantive equality, community empowerment, and political emancipation (Freire, 1996; Pateman, 1970). Deliberative democracy shares some participatory foundations but foregrounds the communicative fabric of political life – i.e., the power of public deliberation in countering arbitrary domination and underpinning legitimate decision-making. Key normative forces are citizens’ discursive equality, discourse ethics, and political legitimisation (Elster, 1998a).

These streams are complementary (Elstub, 2018; Elstub and Escobar, 2019b). Both are premised on citizen equality and community self-determination, while criticising elite-driven, minimalist versions of democracy. The participatory focus on emancipation and the deliberative focus on anti-domination are distinctive yet complementary orientations towards power that can be connected in praxis. Deliberative democrats emphasise discursive conditions for citizen participation as foundational to the legitimate exercise of power, while participatory democrats emphasise socio-economic conditions as the basis for citizens’ political emancipation. These distinct emphases make both streams complementary when combined in the practice of democratic innovation because they can shore up each other’s weaknesses (Elstub, 2018; Escobar, 2017). The participatory stream benefits from discourse ethics, attention to communicative action and the semiotics of power in complex societies. In turn, the deliberative stream benefits from stronger concern for positive freedoms, emancipatory practices, and the political economy of participation. Their combination gives the field of democratic innovation theoretical and practical potency.

This combination is unsurprising given the history of both streams. Contemporary participatory democracy re-emerged in the 1960s, building on thinkers such as Follett (1920) and Dewey (1937: 467), who confronted rising authoritarianism:

Everywhere there are waves of criticism and doubt as to whether democracy can meet pressing problems. . . . Wherever it has fallen, democracy had not become part. . . . of the people in daily conduct of its life. Democratic forms were limited to Parliament, elections and combats between parties. What is happening proves conclusively. . . . that unless democratic habits of thought and action are part of the fibre of a people, political democracy is insecure. . . . It must be buttressed by the presence of democratic methods in all social relationships.

Work by Pateman (1970) and Barber (2003) questioned the post-war consensus that large scale democracy requires minimalist, elite-focussed arrangements. Participatory democrats argued that the demos is not there just to be led, but to exercise collective leadership across society. Democratic life should permeate relationships, communities, associations,

industry, and workplaces, as well as political and economic institutions. This drew inspiration from social movements, workplace participation, community organising, and emancipatory struggles around the world (Craig and Mayo, 1995; Polletta, 2016), driving activism as neoliberal capitalism gained pace. However, participatory theory dimmed in the 1980s as movements declined (Florida, 2018: 37).

Deliberative democracy emerged in the 1980s, first in republican constitutionalism, and then as democratic theory (Florida, 2018: 39: 43). Placing deliberation, rather than aggregation, at the centre of democratic participation contested Rational Choice Theory and interest-based pluralism. Deliberative democrats contested the notion that citizens are rational calculators with fixed preferences that are best aggregated through mechanisms like voting, in a political marketplace. Rather, citizens form and transform preferences by engaging in communication in the public sphere. Deliberation is democratic insofar as citizens can deliberate as equals to shape decisions that affect their lives; and democracy is deliberative insofar as collective decisions track public reasoning to underpin the legitimate, rather than arbitrary, exercise of power (Elster, 1998a). Deliberative theory thus foregrounded the communicative fabric of society (Habermas, 1996), highlighting a discursive dimension that was lacking in participatory theory and that befitted mediated societies undergoing epochal changes to mass communication. This directed attention to discursive power, discourse ethics, and the transformation of the public sphere (Habermas, 1989, 2023).

Although the relationship between participatory and deliberative theories is contested (Dzur, 2019; Hauptmann, 2001; Pateman, 2012), their combination is discernible in Mansbridge (1983), Barber (2003), Cohen (2009), and Dryzek's 'critical version of deliberative democracy' (Dryzek, 2002: 29). This confluence motivated Saward's (2003: 168) ecumenical call for 'a larger, reflexive perspective which combines strengths and innovations of varied models'.

Emerging in the 2000s, the field of democratic innovation answered that call. Saward augured that the 'move beyond deliberative democracy' was underway (Saward, 2003: 161). In the following decades, however, 'the study of democratic innovations hardly ventured outside the boundaries of the deliberative world' (Asenbaum, 2022: 683). The deliberative systems turn (Parkinson and Mansbridge, 2012) accommodated participatory practices such as activism and contentious politics, but it is also criticised as reductionist: 'if a systemic view is what matters to our thinking about democracy, why is it not the democratic system, rather than the deliberative system, that is the focus?' (Saward, 2021: 22). Thus, the systemic turn also places deliberation at the centre. It might incorporate other forms of participation and political activity, but still subsumes them under a conceptual umbrella that foregrounds the legitimacy-oriented concerns of deliberative theory.

Critics of the 'inclination to equate. . . democratic innovations with deliberative models', argue that there is 'more to be seen in the field of democratic innovation' (Hendriks, 2023: 44; also Bua and Bussu, 2023; Dzur, 2019; Elstub and Escobar, 2019b). An upshot of the deliberative stream becoming 'too hegemonic' (Smith, 2019: 579) is that its gaps are transferred to the field of democratic innovation. Moreover, as argued next, the focus of much *practice* on bracketing social inequalities in order to approximate discursive equality within bounded spaces has contributed to valorising those theoretical currents more concerned with legitimation than with structural change, thus fading from view the critical roots of deliberative theory (Hammond, 2019) as capitalism becomes an unquestioned background condition (Pateman, 2012).

Theorising change in democratic innovation: legitimacy >< capacity

The implicit theory of change in democratic innovation is that by transforming the processes and institutions of will-formation, decision-making and collective action, democracies can better address the challenges of our time (Elstub and Escobar, 2019b; Geißel, 2022; Smith, 2009). Both participatory and deliberative democracy are concerned with change, but in different ways. Hendriks's (2023) account of democratic innovation notes that the deliberative stream is 'reflection-oriented' whereas the participatory stream is 'action-oriented' (p.4) and argues for 'paying more attention to concretization (getting things done) in addition to reflection (getting opinions refined) in the public domain' (p.39).

Deliberative democracy has been criticised for being more concerned with political legitimation than social transformation, thus protecting the status quo (Hauptmann, 2001; Pateman, 2012). This charge is overstated. Deliberative democracy's critical theory strand advocates transforming unjust and undemocratic power structures of capitalism to advance citizen emancipation and social justice (Hammond, 2019; 2020b; Rostboll, 2008). However, this is not currently the mainstream of deliberative scholarship and practice:

... where the critical strand of deliberative democracy has been lacking is in its practice orientation, leaving the realm of real-world impact almost entirely to the non-critical strands of the theory, which risks losing sight of some of the most pervasive forms of domination. (Hammond, 2019: 788)

One problem, from a change-making perspective, is that much deliberative practice has evolved into designing fora where inequalities are momentarily and superficially designed out. People participate as if they are equals but, outside the deliberative forum, capitalism continues to shape the resources people can bring to the forum and the preferences and interests of policymakers who will take up, or ignore, the results.

While a non-critical approach to deliberative democracy is becoming hegemonic in the *practice* of democratic innovation, participatory and deliberative *theories* continue to include a spectrum from moderate to radical imaginaries of change. We see this reflected by three imaginaries in the field: affirmation, evolution, or transformation (cf. Fraser, 1995: 82). First, democratic innovation may seek the *affirmation* of existing systems of governance through targeted reforms to shore up legitimacy – e.g. rebuild public trust in legacy institutions; increase acceptance of political decisions. Second, democratic innovation may support the *evolution* of existing systems through reforms that challenge the status quo by addressing shortcomings – e.g., improve inclusion and representation; advance epistemic justice; support new forms of collective intelligence. Third, democratic innovation may seek the *transformation* of current systems by reconstructing social, political, and economic relationships – e.g., building democratic economies, underpinning citizenship with material conditions for positive freedoms. In practice, these imaginaries overlap in the messy realities of developing 'real utopias' (Wright, 2010). However, the pull of the non-critical strand of deliberative democracy works with the incentive structure of the broader political economy to tilt democratic innovation towards 'system-supporting' rather than 'system-disrupting' orientations (Hammond, 2020a).

A theory of change for democratic innovation must be more capacious in today's era of multiple, overlapping crises. Democracies have been constrained to institutions and

processes anchored in dominant forms of political organisation and imagination that limit citizens' agency over conditions that shape their lives (Brown, 2015; Crouch, 2004). This negates a historically informed understanding of democracy as open-ended and reflexive (Dryzek, 1996: 4; Isakhan and Stockwell, 2012). Democracy must change in pursuit of its core goal of enabling people's self-governance (Geißel, 2022). Citizens should drive political life across communities, public institutions and the economy, and democratic innovations should enable new forms of collective reflection, contestation, and action. We argue that a change-making orientation requires focussing *both* on *generating legitimacy* and *mobilising capacity* to act, although the field of practice has prioritised the former over the latter.

An upshot of non-critical deliberative hegemony is that democratic innovation foregrounds questions of legitimacy over questions of capacity, but democracies are undergoing entwined crises of both (Foa et al., 2020: 42). These are inextricable pillars of democratic governance: legitimacy is necessary to mobilise the capacity to act, and capacity is necessary to achieve results that sustain legitimacy. Both underpin the 'political robustness' of a democratic polity¹ (Sørensen and Warren, 2024). This dyad of democratic governance can generate a virtuous circle or a vicious circle. The vicious circle is currently manifest in countries where institutions are losing legitimacy, precisely when they most need to mobilise capacity to address epochal challenges. As Polletta (2016:234) puts it: 'at the same time that government is. . . less capable of acting on the will of the people, it must convince the people that it is more willing to do so'. The virtuous circle is illustrated by the post-war period in polities that developed welfare states and state-managed capitalism, when legitimacy lent by newly enfranchised populations sustained unprecedented capacity mobilisation for social welfare policies and institutions (Crouch, 2004: 7–8).

In the field of democratic innovation, legitimacy underpins securing consent, whereas capacity underpins generating outcomes. Both sustain the field's potency for collective action and change-making. Legitimacy spans the normative realm that confers democratic innovations a compelling claim to authority or influence. Values and practices such as inclusion, equality, representation, epistemic justice, considered judgement, and institutionalisation contribute to legitimacy narratives. In turn, capacity spans the pragmatic realm of resources and capabilities mobilised to pursue public or common goods. Capacity may be mobilised via the public, private, or third sectors; across state administration, governance networks and the commons; and through policy work by civil society, business, and public institutions.

Crucial to our argument and focus on this article is that the field has developed apace in legitimacy-related dimensions, but less so regarding capacity. The assumption seems to be that democratic innovations succeed when they improve decision-making – as if decisions translate easily into practice and mobilising capacity is straightforward. Key puzzles in the field (e.g. impact, implementation) are illegible without grasping the messiness of policymaking, the complexities of governance, or the constraints of public institutions (Boswell et al., 2023; Dean, 2024). Habermas illustrates the importance of the legitimacy >< capacity dyad when explaining the predicament of capitalist democracies straddling two competing demands:

To avoid crises of social integration, governments. . . must ensure sufficiently favourable conditions for the valorization of capital in order to generate tax revenues; on the other hand, from the point of view of political and social justice, governments must satisfy the interest of the

population as a whole in securing the legal and material preconditions of the private and public autonomy of every citizen – otherwise they will be stripped of their democratic *legitimacy*. However, capitalist democracies will only be able to steer a course of crisis avoidance between these two imperatives if they possess sufficient governance *capacity*. (Habermas, 2023: 27; emphasis added)

Habermas' (1988) return to crisis-theoretic themes that animated his 'legitimation crisis' supports re-engagement with the political economy of capitalism (Fraser et al., 2024). Although participatory democracy is more sensitised to political economy, some deliberative scholarship shares these concerns. Dryzek (1996) analysed the constraints placed on democratic governance by financialised capitalism as globalisation advanced. By the new century, the corporate world was hollowing out the public sector and outgrowing the 'governance capacity' of many nation-states (Crouch, 2004: 29), while driving new enclosures of the commons (Henderson and Escobar, 2024). Applied theorists argue that 'lack of state capacity' undermines democratic innovation (Fung, 2012: 610), and that the field emerged to address the 'incapacities of electoral democracy' regarding governance and policymaking (Warren, 2009: 6). Sørensen and Warren (2024: 13) conclude that democratic innovation is needed to 'develop institutions and processes that can strengthen the capacity . . . for politically robust action'.

Deliberative democracy's theory of legitimation, and participatory democracy's attention to capacity for collective action, are key pillars for democratic innovation. They undergird strategies of evolution and transformation that sustain the change-making orientation of the field. We must consider not just what makes democratic innovations legitimate, or how they legitimise legacy institutions, but also what makes them capacious and how they mobilise new capacity in legacy or new institutions, and across society. For example, a stronger focus on capacity opens space beyond the state and for the role of the commons in democratic innovation (e.g. Henderson and Escobar, 2024; Rozenburg, 2023). To be clear, our intention is not to displace questions of legitimacy. However, we focus on capacity because enlarging this dimension in the field is a necessary corrective to support more effective change-making. We explore this in the four gaps identified below. The list is illustrative rather than exhaustive and prioritises field-expanding dimensions that focus on capacity and change.

Advancing democratic innovation: Four gaps and emerging possibilities for change

Pluriversality

Smith (2019) and Hendriks (2023) criticise the narrowing of the field, while Escobar and Elstun (2019: 3) warn about reification when codifying it. A pluriversal lens may trouble such ontological closures, opening the field to account for overlooked democratic innovation(s).

Pluriversal politics emerged from South American praxis-led theories of participatory democracy, the commons, indigenous movements, and decolonial struggles. Pluriversality challenges how the forces of capitalist modernity press towards a type of universality that destroys diversity and concentrates power (Escobar, 2020a). Pluriversal politics criticises the 'one-world world' (Law, 2015) and embraces ontological and epistemological pluralism to resist homogenisation by Western colonial thought (Kothari et al., 2019). As

Escobar (2020a: 69) argues: ‘the world is made up of multiple worlds, multiple ontologies. . . that are far from being exhausted by the Eurocentric experience or reducible to its terms’. Pluriversality contests these legacies and their pervasive monocultures, seeking to sustain diverse forms of life and socio-economic organisation. The pluriversal vision is memorably encapsulated by the Zapatista movement: ‘The world we want is a world in which many worlds fit’ (de la Cadena and Blaser, 2018: 1).

While deliberative theorists have accepted critiques of rationalistic versions of deliberative democracy (Young, 2002) by allowing for multiple forms of expression (Curato et al., 2019), the field of democratic innovation has not yet explored connections with the broader paradigm of pluriversal politics – replicating lack of attention to cultural, linguistic, and historical context in much democratic theory (Saward, 2021: 23). Democratic innovations such as participatory budgeting emerged from the Global South (Peck and Theodore, 2015), but this only scratches the surface of a vast landscape of experiences (see Escobar, 2020a). To be genuinely global, the field must consider the radical plurality rendered visible by pluriversal politics, both to account for it and draw inspiration.² We cannot do justice to this counterhegemonic field but can illustrate three possibilities of a pluriversal sensibility in democratic innovation.

Decentring democratic practice. Florida (2018: 39–40) argues that deliberative theory centred the field on elite-driven institutions of representative democracy. By osmosis, democratic innovation has prioritised sites connected, or legible, to such institutions. These are crucial for democratic innovation, but there are myriad other sites of political life across society and the economy (Pateman, 1970: 43). Decentring democratic practice thus entails understanding and advancing the varied sites where people participate in shaping the decisions that affect their lives. It means recognising the potential of democratic innovation beyond centralised institutions and narrowly defined political sites – a lens that limits capacity to distribute power and effect change. This is why ‘participatory democrats place emphasis on power-sharing and agency and are much more sceptical about representation’ (Dzur, 2019: 35). Decentring democratic practice also has broader epistemological implications. Critics of deliberative democracy argue that it ‘remains dominated by West-centric frameworks, paradigms and cases’ (Ibhawoh, 2024: 14) – a critique transferable to democratic innovation. The field must grapple with this heritage and carve up space for other practices and understandings.

Resisting isomorphism entails sustaining diverse processes and resisting monocultures (i.e. cultivating just one kind of democratic innovation). Participatory democracy traditionally encompasses varied processes, and critical deliberative democrats advocate ‘open designs, in a wide variety of forms and settings’ to advance ‘a general ethos of democratic innovation, in which citizens themselves can proactively engage in democratic experimentation’ (Hammond, 2019: 802). Yet, the gravitational pull of mini-publics sometimes overshadows other possibilities (Asenbaum, 2022; Cunningham and Hammond, 2025; Dzur, 2019; Hendriks, 2023). Even impact-oriented work on democratic innovations focusses mainly on mini-publics (see Jacquet et al., 2024). The growing monoculture of mini-publics in deliberative democracy, and the deliberative skew in democratic innovation, coalesce to drive isomorphism. This reduces the *capacity* of the field to effect *change*, for as Saward (2021: 3) argues: ‘There is no – and there can be no – magic bullet to address democracy’s many contemporary challenges; no obvious, singular or simple blueprints’. Sometimes isomorphic trends develop within a family of democratic innovations. For example, there are many participatory budgeting models, but technocratic versions increasingly prevail (Peck and Theodore, 2015). A pluriversal lens

seeks to ‘redress such monocultures to bring to light the multiplicity of social experience’ (Escobar, 2020a: 68).

Advancing epistemic justice entails enfranchising diverse knowers, knowledges and ways of knowing (Fricker, 2007). This relates to two dimensions in Fricker’s formulation: ‘testimonial justice’, translatable here as what/how knowledge is mobilised in democratic innovations; and ‘hermeneutical justice’, understood here as what/how knowledge about the field is produced. Participatory democrats traditionally value diverse knowledges and forms of knowledge co-production (Fals-Borda and Rahman, 1991), while criticising ‘the silencing of popular knowledges and experiences by Eurocentric knowledge’ (Escobar, 2020a: 67). Critical deliberative democrats acknowledge that ‘we have been stuck in certain ways of knowing and doing, such that many people – many epistemologies – cannot breathe’ (Curato, 2024: 13). Democratic innovations remain prone to narrow understandings of what knowledge counts as evidence, and designs dominated by the ‘banking model’ that frames learning as transactional rather than transformational (Freire, 1996). The politics of knowledge deserves more attention, particularly as marginalised and subaltern knowledges are core to struggles for recognition, justice, and change (Mignolo, 2011). Democratic innovation thus requires a critical epistemology of sources, types and uses of knowledge, and more knowledge co-production about the field.

In sum, a pluriversal sensibility can help to see wider, deeper and anew, thus amplifying the bandwidth of democratic innovation. It can throw into relief democratic innovations in contexts previously overlooked, sensitise the field to capacity-reducing isomorphism, and foster recognition and mobilisation of knowledges that enhance capacity to address complex issues in ways that generate change towards social justice.

Policy

Work on democratic innovations rarely concerns itself with bureaucracies, governance networks or policy work (Dean, 2024). Questions of change-making capacity require opening the black-boxes of public administration and the state. Studies often conclude when results are fed into authorities, precisely when consequential policy work begins (Fischer et al., 2015). The field is arguably skewed by deliberative theory’s focus on questions of legitimacy rather than capacity. Research into democratic innovations thus seldom considers the realm of government departments, public agencies, policy networks, institutional entrepreneurs, advocacy coalitions, lobbyists, and other configurations of actors that shape collaboration and contestation in policy work. This is surprising since participatory democracy has traditionally understood participation and deliberation as constitutive of policy processes, rather than punctuated inputs. Participatory democrats often consider policymaking and public administration (e.g. Dacombe, 2018; Dzur, 2019), yet, despite exceptions (Boswell et al., 2023; Dean, 2024) democratic innovation rarely engages the politics of the policy *process* or the complexities of policy as *domain*.

Policy as process. Policymaking is not a straightforward process where decisions are unproblematically translated into action. Yet, accounts of democratic innovation often puzzle over the troubled fate of participatory outputs that enter policy arenas or state machinery. The assumption seems to be that if democratic innovations produce good outputs, and land with receptive implementers, the rest will follow. For example, scholarship on deliberative systems often relies on ‘communicative miracles’ that assume connectivity between public and empowered spaces, thus erasing agency and policy work

(Hendriks et al., 2020: 26–27). Outside textbooks, policymaking is a messy confluence of practices by actors who coalesce, collude, or collide as their beliefs, narratives, resources, and interests are mobilised to pursue public action (Colebatch, 2009). Formalised moments of decision-making are punctuations in ongoing entanglements of practices through which policy is assembled, contested, and reassembled. Policy is constantly ‘moving’ (Freeman, 2012), yet democratic innovations often aim at policy as if it was inanimate. The field needs a more dynamic understanding of the politics of policymaking to increase its change-making capacity.

By the same token, policy formulation cannot be separated from policy implementation – i.e. policy develops prior to, but also while, being implemented (Lipsky, 1980). Yet, implementation is usually epiphenomenal in research and practice on democratic innovation. We often ask: is this democratic innovation influencing policy by this institution? We seldom ask: does this institution have capacity to take forward this policy work? This is crucial when institutional capacity is under siege by neoliberal reconfigurations of the state (Crouch, 2004) that privatise and outsource public sector intelligence and capabilities (Mazzucato and Collington, 2023). Concerns about the impacts of democratic innovation cannot just focus on gaining support by formal decision-makers but must address questions of capacity. This means understanding policy as a domain of action and interaction unfolding from the interplay between agential and structural power.

Policy as domain. Policy processes are embedded in, and structured by, broader ‘political orders’ (Gerstle, 2022), like the neoliberal state-market nexus of financialised capitalism (Fraser, 2022). Changing political orders requires exercising power and involves struggle, but affirmative democratic innovations take structuring conditions for granted, which limits scope for substantial policy change. Capitalism and the state emerge in symbiosis and reproduce each other through mechanisms such as public policy. Absent political struggle, policy systems tend to channel democratic innovations in system-supporting ways. Here lies one explanation for the constant charge of tokenism. However, just like capitalism evolves through contradictions and crises, the state is not a coherent entity, but an ensemble of organisations, institutions and actors bound by relations, rules, and practices sedimented by struggles and politics (Jessop, 1990). The paradoxical qualities of the state (dynamic yet slow-moving; coordinated yet contradictory) makes its transformation seem impossible – although many of us have witnessed transitions from welfare to neoliberal states (Brown, 2015). The field of democratic innovation can sharpen its critical edge by conceptualising the state not as a background condition, but as a field of struggle. Those who wish for transformative democratic innovations must rekindle the participatory tradition of reclaiming the state (Vlahos et al., 2024).

From a strategic-relational perspective (Jessop, 2016), the state encapsulates the social balance of power, generated by political actors mobilising power resources in structurally asymmetric contexts. This lens questions ‘state imperatives’ that construct narrow policy paradigms and limit democratisation – e.g. developing democratic economies (Kelly and Howard, 2019). As Dryzek (1996: 36) explains, ‘once the basic parameters of capitalist democracy have been achieved, the state is peculiarly resistant to further democratisations’. State institutions reflect political compromises between anti- and pro-democratic forces, and democratisation reflects struggles by which pro-democratic forces extract concessions from elites seeking to contain democracy. Structural and instrumental capital power generates a gravitational pull in favour of socio-economic elites, but this cannot fully constrain democratisation pressures (Kelly, 2023). System-disrupting democratic

innovations can support change by creating new political space for more capacious policy paradigms. As Dryzek (1996: 34) concludes: ‘The task that remains is to locate possibilities for democratic innovation in the face of these structural and ideological constraints’.

In sum, a change-making orientation for democratic innovation requires engaging with policy as process and domain. We illustrated this with insights from critical policy studies and state theory that connect to our concern with political economy, discussed next.

Political economy

The field of political economy takes politics and economics as mutually constitutive and inextricable, re-embedding ‘the analysis of the economic within the social and political realm’ (Clift, 2014: 1–2). As Vlahos (2023) argues: ‘democratic innovation research suffers from a lack of theoretical, analytical and empirical engagement with critical research on capitalism’. This limits its analytical and practical bite regarding systemic change, failing to grapple with ‘the precarious relationship between the democratic state and a capitalist economy, which tends to reinforce social inequalities’ (Habermas, 2023: 26). When financialised capitalism threatens the *legitimacy* of democracy by undermining its *capacity* to act (Crouch, 2004; Fraser, 2022; Wagenaar and Prainsack, 2022), it shows the fundamental tension between building democratic polities and sustaining autocratic economies. More profoundly, capitalism tends to drag the social totality towards the accumulation of capital (Fraser, 2022). The structural dependence it generates upon its circulation for individuals and organisations gives it a co-optative ability that resignifies interventions such as democratic innovations towards affirming capitalism’s systemic features, reducing change-making capacity and constraining democracy. Thus, we heed Habermas (2018: 881) when he criticises:

the erosion of democracy that has been progressing ever further since politics. . . more or less abdicated before the systemic pressure of deregulated markets. From this perspective, the theory of democracy and the critique of capitalism belong together.

Pateman (2012: 10) argues that deliberative democrats ‘are not usually concerned with structural features of the wider society’, whereas participatory democrats insist that ‘the changes required are structural; they necessitate reform of undemocratic authority structures’. Klein (2020) shows how these debates permeate the critical theory of Habermas vis-à-vis Polanyi, with the former focussed on legitimacy and the latter on capacity. For Habermas, the relationship between capitalism and democracy is mediated through law (p. 21), whereas for Polanyi via ‘democratic self-organization and collective struggle in the economy’ (p. 19). These classic divides between participatory and deliberative streams can be reconciled in the field of democratic innovation.

Political economy can sensitise the field to how capitalism works to structure societies. Arguably, the field absorbed the post-cold-war liberal triumphalism where capitalism is unimpeachable. The upshot: democratic innovation takes capitalist social relations as unquestioned background conditions, precluding attention to the sources of the world’s greatest problems (Fraser, 2022; Kelly, 2023; Wagenaar and Prainsack, 2022). Transformative democratic innovation must incorporate a theory of the capitalist dynamics into which participatory processes and institutions are inserted (Bua, 2022). Capitalism has great capacity for co-optation, but it is not impermeable to change. As a contradictory and crisis-ridden system, it offers opportunities for democratisation.

Hope and scope for democratic innovation lies in capitalisms' deficitarian nature: it cannot sustain itself without incorporating external elements (Fraser, 2022). Critical approaches to democratic innovation can recognise the risks of incorporation and make space for participatory processes working to 'erode capitalism' (Wright, 2010). In practice, de-commodified forms of life and social relations emerge in interaction with capitalist dynamics (Sevilla-Buitrago, 2022). This means that the coercive, ideological, and economic power that sustain capitalism never fully seal off the possibilities for change. The field of democratic innovation should identify emergent, and established, social formations within capitalism that prefigure democratic alternatives. For example, commons-based governance, ownership, and production (Henderson and Escobar, 2024; Sevilla-Buitrago, 2022) and arrangements emerging from social movements (Bua and Bussu, 2023). A political economy turn can thus strengthen the change-making orientation of the field (see Vlahos et al., 2024). Two areas illustrate this potential:

Economic democracy. Habermas (2023: 27) recently argued that democratic states must 'curb the centrifugal forces of social disintegration' generated by 'self-perpetuating capitalist modernization'. There is much scope for democratic innovation in economic policymaking and governance. Wagenaar (2023: 70) notes the 'absence of the importance of economic democracy in the new forms of public participation'. It is peculiar that an area of policymaking so consequential to citizens remains so impermeable to democratisation. Some democratic innovations have been closer than others – i.e., participatory budgeting; although global expansion is taming its transformative leanings (Escobar, 2020b; Peck and Theodore, 2015). Despite experiments³, mini-publics rarely work on economic policymaking. Nevertheless, participatory economic governance is reviving across the world (Thorpe and Gavena, 2020), including democratisation rooted in financial reform (Wagenaar and Prainsack, 2022). Democratic innovation can thus expand its horizons through research and practice on economic democracy.

Democratic economy. Another promising liaison is current work towards building more democratic economies (Kelly and Howard, 2019). This includes prefigurative practices that create interstitial alternatives within capitalism (Wright, 2010). Participatory democrats have long argued for workplace democracy and democratising 'spheres such as industry. . . seen as political systems in their own right' (Pateman, 1970: 43). There are various dimensions to building a democratic economy, from labour conditions to the governance of enterprises, the construction of markets and the ownership structures that organise and finance economic activity. Related movements are gaining ground, demonstrating alternative forms of economic development and governance – e.g. community wealth-building, wellbeing economies, cooperativism, community development trusts, and social enterprises. These merit attention because some feature new forms of citizen participation and community governance, while others need democratic innovation (see Durose et al., 2021; Henderson and Escobar, 2024). Attention to processes and institutions of democratic economy offers opportunities to apply de-commodification theory to assess whether democratic innovations generate space for freedom outside market relations (Vlahos, 2023). The field overlooks these developments due to a focus on legitimising state institutions and disregard for the commons – never mind two billion people worldwide govern resources as commons to sustain their communities (Bollier, 2014: 2).

In sum, a political economy turn can develop change-making capacity in the field. Institutional strategies and designs informed by political economy likely have more

capacity to blunt capitalism's sharpest edges. Such interdisciplinary work can support reflexive democratic innovators to navigate structural power relations and potentially erode them through their practice. Democratic innovation should thus play a part in broader efforts to remove the *cordon sanitaire* that keeps the economy away from democratisation.

Empowerment

Empowering citizens and communities is sometimes epiphenomenal in studies of democratic innovation, with notable exceptions for example in research and debates about participatory budgeting (e.g. Baiocchi, 2005; Ganuza and Baiocchi, 2019) and other forms of empowered participatory governance (Bua and Bussu, 2023; Fung and Wright, 2003). This limited attention in the field of democratic innovation is striking given empowerment's centrality in its participatory democracy stream.

For Freire (1996), empowerment is the process by which people develop critical consciousness about their situation and context, the power dynamics and structures at play, and their individual and collective agency to advance social change. Empowerment is both deliberative and participatory – i.e., underpinned by *praxis* defined as 'reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it' (Freire, 1996: 33). Definitions of empowerment usually encompass the capacity to act and the process by which that capacity is developed. Adams (2008: xvi) includes

the capacity of individuals, groups and/or communities to take control of their circumstances, exercise power and achieve their own goals, and the process by which, individually and collectively, they are able to help themselves and others.

The emancipatory, solidaristic, and change-oriented politics of empowerment animate participatory democracy across disciplines such as community development, education, and social work (Adams, 2008; Craig and Mayo, 1995). More broadly, empowerment is central in participatory scholarship (e.g. Baiocchi, 2005; Barber, 2003; Pateman, 1970; Polletta, 2016). Yet, democratic innovation is sometimes characterised by participation without power and power without participation (see Lee et al., 2015). That is, democratic innovations often lack power-sharing by institutions, and sites of power often remain impermeable to democratisation. The field must address 'to what extent (or under what conditions) the democratic innovations of participatory and deliberative democratic theory fulfil their original empowerment ambitions' (Hammond 2020b: 7).

We think this gap stems from the deliberative stream's non-committal stance towards substantive normativity. For example, Warren (2017: 48) characterises deliberation as lacking an empowerment dimension. Critical deliberative democrats disagree (e.g. Curato et al., 2019) and argue that the problem is democratic innovations being used as technologies of citizen activation rather than empowerment (Hammond, 2020b), and the proliferation of designed deliberative fora instead of a deliberative democratic political culture across society (Cunningham and Hammond, 2025). Our point is that non-critical deliberative scholarship foregrounds norms that make a process deliberative (e.g. inclusion, respect, justification) while being agnostic about normative commitments in participatory democracy (e.g. empowerment, socio-economic equality, economic democratisation). This results from the 'procedural', rather than substantive, orientation that gives deliberative democracy coherence as a theory of legitimation (see Chambers, 2003).

Democratic innovation thus navigates the paradoxical tension between procedural and substantive commitments at play in its participatory and deliberative streams. Although this can be overstated. Cohen's (1998: 187) deliberative theory carries 'substantive, not simply procedural' commitments and 'the substance comprises egalitarian and liberal political values'. Empowerment is part of deliberative democracy insofar as it is a theory of resistance to arbitrary domination (Hammond, 2019). The question is whether it goes beyond formal equality and negative freedoms, and beyond agnosticism regarding political economy. Rozenburg (2023: 126) criticises excessive proceduralism because it

empties deliberative democracy of its radical idealism, and subverts its emancipatory promise, as it is not inherently oppositional to the hegemonic forces of capital and state power. When deliberative democratic theory overemphasises authentic procedure, without paying attention to the social positions – and associated interests – of participants, it runs the risk of being deliberative, without being democratic.

Democratic innovation must grapple with normativity challenges from its dual heritage. Our instinct is to embrace capaciousness and its paradoxes. Paradoxes reflect the messiness of practice and generate insight. Crucially, democratic innovation is not political theory, but praxis in conversation with theories. A pluriversal lens accommodates procedural and substantive commitments across different democratic innovations. For instance, participatory budgeting sometimes carries substantive commitments to social justice and economic democracy (Escobar, 2020b), whereas mini-publics emphasise procedural norms to warrant credibility.

Nevertheless, as a field, democratic innovation should carry a commitment to empowerment. After all, democratisation is a history of struggles for empowerment (Wood, 2016). Without it, the field lacks capacity for change. Recentring empowerment encompasses various dimensions. Let us illustrate two. First, there is the challenge of empowering democratic innovations, *but also* the institutions that authorise them. The capitalist political economy strains the capacity of the state and the potential of the commons. Therefore, the field should pay attention to institutional and community capacity for collective action. That goes beyond treating symptoms (e.g. impact deficits) and towards understanding the constraints on institutions that constrain democratic innovations.

Second, an empowerment lens invites revising imaginaries of citizenship and conditions of possibility for participating in democratic life: from the formal empowerment of liberal rights to the material empowerment of social rights – substantiated through policies and services to support living standards that underpin citizenship (Crouch, 2004: 78–103). Such empowered citizenship requires 'strengthening people's (material) capacities to participate, which have been conveniently overlooked by the field of democratic innovation' (Bua and Bussu, 2023: 2). Pateman (1970: 43) argued for a 'substantive measure of economic equality' to give citizens the 'independence and security necessary for (equal) participation'. Universal basic services alongside universal basic income epitomise efforts towards 'democratising citizenship' (Pateman, 2004). These concerns permeate participatory democracy but are also found in earlier reflections about deliberative democracy's prospect in unjust societies. By foregrounding change-making capacity, the field can revisit questions posed by Elster (1998b: 16):

'What is the relation between equal access to the deliberative process and the distribution of income? Does equality of access mandate a floor on incomes, a ceiling, or both? Does the

unequal distribution of education, information, and commitment pose a threat to deliberative democracy?’

Cohen’s (1998: 207) stance that deliberation presupposes ‘free and equal citizens’ is usually interpreted according to a liberal, rather than social, imaginary of citizenship. However, there are basic needs to be met before citizens can deliberate. People’s capacity for public reasoning is underwritten by material conditions. This recasts positive freedoms as conditions of possibility for deliberative democracy. To be sure, deliberative democrats already foreground material conditions when they support reducing barriers to participation in mini-publics (e.g. stipend, accommodation, childcare, digital resources). The participatory corrective we propose extends such commitments to the structural level, reconnecting the field with broader change ambitions.

In sum, the field of democratic innovation must recentre empowerment, and address questions about social well-being and economic rights in citizenship (Vlahos, 2023). This entails a shift ‘from viewing participation as a civic virtue to seeing it as a form of labour that is distributed in society, and whose terms need to be renegotiated’ (Holdo, 2023: 57). How can the field otherwise mobilise legitimacy *and* capacity for change?

Conclusion: The change-making potential of democratic innovation(s)

Democratic innovations help to reimagine and deepen the role of citizens in democratic governance (Elstub and Escobar, 2019b), but they have not yet captured the public imagination at large or permeated the vernacular of political life. They seem a temporary fashion that is concomitant with our troubled times but cannot change them. As a realm of praxis, however, democratic innovation is implicit in normative, historical, and pragmatic accounts of democracy as an open-ended project (Dryzek, 1996: 4; Fung, 2012; Wood, 2016). If democratic innovation is perennial, the narrowing of the field matters. We therefore argued for capaciousness, from affirmative to transformative approaches. This means preventing it from becoming mainly a technology of *affirmation* of the status quo and strengthening its change-making capacity. More attention to *evolution* and *transformation* strategies is necessary – unless we are seeking to change everything so that nothing changes (paraphrasing Di Lampedusa, 1957).

Consequently, we proposed a corrective to the field that foregrounds questions of capacity to complement the prevalent focus on legitimacy. The ‘participatory corrective’ heuristic denotes areas currently overlooked – e.g., democratisation across society; risks of isomorphism; empowered citizenship; and socio-economic foundations of democratic life. We justified this corrective by surveying four gaps, or field-expanding dimensions, that re-orient the field towards capacity and change:

Pluriversality: A theoretical lens that can sustain a vibrant participatory ecology and enrich the ontology and epistemology of the field. It sensitises against isomorphism and accommodates multiple sites, processes and knowledges to account for, and generate, a wider range of democratic innovations.

Policy: A realm of action and interaction that, although targeted by many democratic innovations, is often black-boxed. Attention to policy, as process and domain, can illuminate constraints and possibilities for democratic innovation(s).

Political economy: A discipline that considers socioeconomic structures and conditions for change. By elucidating the inextricability of politics and economics, it surfaces structural barriers and enablers for democratic innovation.

Empowerment: A dimension of democratic life that sustains the capacity – of citizens, communities, organisations and institutions – for social development, collective action and systemic change.

The list is illustrative rather than exhaustive. But it opens possibilities and links to cognate fields, including pluriversal politics, critical policy studies, political economy, community development, and social policy.

We started from Smith's (2019) warning that deliberative theory is becoming hegemonic in democratic innovation. Curato et al. (2019: 178) note the 'irony that the field that seeks to fight domination has become a dominant field itself'. We do not reject deliberative theory but highlight its critical strand as better suited for a change-making orientation with systemic bite (see Cunningham and Hammond, 2025; Hammond, 2019; Rostboll, 2008; Rozenburg, 2023). The problem is not just that democratic innovation is increasingly equated only with deliberative democracy, but that deliberative democracy is often reduced to its non-critical, system-supporting strand. There is a difference between deliberative democracy as a critical theory of social transformation or as a theory of political legitimisation agnostic about the status quo. Both have a place informing the field, but currently one is prevailing.

We conceptualised democratic innovation as a field of praxis rather than political theory, but argued that it carries a theory of change – i.e. democratisation can mobilise legitimacy >< capacity to act collectively on the crises of our time. A change-making orientation is challenging for a field unavoidably tethered to institutions it seeks to transform. Democratic innovations build bridges between publics and institutions, but to do so, they must be acceptable to both and legible to the latter. A bridge is a liminal space, an in-between. This indeterminacy can trigger institutional caution and render democratic innovations symbolic. That is perhaps why change is so difficult and transformative democratic innovations so scarce. How can democratic innovations channel the new without risking illegibility by traditional institutions? The field must grapple with this bind. This is why we remain ecumenical about the field. We do not argue that all democratic innovations should aim for transformation but that the spectrum should span from moderate to radical. Context and contingency are key to change-making. In some contexts, moderate advances may be the only entry point and have potential as Trojan Horses for broader change.

The field is at a crossroads: no longer a figment in the imagination of democratic reformers, yet far from capable of transforming democracies. It is a vibrant field that elicits hope based on experience and 'openness to the perpetual possibility . . . of democratic innovation' (Saward, 2021: 30). But it needs a stronger orientation towards systemic change commensurate with our times. Ultimately, the field must expand our democratic imagination and capacity for collective action – a task now as demanding as urgent.

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Notes

1. Political robustness is 'the capacity of a political system to adapt and innovate in ways that enable it to serve its core democratic functions in the face of disruptive political demands and events' (Sørensen and Warren, 2024: 2).
2. Pluriversality should not be read as an irrationalist attack on science. Rather, as Bourdieu (1988: xii-xiv) would have it, pluriversality accepts the multiple *subjectivities* which *form part of* the objective world to be studied by science. A pluriversal lens thus supports the sociological reflexivity needed by any field seeking emancipatory change, because it can situate the field within, and in relation to, a broader epistemological matrix and thus prevent it from *losing sight of itself* and becoming an instrument of that eternal enemy of science: ontological closure.
3. For example, UK Citizens' Economic Councils: <https://citizensecon.org.uk> and <https://www.thersa.org/projects/archive/economy/citizens-economic-council> [Accessed 1/11/24]

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