Learning from Democratic Practices: New Perspectives in Institutional Design

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Contemporary democracies feature an increasingly diverse and complex variety of democratic practices. The systematic observation of these practices offers a valuable yet neglected source of insight for current debates on democratic systems and for institutional design. Taking democratic practices as the starting point for theorization counters the tendency to think that democracy has some sort of fixed core around which a political system should be organized. Drawing from literature on democratic practices in social movements and democratic innovations, I illustrate three ways to advance institutional design in the wake of the systemic turn. First, I call for greater attention to the role of political actors in institutional innovation. Second, I show how to better address issues of temporality in institutional design. Third, I introduce the concept of democratic assemblage as a means to understand and reform democracies.

This article contributes to the ongoing debate on democratic systems, which is now central to deliberative democracy. I argue that scholarship on democratic systems would greatly benefit from enhanced attention to the extant variety of democratic practices. In particular, these practices should be acknowledged as a valuable source of insight for institutional design. I introduce a practice-based understanding of democracy that offers a new way of thinking about how to reform democracy. On the basis of this approach, I propose three ideas to advance ongoing debates in democratic theory. These ideas also illustrate how theorists can learn useful lessons from the systematic observation of contemporary democratic practices.

The presence of a growing variety of democratic practices is a fundamental characteristic of our democracies. As we will see, in democratic studies, the now dominant systemic approach insists on the importance of investigating how different components of democratic systems interact with each other (see Elstub, Ercan, and Mendonça 2016; Parkinson and Mansbridge 2012). A problematic development in this literature is that, although they are deemed important, democratic practices, especially those outside institutions, receive little attention (see Dean, Rinne, and Geissel 2019). In particular, efforts to reflect on how the expanding galaxy of democratic practices can inform institutional design are still limited.

What do contemporary democratic practices tell us about democratic systems? To answer this question we need to adopt a practice-based understanding of democracy. That is, we should engage in democratic theorizing that is based on a systematic scrutiny of democratic practices. Taking democratic practices as the reference point for theorization helps us to counter the tendency to think that democracy has some sort of fixed core around which a political system should be organized—such as elections, deliberation, or participation—and to look in new directions in institutional design.

The limited attention to democratic practices in contemporary debates can be seen in the fact that democratic systems scholarship offers no clear definition, let alone a shared understanding, of what democratic practices are. Drawing from Schatzki (2005, 11), I define democratic practice as an array of human activity that addresses political problems and is centrally organized around a shared practical understanding that is inclusive and egalitarian. This broad definition intends to transcend well-known distinctions between different types of democratic practices (e.g., deliberative, participatory, electoral). The practice-based understanding of democracy, in fact, is ecumenical: it acknowledges the importance of the various normative preferences of theorists and leaves open the possibility for theorists of different strands to learn from a variety of democratic practices.

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Using a review of extant investigations and extensive research on contemporary democratic practices, I identify three ways to expand and refine institutional design in the aftermath of the systemic turn in democratic theory. My three recommendations are illustrations of the potential insight and the new research directions that might stem from a practice-based approach to democracy. The first two are calls for greater attention to the role that political actors, on the one hand, and issues of temporality, on the other, play in institutional innovation processes. The third one is more general and relates to the notion of democratic assemblage, which I introduce as a supplementary way of understanding the relations among the components of democracy, as well as the notion of democratic systems.

Two caveats are in order at this point. First, I do not claim that remarking on the importance of observing practice is something new in political theory. Theory and practice go hand in hand because ideas are influenced by the political context in which theorists and reformers are immersed (see Palonen 2005). An iterative course between theory and practice characterizes many original developments in political thought and action (see Mansbridge 2003). Furthermore, theorists have criticized the detachment between theory and practice (e.g., Elstub 2010; Thompson 2008) highlighting, instead, the value of a more inductive approach to theorizing (e.g., Saward 2003; cf. Fung 2007).[1] I claim that, in the wake of the systemic turn in democratic theory and in the face of a thriving landscape of democratic practices, we need a renewed effort to understand what democratic practices are and how they can lead theorizing in new directions. Studies seeking to improve specific institutions on the basis of a close observation of how they work in practice are fundamental. However, they should be paralleled by a way of theorizing about systems—rather than individual institutions only—that is informed by the systematic observation of contemporary democratic practices. This is particularly important today. On the one hand, the crisis of representative democracy calls for systemic change (Dryzek et al. 2019). On the other hand, there is an unprecedented wealth of democratic practices available for us to learn from (Smith 2019).

Second, claiming that we need to make more conscious and systematic efforts toward learning from practice does not mean, of course, that we should disregard the importance of theoretical knowledge in guiding practice. As I show, many activists in social movements and democratic innovators are trying to turn ideas that have long been considered in theo-

retical debates into practical reality. Ultimately, a practice-based understanding of democracy seeks to improve theorizing so as to develop more complete and adequate reform proposals (cf. Bevir 2010). Yet, we should remember the distinct nature of the concept of practice and the unique insight we can gain from its observation. As argued by Wagenaar and Cook (2003, 141), practice "is not just the executive arm of rational knowledge, but instead is a way of engaging with the world in its own right; a way of moving about that is much more attuned to the pluralistic, open-ended, moral-political character of the everyday world."

The article is structured as follows. I first show that there is a growing variety of ways in which democracy is understood and practiced, and I argue that the theoretical implications of this development have not been duly explored. In trying to address this problem, I first provide a definition of democratic practices that is currently missing and then discuss the proliferation of such practices in social movements and in democratic innovations. Then, I argue that the systemic turn in deliberative democracy represents a promising development for engaging with a practice-based understanding of democracy. In the second part of the article, I show that the most influential systemic approaches already welcome the idea of contestation over the meaning and practices of democracy. Nevertheless, the main concern of theorists lies in the identification of some core objectives that systems should aim for and in designing the right set of institutions to enable this. Insight tends to stem from critical reflection on the different meanings of democracy. In the last part of the article, I engage with scholarship from social movement studies and democratic innovation to illustrate how the attentive observation of democratic practices can teach valuable lessons for theorizing, and I suggest ways of moving toward a practice-based understanding of democracy.[2]

A HYBRID AND DIVERSE LANDSCAPE OF DEMOCRATIC PRACTICES

Democracy, is a highly complex idea that generates disputes over its core aspects. Indeed, democracy is an open-ended project whose strength consists of the ability to accommodate contestation around its different meanings and around its many practices. Interestingly, Gagnon (2018) has recorded over 2,200 adjectives associated with democracy that have been

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1. For an investigation of how the relationship between theory and practice has been understood in democratic theory in general and in deliberative democracy specifically, see Elstub (2014).

2. Some of the ideas explored in this article resonate with those emerging in debates in other areas of political theory. Most notably, these include long-standing discussions about the nature of and relationship between ideal and nonideal theories of justice (for an overview, see Valentini 2012) or debates on the role of realism in political theory (see Galston 2010). This type of self-reflexivity is rightly deemed key to retaining a critical edge in political theory in general and democratic theory in particular (Hammond 2019).

used to describe some defining features of special relevance to different ways to understand and practice democracy.

Although there is no shortage of ways to interpret democracy, differences have to fall within certain boundaries. At the most general level, according to Dryzek (2016, 358), democracy—as distinct from dictatorship, market, and anarchy, among others—"covers questions concerning construction, distribution, exercise and limitation of legitimate public authority." Within these broad boundaries, over time, democratic theorists have identified different subtypes of democracy (Collier and Levitsky 1997). Liberal, participatory, deliberative, radical, cosmopolitan, and direct democracy are just some of the more familiar adjectives that have been used to describe democracy and correspond to different approaches that inform theorists' analyses.

Certainly, the normative perspectives adopted by theorists affect the way they understand different democratic practices (Elstub 2010; see also Gerring and Yesnowitz 2006; O'Flynn 2010; Smith 2009). Indeed, institutional devices can be assessed in terms of their ability to enact different democratic principles (Elstub 2014). Granted that, the practice-based approach I argue for in this article is not tied to any specific theory of democracy, and it can be adopted by democratic theorists of different strands. It remains possible that reflection on practices might lead theorists to reconsider their conception of democracy (see Fung 2007, 447–48). At any rate, the goal is not to privilege one normative perspective over others but to grant the expanding constellation of democratic practices greater attention when theorizing. As I will show, that is key to developing desirable and effective institutional design.

Before proceeding with the analysis, it is important to clarify what is meant by democratic practices, a term often mentioned but rarely defined in literature (Wagenaar 2012). Warren represents a notable exception in this regard: in developing his problem-based approach to democracy, he defines "generic political practices" as "ideal-typical social actions that are commonly organized or enabled by institutions that serve democratic functions" (2017, 43). Because social actions that are rule oriented "imply institutions" (43), Warren addresses his efforts to improve democracy toward institutional design. I share this resolution. Nevertheless, to understand the insight that democratic practices can give to institutional design, it is necessary to acknowledge that not all democratic practices, especially those in the public sphere, are rule oriented or embodied in institutions in the above sense. In addition, rather than concentrating on the ideal-typical representations of practices, scholars should look at the ways in which practices actually work as the source of insight for their theorizing.

An alternative conception of democratic practices is needed. In one of the most influential investigations of the concept of

practice, Cetina, Schatzki, and von Savigny (2005) highlight the fact that this concept has attracted extensive attention from leading social and political theorists for decades. Interest in this concept is so widespread that they see a "practice turn" occurring in social science at large. Furthermore, the idea of practice is often employed in democratic theory. Democracy scholars, however, define the type of practice being discussed (e.g., discursive, participatory, deliberative, agonistic), rather than consider the notion of practice itself. Whereas this article does not aim at providing an overview of practice theory (see, e.g., Dunne 1993), it brings some much needed insight from this scholarship into current institutional design debates.

I follow Schatzki (2005, 11), who, in an effort to find a minimal, commonly shared definition of the concept, refers to practices as "arrays of human activity centrally organized around shared practical understanding."[3] Here, this definition is further qualified in that I limit my interest to practices that, in dealing with political problems, display a commitment to egalitarian and inclusive forms of engagement. That is, I refer to those practices in which actors' "shared practical understanding" can be seen as democratic. I do not aim at finding a definition of democratic practice that covers the semantic richness of the idea of democracy. Nor do I intend to develop a stringent definition that risks privileging some subsets of democratic practices (e.g., participatory, deliberative, or electoral ones). Rather, I limit myself to identifying plausible and minimal boundaries within which discussions on democratic practices might unfold. As seen in the introduction, this is similar to what occurs in the debate on the different meanings of democracy. Thus, I refer to a commitment to egalitarian and inclusive engagement in order to identify a fundamental feature practices that can be meaningfully called democratic should have. As we will see, within the variety of practices falling within these boundaries, some (e.g., sortition) are readily identifiable as democratic, whereas for others (e.g., encampments) this might be less apparent. Overall, the practice-based approach can be used to engage with as broad as possible a range of democratic practices.

In this article, I direct my discussion toward those democratic practices developed in the context of social movements (della Porta and Diani 2006) and of democratic innovations (Smith 2009). Of course, these are not the only two areas in which democratic practices are emerging. Nevertheless, I select them because this allows me to refer my discussion to two of the most dynamic contexts in which democratic practices are evolving. Furthermore, this choice reduces the risk of getting lost in discussing the overwhelming

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3. Schatzki further specifies that practices are "embodied" and "materially mediated." I take these two aspects for granted and focus on the idea of practices as activities organized around shared practical understanding.

quantity of democratic practices occurring in our societies. There is no ambition to provide an exhaustive overview or a typology of existing practices or to empirically track extant conceptions of democracy in activist and practitioner circles. Rather, I discuss some democratic practices to support my broader argument and to illustrate my three recommendations.[4]

Social movements host a growing number of democratic practices, which are increasingly hybrid in nature. This emerges from several investigations. For instance, Polletta (2012) has extensively documented the rise of discursive and participatory practices in social movements. Indeed, it has been shown that apart from more conventional ways of protesting and campaigning, social movements have generated innovative practices (now widespread in democracies) such as sit-ins and awareness-raising groups (see also Norris 2002). Furthermore, della Porta has investigated not only the engagement of social movements with democratic participation and deliberation but also their ability to adopt and adapt previous practices to concoct altogether new practices, such as encampments or standing protests (e.g., della Porta and Mattoni 2014). Through such practices, social movements engage in both protest and deliberation (Felicetti and della Porta 2018; Mendonça and Ercan 2015). Certainly, the internet has also provided a basis for activists to engage in innovative and increasingly sophisticated democratic practices. For example, Carpentier (2009) refers to the idea of "mediated participatory practices," to highlight the growing mix of participatory and mediated practices. As well as media scholars (e.g., Earl and Kimport 2011), democracy scholars too have given substantial attention to these practices (e.g., Dahlgren 2009; Sunstein 2018). Far from being limited to social movements only, the study of ever-expanding sets of deliberative and participatory practices online also represents an important component of research on democratic innovations, the other context of interest here (e.g., Kies 2010).

As democratic innovations have grown in complexity, new typologies have emerged, accounting for the growing variety and hybridity of existing democratic practices (Elstub and Escobar 2017; Smith 2009). Whereas a burgeoning literature discusses the extensive variety of public deliberation forums (e.g., Grönlund, Bachtiger, and Setälä 2014) and participatory experiments (e.g., Davidson and Elstub 2014; Pogrebinschi and Samuels 2014), a growing body of scholarship investigates practices effectively incorporating a mix of deliberative, representative, and participatory aspects (e.g., Caluwaerts and Reuchamps 2015; Gastil et al. 2018). This hybridization brings complexity, of which we still lack an encompassing understanding (Hendriks 2019). As argued by Sintomer (2018), experiments in democratic innovation have changed in nature over time. They have shifted from top-down, consultative, highly engineered bodies intended to complement representative democracy (e.g., deliberative pools, citizen juries, and consensus conferences) toward more "hybridized and inventive" radical experiments. As Mansbridge (2019, 1) effectively put it, "new practices require new theories."

Overall, scholars have given attention to the growing variety of democratic practices. Importantly, we need to acknowledge that the wealth of normative interpretation of democracy in political and social theory that informs different democratic theories actually tends to make reference to different democratic practices at the same time. Liberal democrats' narrow focus on elections and other institutional devices of representative democracy has long been bemoaned by more radical scholars of democracy. The latter, nevertheless, have themselves focused almost exclusively on practices more immediately resonant with their own theoretical preferences.

For instance, although conflict has been a key concern for critical theories of democracy generally, this subject has been understood as a domain of inquiry reserved for mainly agonist and radical democracy scholars (Mouffe 2000; Young 2000). The bulk of democracy scholars, including critical ones, instead, have focused on more collaborative forms of governance. Dean (2018) sees in this phenomenon the cause of the scarcity of theoretical and practical proposals with regard to citizens' oppositional engagement with institutions. Similarly, some exceptions notwithstanding (see Felicetti 2016; González-Ricoy 2014; Landemore and Ferreras 2016; Malleson 2014), participatory democrats have traditionally been virtually the only democracy scholars investigating workplace democracy.

Up until recently, deliberative democrats also oriented the bulk of their attention—and, thus, most of the recent research on democracy, as Pateman (2012) critically remarked—toward deliberative practices only. In particular, strictly deliberative practices such as minipublics have, by and large, received the most attention (see Bächtiger and Parkinson 2019; Elstub and Mclaverty 2014). Chambers's (2012, 329) provocative question, "Has deliberative democracy abandoned mass democracy?" was addressed exactly to that quarter. This kind of critical reflection, together with similar remarks about the variety of democratic practices characterizing political systems, has bolstered the development of the deliberative system idea (Hendriks 2006; Mansbridge 1999).[5] This approach, to

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4. For extensive databases of democratic experiments, see https://participedia.net/ or https://www.latinno.net/.

5. My critique is not addressed to efforts to tie together theoretical arguments and empirical investigation as such. The importance of this undertaking is firmly established (for deliberative democracy, see, e.g., Boswell and Corbett 2017; Neblo 2015; Thompson 2008) and beyond question here. In line with the systemic turn, I claim that theoretical and

which I turn in the next section, illustrates a way of theorizing that gives more value to varieties of practice in our democracies and offers a basis to further a practice-based understanding of democracy.

GIVING THE SYSTEMIC DEBATE A PRACTICE TWIST

The systemic turn has highlighted the need for scholars to take into consideration how deliberation interacts with other democratic practices in our political systems. According to an influential definition, a deliberative system is "a set of distinguishable, differentiated, but to some degree interdependent parts, often with distributed functions and a division of labor, connected in such a way as to form a complex whole. . . . A deliberative system is one that encompasses a talk-based approach to political conflict and problem-solving—through arguing, demonstrating, expressing, and persuading" (Mansbridge et al. 2012, 5). Overall, systems scholars agree that not all components of a system can or even need to be deliberative. Deliberation alone cannot perform the democratic function. For this reason, a deliberative system should be characterized by a division of labor among its different parts (Goodin 2005; Thompson 2008). This is all the more true for scholars adopting a democratic systems view, which, as we will see, deems deliberation important but not necessarily central to democratic systems and is something in which I am interested here (see Warren 2017).

What is especially interesting about the systemic turn is that it has enabled the development of different approaches, which, in various ways and to different extents, welcome diversity in democratic practices. As an illustration, I discuss three of the most influential approaches: the classic systemic (Dryzek 2011; Parkinson and Mansbridge 2012), the deliberative stance (Owen and Smith 2015), and the problem-based approach (Warren 2017). In the first approach, democratic practices other than democratic deliberation are conditionally welcomed into the system. In particular, nondeliberative practices are deemed desirable depending on "how well they perform the functions necessary to promote the goals of the system"—epistemic, ethic, and democratic—or contribute to either authentic, inclusive, and consequential deliberation in the system or "deliberative capacity building" (Mansbridge et al. 2012, 13; see also Dryzek 2009). According to the deliberative stance characterization, instead, a deliberative system should welcome only those practices that feature a minimum of deliberative democratic engagement methods, that is, those practices in which actors display "a relation to others as equals engaged in the mutual exchange of reasons oriented as if to

reaching a shared practical judgment" (Owen and Smith 2015, 228). Finally, the problem-based approach is critical of models that give priority to certain practices over others (e.g., deliberation or voting), because they constrict our ability to think about democratic systems (Warren 2017).

Warren's approach builds on earlier scholarship and is based on functional thinking (2017, 42).[6] Different means and mechanisms are deemed suitable for solving different democratic problems, for example, empowered inclusion, collective will formation, and collective decision-making. Seven types of practices are identified in democratic systems (recognizing, resisting, deliberating, representing, voting, joining, and exiting). Importantly, none of these practices should be taken as inherently democratic because their ability to solve democratic problems depends fundamentally on the context in which they take place. To Warren, the challenge lies precisely in combining these practices "in ways that maximize their strengths and minimize their weaknesses, relative to the three broad democratic problems," which, as mentioned above are empowered inclusion, collective will formation, and decision-making (2017, 39; see also Kuyper and Wolkenstein 2018).

Warren's identification of key problems of democratic systems has naturally been questioned by other theorists (see Saward 2003). For instance, as Dean and Geissel (2018, 1) argue, the identification of the three fundamental problems that democratic systems are expected to serve "cannot deal with the heterogeneity in normative conceptions of democracy as well as in real-life politics." In fact, within and across cohorts of scholars working on democracy there have always been controversies about what are the most important elements of democracy and what institutional arrangements might best enable democratic life (Gagnon 2014). In questioning Warren's selection, Dean and Geissel ask why, for example, "constraining sovereignty" and "responsive outcomes" should be neglected as democratically relevant problems. As an alternative, they argue for a more open-ended understanding of what democratic problems a system would need to tackle. In particular, such an understanding would benefit from being informed by citizens' perspectives (Geissel 2016).[7] Likewise, the range of democratic practices under consideration by Warren seems unduly limited. Indeed, theorists' attention should not only be limited to those democratic practices that are deemed able to fulfill a given democratic function. Instead, useful lessons for democratic theorizing come exactly from the

empirical investigations should be coupled but be broader in terms of the scope of their analyses.

6. For earlier critiques of model thinking and a call to ecumenical approaches to democracy, see Saward (2003).

7. For a discussion about the quest for normative principles in democracy, see Gutmann and Thompson (1998).

complex and varied landscape of democratic practices hosted by contemporary political systems.

To recap, as well as being important sources of inspiration for contemporary democratic theory, the above three systemic proposals are particularly interesting because they have allowed for the conceptual developments on which a practice-based democratic theorizing can be developed. A practice-based understanding of democracy sees value in the expanding range of democratic practices. Granted that theorists will maintain different normative approaches, which will affect the way they might learn from practice, it is fundamental that they more systematically engage in and learn from observations of democratic practices. As I argue in the remainder of the article, taking the increasing variety and hybridity of practices as a starting point for thinking about democracy enables new developments in institutional design.

INSIGHT FOR INSTITUTIONAL DESIGN FROM A PRACTICE-BASED UNDERSTANDING OF DEMOCRACY

The systemic turn affects the way in which democratic theorists engage in institutional design, something that has long been one of the main means of envisioning a strengthening of democracy. Below, I provide three insights illustrative of how a practice-based understanding of democracy improves institutional design in the wake of the systemic turn. My recommendations depart from long-standing efforts to make a specific institution more effective by observing it and then improving its design (e.g., Gastil and Levine 2005) and also from practice-sensitive policy analysis (e.g., Escobar 2015; Wagenaar 2004). Rather, my considerations, which stem from research experience and a broad review of literature on different democratic practices, are intended to lead debates on institutional design toward valuable but still overlooked directions. In particular, the first two considerations concern the role of agents and temporality issues in democratic systems; the last one is a critique of the notion of the system itself.

Considering agents of change

An oft-mentioned argument in democratic systems literature is that the systemic effects of a democratic practice depend on the context in which they are embedded. According to a practice-based understanding of democracy, this claim is correct but underspecified. Contexts are constitutive of democratic practices, and democratic practices take their own specific forms in light of the contexts in which they emerge. If democratic practices emerge, they do so because they make sense in the light of the contexts they originate from. Democratic practices do not originate out of a concern with systemic problem solving. Rather, they stem from efforts to

address immediate political problems acutely felt by activists. More precisely, although there is no doubt that in organizing a sit-in, a *nuit debout*, or an *acampada* some activists aim at systemic change in the form of greater social justice or empowerment of marginalized groups, they generally do not have systemic design in mind (see Flesher Fominaya 2017).[8]

Even when democratic practices emerge in the context of struggles for democracy and justice, they are developed within social and political groups trying to solve substantial political problems (Doerr 2018). Encampments in the context of occupied squares in Egypt, Turkey, Spain, or the United States have been understood as ways of practicing deliberative and direct democracy (Steinberg 2014). These radical attempts at organizing dissent in nonhierarchical and inclusive ways (Murray 2014) represented efforts to voice different grievances to a broader public while manifesting the democratic ethos of protests in the face of police repression (della Porta and Mattoni 2014). Similarly, awareness-raising groups were devised in feminist circles first and foremost as a means to actually address tangible problems stemming from life in a sexist and abusive social context. Before they "became white," as Polletta (2005) famously put it, also some participatory practices in the United States were developed as a means for black activists to fight racist cultural and organizational practices they experienced.

Thinking of democratic practices as detached from the immediate political problems of the agents that use them and the contingent challenges they meet seems unwarranted. The practice of political translation as described by Doerr (2018) helps further clarifying this point. Political translation emerged out of activists' concern with domination in institutional and informal deliberative settings. This practice involves activists and community organizers employing a set of practices to counter the perceived marginalization of disadvantaged groups experienced during political discussions, informal and institutional alike.[9] As Doerr shows, activists display an awareness that rational argument, collective storytelling, and narratives all play a role in effective deliberation geared toward social change. Activists engage in political translation to effectively use these different forms of communication to deal with different collective action problems—mustering public support,

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8. Bächtiger and Parkinson (2019, 27) recently highlighted the value of understanding deliberation as a cultural practice rather than an abstract, institutionalized idea.

9. Activists' efforts to promote constructive moments of disruption enable them to shed light on and overcome some flaws of decision-making processes (Doerr 2018, 4–7). To Doerr, this insight is helpful for improving deliberative processes but also for thinking about deliberative and participatory democracy more generally.

improving inclusivity and equality in debates, and obtaining policy change—and to relate to groups with different cultural conventions (Polletta and Lee 2006; see also Polletta 2012).[10]

The observation of these practices can teach at least an important lesson for institutional design. Systemic goals might inform theorists' recommendations for institutional design. Nevertheless, if involved at all, democratic theorists will not be the only or main actors translating democratic ideas into democratic institutions. Just like the activists who had to devise different solutions to promote their views in contexts with different problems (e.g., democratic life in encampments or marginalization in deliberation), political actors involved in institutional change might have immediate interests to tackle (e.g., reelection, securing of funding, or coalition building). Even when these actors share with theorists a concern about the overall system, they take action in an unpredictable and conflict-ridden world characterized by concrete, often urgent problems whose solution tends to be open-ended (Wagenaar and Cook 2003). As shown by Dean, Boswell, and Smith (2019) in an illuminating study on a rare case of democratic innovation designed with systemic concerns in mind, strategic political considerations continue to affect the way in which political actors engage in institutional change. Political actors invest in democratic practices in response to perceived political failures (see Wiens 2012), and their behavior should be closely observed in designing institutions.

Although reflection on the agents of change is still limited in systemic theorizing, some promising developments do exist. To begin with, possibly because of the fundamental yet deeply complicated role that political parties have in a deliberative system, theorists looking at political parties are among the few who have given attention to the problem of agents of change (Biale and Ottonelli 2018; Invernizzi-Accetti and Wolkenstein 2017; see also Bächtiger and Parkinson 2019, esp. chap. 6). The focus on developing theoretically defensible proposals or assessing the potential of given institutional arrangements to advance a certain set of values is characteristic of current systemic work (Dean, Boswell, and Smith 2019). However, this should not lead to neglecting that the democratic practices of political actors innovating democracy respond also to a quest for solutions to practical problems. In this respect, a growing research agenda on deliberation in political parties as well as studies on the role of public administration in governance innovation (Warren 2009) and on political actors' and citizens'

attitudes toward participatory and deliberative processes represent welcome developments (Hendriks 2016; Hendriks and Lees-Marshment 2018; Jacquet 2018; Jacquet and Reuchamps 2016). Such efforts should be furthered and more consistently integrated into systemic theorizing. More broadly, a focus on agents of change sheds light on the nature of the normative demands actors envision when engaging institutional innovation and of the obstacles they face in pursuing them, which is certainly beneficial to political theorizing (see also Herzog and Zacka 2017).

A practice-based understanding of democracy furthermore insists on the need to observe the pragmatic solutions concocted directly by actors on the field. Apart from those mentioned above, there are many other examples of how democratic innovation in practice stems from actors' quest for solutions to their own issues rather than overarching systemic concerns. For instance, Sintomer (2018) discusses how the practice of sortition has been revitalized in activist circles during the wave of antiausterity protests and is slowly making its way into the workings of political parties. He refers to the different ways in which sortition has been introduced in the Morena party in Mexico, Izquierda Unida and Podemos in Spain, and En Marche and La France Insoumise in France. Different sortition practices can be connected to the pursuit of different goals, including countering hierarchy and dealing with specialization of roles, promoting diversity, and keeping actors occupying various roles constantly accountable to others (see Delannoi and Dowlen 2016). Another example comes from the newly born Agora party in Belgium. Inspired by the pioneering experience of the G1000 popular deliberation (see Caluwaerts and Reuchamps 2015), activists have sought an original way to translate public support for citizen deliberation and sortition into institutional change. Having created an electoral list whose program's only goal was setting up a permanent Citizens' Assembly, activists have organized a successful (crowd-funded) campaign to elect one member of the Brussels regional government. The elected politician has the sole role of acting as a speaker of the decisions made by the Citizens' Assembly and as an advocate of its institutionalization (see Agora, https://www.agora.brussels/). This course of action, overlooked in theoretical debates, has been envisioned by activists sensitive to their immediate political context, and it illustrates the original solutions that can stem from an actor-level perspective on democratic innovation.

Actors on the ground not only mix practices belonging to different conceptions of democracy (in this case electoral competition and citizen deliberation); they also constantly deal with the challenges that this heterogeneity involves. As argued by Herzog and Zacka (2017), this kind of information does provide a source of normative insight, particularly

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10. Deliberative democracy debates offer ample discussion on the democratic significance (and limits) of these practices (see, e.g., Elstub 2010).

for those political theorists who adopt an "ethnographic sensibility." A practice-based understanding of democracy advises us that if the kind of change that theorists of institutional design recommend is to take place, then concerns about how and why political actors would seek to promote innovation should receive more attention.

Acknowledging temporality at work

The second insight from a practice-based understanding of democracy concerns the issue of timing. Despite the fact that this has been discussed as a critical issue for democratic design, timing has received only limited attention in systemic scholarship (Bächtiger and Parkinson 2019; Saward 2017). I previously argued that political actors are immersed in contingencies and interlinked challenges they need to take into account. Going beyond the actor-level perspective, it is important to acknowledge that political developments that occur over time affect innovation processes in democracies. Theorists should take this aspect into greater account in developing their proposals.

As Saward argues, current thinking on representation and institutional design more generally tends to be rather linear and static. Political change is conceived as unfolding from one stage to the next, instead of acknowledging time "as a realm of possibility rather than certainty, established fact or known outcome" (Saward 2019, 277). We need instead a way of thinking about institutional design that is aware of and sensitive to the role that contingency plays in political life in general and in democratic practices in particular. Using a practice-based understanding of democracy might help us in this regard.

Movements' democratic practices offer interesting examples of the role of contingency. Le Vrai Débat National in France is a point in case. This is an alternative forum for online and offline deliberation among activists and citizens dissatisfied about the more famous Grand Débat National organized by President Emmanuel Macron in the wake of the Yellow Vest protests (Legris 2019). Both forums appealed to and sought to implement deliberative democratic values. Interestingly, the suddenness of the French government decision is one of the aspects that has attracted attention and some skepticism about this top-down innovation. Yet, it is important to notice how Le Vrai Débat National has been generated in reaction to a governmental initiative whose legitimacy it challenged. Democratic practices are also affected by and need to adapt to social and political shocks. For instance, during critical junctures, movements' democratic practices are halted by highly restrictive governmental measures, and the articulation of dissent tends to be curtailed (della Porta et al. 2020). Public gatherings and even private meetings can be impossible, and

the bulk of action needs to be coordinated and performed through media practices (see Mattoni and Treré 2014).

Democratic practices also tend to naturally change over time, as illustrated by the trajectory of social forums. Initiated as small local democratic practices in the seventies, they quite suddenly became important national activities in the nineties and a key democratic practice of global activists early in the first decade of the 2000s, before declining and reappearing into profoundly different forms during the occupy and antiausterity protests and more recently in the environmental movement's "climate camps" (e.g., Fiedlschuster 2018).

Social movement scholarship has devoted attention to the ways in which activists adopt, adapt, and discharge their democratic practices in light of the evolving context that they face, and a similar sensibility would be beneficial to thinking about institutional design too. In social movement studies, an attentive observation of democratic practices has gone hand in hand with the widespread affirmation of concepts that seek to account for the role that temporal aspects play in mobilization. Windows of opportunity, political and discursive opportunity structures, critical junctures, waves of mobilization, and periods of latency are all concepts that have greatly contributed to the study of movements (e.g., McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald 1996; Snow, Soule, and Kriesi 2008). More engagement with the above concepts and attention to democratic practices in the public sphere might spur ongoing efforts to understand how democratic innovation might emerge and develop over time, shedding light on the complex and interactive nature of these processes.

Notable exceptions notwithstanding—for example, Goodin's (2005) argument for sequencing deliberation and Parkinson's (2006) cyclical model of the policy process—efforts to theorize about issues of timing in democratic innovation are limited in the systems literature. The tendency to see deliberation as tied only to exceptional moments in the life of a polity has been rightly criticized as exceedingly restrictive (Dryzek 2001). Indeed, today, we are well aware of the far-reaching nature of discursive politics—all the way into everyday life (Holdo 2019). Nevertheless, in concocting reform proposals, theorists should avoid the opposite exceedingly rosy picture in which suitable conditions for significant institutional reform are taken as an established fact. Today, there seems to be a questionable tendency to design institutional innovation as if we were perpetually in a period of constitutional change.[11]

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11. The current debate on constitutional deliberative democracy seems to have embraced this notion (e.g., Reuchamps and Suiter 2016). Interest in constitutionalism is not based on the idea that it is only in such moments that societies deliberate; rather, it is based on the consideration that such moments are sufficiently rare and powerful and, therefore, deserving of more attention.

Temporality issues need due attention, and being sensitive to the developments of democratic practices in the public sphere can contribute in this direction.

System and assemblage

One last important consideration from a practice-based understanding of democracy concerns the very notion of a system. As seen, the systemic approach to deliberative democracy has produced important developments in the study of democracy that are of interest for developing a practice-based approach to institutional design. However, this approach has also been questioned (e.g., Mendonça 2016). Recently, Pickering (2019) has argued that theorists should draw more broadly from literature on socioecological systems and complexity theories. For instance, Pickering stresses the importance of nonlinear dynamics, positive feedback, cascades, and path dependency in affecting the working of systems. In addition, he explores the potential for thinking in terms of not just systems but social ecologies (Dryzek and Pickering 2017).

Such efforts with regard to rethinking the systemic approach to democracy are interesting from the standpoint of a practice-based approach to democracy. In the face of the overwhelming diversity of democratic practices and their complexity, having more than one concept (that of a system) to study profoundly different situations seems highly desirable.

The concept of a system is based on the idea that, first, there is an identifiable set of components. However, the observation of democratic practices tells us that it is hardly possible at all to envision or map all the relevant system components that interact with each other. Indeed, determining the boundaries of a system remains both a theoretical and a practical problem (see Dean, Rinne, and Geissel 2019; Smith 2016). Second, and even more problematically, there should be a synergy among these components, not just mere coexistence. When we think about democracy by looking mainly or only at its institutions, envisioning synergies might seem both a desirable and a feasible pursuit. That is, institutions can be designed so that, some tensions notwithstanding, they can collaboratively serve one or more goals. Taking practices as our point of reference, however, makes matters substantially more complicated when it comes to the quest for synergies. Democratic practices are often developed in response to decisions made by institutions. Crucially, whether activists collaborate with or oppose institutions generally depends on the purpose of these institutions and what they promote. Granted that design obviously affects the functioning of institutions, the level of synergy promoted by the same institution in relation to other components should not be taken as a constant variable. Actually, it might change

dramatically in the light of political circumstances and actors' behavior. The orientation of institutions affects the potential for synergy in democracy, as does what they promote. The behavior of institutions has an important role in generating mobilization (Meyer 2004). It is worth referring once more to encampments characteristic of the Indignados and occupy movements. According to Flesher Fominaya's (2017, 9) study of the influential and exemplary case of Acampada Sol, the "central conceptual framework of democracy manifested through the diverse aspects of the camp," which offered a platform for activists to develop "a critique of really existing democracy and the development of alternative democratic imaginaries." Interestingly, whereas scholars have analyzed the strengths and weaknesses of these democratic practices, their varying meaning, and their evolving form in different contexts, occupations have commanded little attention in democratic theory (Szolucha 2016).

There are reasons, however, why potential lessons from practices such as encampments are overlooked in theories that look at democratic systems only in the abstract. First of all, encampments are difficult to identify: they suddenly emerge from political contentions and cannot be designed beforehand or engineered within the political system. Second, encampments are not meant to work in synergy with institutions. To the contrary, their goal is to disrupt the political system. Essentially, these are attempts to contest the choices made through the representative democratic process through democratic practices. Finally, the same set of democratic institutions might not be challenged via encampments until certain contested choices are made. The strategic choice of activists to adopt democratic principles in the working of the camps and in their communication represented a way to challenge the political system on democratic ground. Overall, it is dubious whether a democratic system might or even should be designed so as to prevent such democratic practices from emerging.

At this point it is possible to propose a concept that, apart from the very notion of a system, might help exploring the working of our democracies: the idea of assemblage. Made prominent by the work of Deleuze and Guattari (1988), the concept of assemblage has received virtually no attention in deliberative scholarship despite its popularity in other fields. Exploring this concept in its complexity is beyond the scope of this article (see, e.g., Buchanan 2020). Yet, importantly, the observation of practices offers insight that resonates with assemblage theory.

At a minimum, the concept of assemblage refers to a set of entities that stick together (instead of working in synergy) and are subject to contingency and change. It is possible to think of our political institutions and practices as elements

that shape the political context we live in. The components of an assemblage "are not uniform either in nature or origin," and we are called to assemble them in such ways as to enable democratic life to happen (DeLanda 2016, 2). This view falls somewhat in between two extremes we should avoid in looking at democratic design. Borrowing from Deleuze, one could say that democracy is neither "a set of predetermined parts (such as the pieces of a plastic model aeroplane) that are then put together in order or into an already conceived structure (the model aeroplane)," as systemic thinking might tend to see it, nor "a random collection of things" (Wise 2005, 75). More so than focusing on institutions only, looking at practices helps us to understand the complexities, discordances, and variabilities that democracies are made of. Thinking in terms of assemblage might help to better take into account and tackle these aspects in democratic theory, going beyond a focus on discussing the normative desirability of different possible arrangements.

Using the concept of assemblage can free theorists' investigations from the problematic synergy expectation characteristic of the systemic approach. Referring to the idea of assemblage might strengthen our ability to reflect on how disruption concurs to shape democratic politics. The democratic value of encampments, for instance, lays exactly in their contestation of the political system, which is a vital aspect of democratic life.

A valuable aspect of the systemic approach is that it enables envisioning synergies among democratic institutions. However, adopting the concept of assemblage helps to see that there is another important task that institutional design needs to address, that is, contextualizing democratic practices that do not and should not join in the systemic synergy. Studies on encampments highlight that activists engaging in these democratic practices have systematically been subject to various degrees of repression (della Porta and Mattoni 2014). How can institutional design contribute to envisioning democratic societies capable of better accommodating the kind of contestation I have been discussing? Certainly, theorists see a role for protest in the wider system, and hardly any democratic theorist would support repression of democratic protesters. Nevertheless, the implicit expectation of orderly, indeed synergic, relationships among components underpinning the notion of a system remains limiting when thinking about constructive alternatives.

Adopting the notion of assemblage might be an important step to learn from disruptive democratic practices when it comes to institutional design. Thinking about assemblages might enable us to better account for change and for the role and effect of disruptive events than we are able to through the notion of systems (see, respectively, Chia 1999; Hillier

2005). Based as it is on linear dynamics of change, whereby there exists a relationship between cause and effect as well as an expectation that the same cause will always produce the same effect, the notion of a system might be better for explaining special cases (DeLanda 2013; Law and Urry 2004). The bulk of social and political phenomena and the complexity, multiplicity, chaos, and emergence that go along with them are difficult to understand through systemic lenses (Van Wezemael 2008). These aspects should not be discarded as a nuisance in the democratic process. The concept of assemblage with its focus on coexistence rather than synergy, change rather than continuity, and contingency rather than cause-effect is a resource for institutional design to learn from and to accommodate the variety of democratic practices in our societies.

CONCLUSION

In this article I have introduced and discussed the idea of democratic practice as an overlooked yet valuable source of insight for theorizing. Disputes over the meaning of democracy are vital to theoretical debates. Yet, we should be aware that differences in the way democratic ideas are manifested in practice are also useful for theorizing. I drew from research on the growing variety of democratic practices emerging in social movements and democratic innovations. My engagement with these two well-developed bodies of scholarship has contributed to further bridging them with literature on democratic systems. More importantly, it has been instrumental to the development of three recommendations illustrative of how the practice-based approach might contribute to institutional design after the systemic turn.

First, theorists should discuss more extensively how their institutional design recommendations might be given substance by political actors. Emerging empirical literature in the field of democratic innovation provides a valuable resource in this respect. However, in order to develop theoretically desirable and practically feasible reform proposals, greater attention is needed toward the pragmatic dimension informing actors' choices about whether to engage in innovative democratic practices. Second, temporality should be addressed more extensively and explicitly in systemic analysis. In this case, institutional design theorists can learn from social movement scholarship, which, thanks to its characteristic attention to democratic practices, has developed an extensive set of concepts to account for temporal dynamics. Finally, I have argued that the very idea of a system might not alone suffice to account for the complexities involved in our democracies. The notion of assemblage offers a valuable alternative to that of a system in theorizing about democratic societies.

A practice-based approach to democracy represents an important addition to contemporary debates on democratic systems, and it can help enhance institutional design. There is ground for future research to refine the theoretical understanding of practice advanced in this article and to more systematically connect observation of practices to theorizing with respect to the role of agency, timing, and the idea of democratic assemblage illustrated here or to investigate in new directions.

Before concluding, a note of caution is in order. The practice-based approach should not be used so as to exacerbate some problems characteristic of current institutional design recently highlighted by Spada and Ryan (2017). First, the practice-based approach should not be distorted into a good or best practice approach to democratic theory. The larger the set of practices we learn from, the better we can refine institutional design. Not only "successful cases" but also practices that display some limitations have valuable lessons to teach to theorists. Second, we should go beyond what Spada and Ryan call the solutionist approach to the problems of democracy, characterized by a lingering expectation that every democratic problem might be addressed with some form of institutional innovation. Whereas the practice-based approach opens up new ways to make institutional design more effective, for instance, by giving greater attention to the role of actors involved in democratic innovation, it also highlights dark areas and new challenges for thinking about democracy, such as the lack of synergy among its components. Both aspects should receive attention, so as to understand what institutional design can and cannot contribute to in democratic life. The practice-based approach introduced in this article might provide a new sensibility and thus a valuable integration to ongoing theoretical efforts to interpret current developments and support the prospect of democratic life. These endeavors are all the more important as contemporary developments present unprecedented challenges and opportunities for democracy.

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