

# Engineering Democracy

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This paper presents a critical assessment of current initiatives to deepen democracy and seeks to examine why they often fail. By analysing their various, and conflicting, conceptions of participation and associational life, it argues that many of the difficulties they encounter can be attributed to a usually unexamined set of organisational assumptions. These assumptions are then inspected in order to analyse the breakdown of communication that can occur between incumbent social engineers trying to institutionalize more democracy, and those more critical and grassroots initiatives which emanate from the periphery of power. With this distinction in view, a series of recurrent problems around the institutionalization of democratic processes are investigated. Finally, the paper explores the implications of the distinction for how we can aid and deepen democracy more effectively.

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You will develop ... corporate strategies ... that (a) enable Members to ... maximise their capacity to govern effectively; (b) help local people ... become involved in local democracy ... and (c) manage the potentially divergent views and expectations of Members and ... the public.<sup>1</sup>

Our appetite for democracy is insatiable. Not content with its triumph over all other political forms, nor with its present state of health, governments, international organizations, NGOs, civic associations, protestors and democratic theorists all want more. The sheer variety of democratic initiatives currently on offer is extraordinary.

There is a discernable pattern to these endeavours. For the most part, they direct our attention downwards, towards the society that underpins the democratic state, towards the local, the civil and the grassroots (Peet and Watts, 1996). Whether designed to counter democratic deficits, falling voter turnout, the paucity of feedback on public policy or to consolidate democratization abroad, making more democracy takes the form of finding new places for participation and new forms of participation within them.

This apparent coherence suggests reasons to be optimistic about the prospects for democracy. As governments reform institutions, civil societies are strengthened

and citizen participation is increased, so democracy will gradually and meaningfully improve. 'Representative democracy', we are often told, 'requires and is strengthened by participatory democracy' (Stewart, 1996). Democracy is thus an 'unfinished journey' (Dunn, 1992), an ongoing process, a single yellow brick road. It is something we have at the level of the state and which we now seek to extend, in various ways, down into civil society. To follow this road, we must help others be more democratic, be they a developing nation, a local authority or a civic association.

Yet making democrats turns out to be a very hard thing to do. Time and again, we are unable to locate and motivate the active citizens required by our designs. Often, political reforms fail to impact upon entrenched inequalities (Craig and Mayo, 1995, p. 2) and merely offer slightly easier access to carefully controlled spaces in which to sanction elites (Thapalia, 1996, p. 151). We conduct electoral reforms, we devolve power to regional assemblies, yet these efforts have scarcely any effect on voter turnout. And when we fund grassroots democracy we somehow end up stifling it with bureaucracy (Muhammad, 1995, p. 27; Gastil, 1993).

This paper seeks to further our understanding of why democratic initiatives fail. If we are to be optimistic about the future, we must explain why it is that attempts to make more democracy so often generate outcomes which are undemocratic (Wolin, 1989). In the literature on democratization and grassroots organizing, failure is often explained by alluding to a 'top-down' orientation (Arnst, 1996, p. 111). As we shall see, however, this does not adequately reveal the subtle ways in which attempts to make more democracy generate undemocratic outcomes. For this, we must inspect the organizational assumptions that underlie and condition such activities. Only then can we identify, at the source of these recurrent difficulties, a misplaced optimism regarding the prospects of what will here be termed 'engineering' democracy.

History, and Karl Popper, have made us suspicious of large scale social engineering projects, even, and perhaps especially, those with good intentions (Popper, 1962; Bauman, 1991). To clarify what engineering means in the context of democracy, the paper focuses on a fundamental conflict in how we conceive of democracy and participation. It explores the possibility that democracy is not one thing, one journey, one continuous project which reaches up to the state and down to the grassroots. Instead, it suggests that conceptual variation among current deepening initiatives is so marked as to delineate what are, in effect, mutually exclusive political projects. This possibility will be shown to have two implications. First, where our optimism about democracy is based on the compatibility of these projects, it may be seriously misplaced, and second, where democratic initiatives peddle a particular understanding of democracy and a particular set of organizational assumptions, they risk failure.

With the 'end of history', we are told, there will be no further ideological conflict. Yet significant friction still occurs between the form of democracy we find at the centre of political power and its increasingly articulate rejection at the periphery. Were this to continue, we may well, one day, have more democracy, though not of the kind desired by elites. Nor will it be brought about by their engineering efforts.

## Conceptions of Democracy

Trying to understand democracy is like reaching into a black plastic bag. You can feel a large object, but accurate description is difficult because the shape is extremely complex. In particular, it seems to jut out in two directions. On one side, democracy appears as a decision-making method (Schumpeter, 1966), and as a set of political institutions that embody, to varying degrees, certain basic democratic principles (Dahl, 1989; Beetham, 1999). On the other, we see a revival of the ancient notion of democracy as civic virtue, as a way of life, as a mode of interpersonal conduct oriented to what is good for all, in other words, as an ethical ideal (Arendt, 1973; Carter, 1973; Putnam, 1992).

The object concealed within the plastic bag is thus strangely elongated, for it has two bulbous and tangible lobes. This semi-divided shape has been endlessly studied by democratic theorists. Thus, Dunn describes our conceptions of democracy in terms of two competing camps: the 'realist' and the 'participatory' (1979). Macpherson distinguishes between 'protective' and 'developmental' accounts (1977), Elster between the metaphors of the 'market' and the 'forum' (1986). This tendency, to use heuristic distinctions to better describe democracy, is surprisingly widespread. We distinguish between representational and direct, top-down and bottom-up and adversary and unitary democracy (Mansbridge, 1980). In our examination of participation, we split exit and voice (Hirschman, 1970), instrumental and expressive explanations (Parry and Moyser, 1992, p. 15), the private and the public and exogenous and endogenous accounts of individual preferences. Finally, we can even identify two distinct methodologies for the study of democracy: the empirical and the normative (Skinner, 1973). These many distinctions are not so much due to erroneous 'either/or' thinking. They are more the product of careful analytic attempts to theorize and disclose the complex shape within the plastic bag.

While many democratic theorists draw distinctions within a single and unified vision of democracy, others have gone so far as to highlight a level of internal tension which effectively describes two distinct objects. Wolin and Pizzorno, for example, each distinguish between democracy as a stabilizing and a destabilizing force. Wolin thus contrasts 'constitutional democracy' with its 'revolutionary' counterpart (1994), while Pizzorno counterposes a 'liberal' form of participation with a 'mobilizing' one (1970). Both these theorists extract their analyses from the historical trajectory of democracy. Democracy here appears as an ongoing struggle between incremental advances in the institutionalization of accountable elite rule, and extraordinary moments of revolutionary mobilization, which raise popular consciousness and force elites to grant reforms.

At issue here, then, is the question of whether the object in the bag is one thing with two complex yet distinguishable lobes, or two separate objects that have been incorrectly conflated. If democracy is, in fact, two separate objects, then we need to know what it is that separates them, and why it is that democratic theorists have so consistently misunderstood their relation. Finally, we need to explore how such a separation affects the outcomes of initiatives designed to make more democracy. After all, our optimism about the future turns precisely on the compatibility of these two visions.

If democracy is indeed an uneasy marriage between two different political projects, then we must acknowledge their respective locations within the structures of power. When viewed from the centre of such structures, democracy appears as a set of institutions to be valued, protected and improved. When viewed from the periphery, however, democracy becomes a method of challenging such institutions. To identify the two objects within the plastic bag is thus, in part, to recognize the distinct social and political *locations* of two competing discourses about democracy. In order to further explore this division, we might term one kind of democracy ‘incumbent’, and the other ‘critical’. This will allow us to focus on the quite distinct motivations, methods and outcomes of their respective efforts to make more democracy. If democracy is not one yellow brick road, but two, then we should be able to articulate each as a distinct ideal-type.

*Incumbent democracy* can be described as liberal, realist, representative, institutional and protective. It sees participation through the metaphor of the market, as a competition for votes and as the (political) survival of the fittest. Nowadays, incumbent democracy is concerned that falling levels of participation threaten the quality and legitimacy of elite decision-making (Hindess, 2000). It thus seeks to improve, though at the same time to control, participatory input, by channelling, simplifying and rationalizing it through institutionalized conduits. Participation in incumbent democracy is largely characterized by voting, by normalized interaction within structured groups and by orderly civic involvement. In conceiving of democracy as an institutionalized and rule governed procedure, participation becomes primarily instrumental, subsuming ethical considerations into interests to be adjudicated and preferences to be aggregated.

The strengths of incumbent democracy, of course, lie in its effectiveness, its ability to centrally command resources, the stability and protection it offers to individuals (in the form of codified rights backed up by force) and its perception as being conducive to economic growth. Incumbent democracy achieves its effectiveness through institutions. When it seeks to deepen democracy, it is mostly concerned with the accurate representation of interests within institutions, with the accountability of those institutions and with the need to improve elite knowledge of what the people think. Incumbent democracy may seek to devolve power downwards, yet its primary imperative is, again, to preserve existing institutions. For this reason, and towards this end, it must manage participation effectively.

Incumbent democracy, it should be noted, has a negative side. Where it degenerates into competitive elitism with a fully commodified public sphere, electoral dictatorship and the systematic depoliticization of the populace, democracy becomes a political form entirely devoid of legitimacy. Popular input into decision-making is then controlled by a series of carefully constructed impediments designed to insulate elite power. Similarly, practices of exclusion and oppression are largely enacted by a concealed bureaucracy which fails to attract media scrutiny. At the micro-level, the negative side of incumbent democracy can be observed in the stunted interactions of ill-attended meetings dominated by due procedure, institutionalized inequality and a plethora of ‘non-decisions’ (Duncan and Lukes, 1963).

Very different from incumbent democracy is its critical sibling. *Critical democracy* is, first and foremost, a response to suffering. It sees participation through the

metaphor of the forum, and is thus primarily deliberative, direct, developmental and personal. Critical democracy occurs within local and peripheral sites and involves resistance to elite governance. It is characterized by increased participation and empowerment, often on the part of people normally excluded from political activity. Participation in this ideal-type of democracy is face-to-face, with decision making preceded by open argumentation and debate. Indeed, where this argumentation is fair, does not unduly exclude or coerce, it can be said to be democratic (Cohen, 1991; Habermas, 1992a; Fishkin, 1992). From its capacity to secure the informed and free agreement of actual participants, and its deep suspicion of authority, it derives its unique legitimacy. Its minimal institutional arrangements are understood as necessary and seen as requiring direct and ongoing sanction by participants. Examples of critical democracy range from recent outbreaks in Eastern Europe (Garton-Ash, 1991) to the Zapatistas rebellion in Chiapas (Holloway, 1996; Burbuck, 1994), and from the League of Revolutionary Black Workers in Detroit (Georgakis and Surkin, 1975) to the rebellion against the British Poll Tax (Burns, 1992). The anti-globalization protests (Klein, 2000) of J18, Seattle and Genoa offer more recent examples.

Critical democracy involves rapid transformations of citizen capacities, inter-relationships and self-descriptions. In this kind of democracy, participation is characterized by dedication and sacrifice, energy, resourcefulness and disinhibition (Moscovici and Doise, 1994). With participation seen as a good in itself, democracy becomes an experience rather than an institutional form. It is a way of life, an attempt to enact the ethical ideal of self-rule – in old parlance, a set of civic virtues. When democracy is conceived along these lines, participants are engaged in a personal rejection of subjugation which is integral to their identity. Yet their activities are not primarily oriented to capturing the institutions of power. As Henri Lefebvre pointed out, ‘people do not revolt to change governments ... but to change their lives’ (1971, p. 36).

Critical democracy has its own negative side, and has been heavily criticized for its insufficient attention to concrete institutions and procedures. By conceiving of participation as a micro-level process in which identities are created and dramatically displayed, it appears strangely disinterested in the realities of power politics. It is thus seen as incapable of organizing its activities, and thereby, as inherently ineffective (Blaug, 2000). Yet it is also accused of constantly threatening to degenerate into something quite undemocratic and even dangerous.

These apparently contradictory accusations, one of ineffectiveness, and one of excessive effectiveness, illustrate the complex ways in which critical democracy co-ordinates its collective activities. Certainly, critical democracy struggles to be effective, beset as it is with organizational inexperience, few resources, restricted information, and often, the open hostility of even democratic states. Yet at the same time, the personal commitment of its participants, and indeed, its use of informal organizational methods, occasionally enables it to achieve surprising effectiveness. When this occurs, information exchange and the co-ordination of action takes place through networks of communication already operating in the social and material interactions of everyday life. When critical democracy does achieve effectiveness, therefore, it somehow does so without the use of institutions.

## Assumptions about Participation

There is little question, when trying to understand the variety of conceptions of democracy, that participation is the key. It is around participation that the apparent consensus on democratic values breaks down, and it is here that the end of history thesis is revealed to be entirely premature. By identifying two distinct and competing modes of democracy, we have noted a series of differences around how participation is conceived, and in particular, how it is to be properly institutionalized in order to achieve effectiveness. Because our optimism about democracy turns precisely on the compatibility of incumbent and critical democracy, we need to more carefully analyse their respective and contradictory assertions about the institutionalization and effective co-ordination of participation.

Incumbent democracy is primarily motivated to preserve and improve existing institutions by maximizing and managing orderly participation. Critical democracy seeks, instead, to resist such management and to empower excluded voices in such a way as to directly challenge existing institutions. Incumbent democrats assume that effectiveness is only achieved through institutions, and that participation requires institutionalization in order to be compatible with the central representative structures of the democratic state. Critical democracy upholds a rather different assumption: that effectiveness can arise out of a collective adherence to common concerns. Here, the institutionalization of participation is seen as an attempt to tame radical energy. Indeed, many of the more critical initiatives currently on offer harbour a deep suspicion of institutions *in toto*. This amounts to a profound disagreement about the very nature of democracy. Specifically, it pertains to the organisational assumptions that underlie its incumbent and critical modes. On the one hand, effectiveness is seen solely as a product of properly institutionalized activity. On the other, effectiveness is seen to derive from anti-institutional activity.

This disagreement is perhaps most apparent around the belief that, in the last instance, democratic participation necessitates a central institutional and representative core. Certainly, incumbent democrats hold hard to this assumption, yet we also find it operating in the more idealistic and radical suggestions for democratic reforms currently emanating from the academy. In this dominant discourse about democracy, participation, active citizenship, civil society and deliberative decision-making are widely celebrated. Yet it is also understood that such things can go too far. We say we want more democracy, yet we remain profoundly ambivalent about more participation.

Arguments for the necessity of a representative core arise from the intuitive assumption that a fully deliberative procedure is simply impractical in massive nation states facing highly complex policy issues (Dahl, 1970; Dahl and Tufte, 1974, p. 23). Seldom is this assumption really scrutinized, still less is it the subject of creative and practical experimentation. Having thus 'established' the inescapable necessity of such a representative core (Canovan, 1999, p. 13; Beetham, 1992), 'radical' democratic theorists proceed to design institutional plumbing by which participatory input to the core can be increased (Hirst, 1994; Budge, 1993; Keane, 1988; Clarke, 1996). Such democratic reforms are always concerned to preserve

the stability and effectiveness of the core by protecting it from excessive participatory input. As Habermas says, 'discourses do not rule'. Rather, deliberative fora should 'influence' policy making as part of the public sphere. They should, ideally, be 'self-limiting' (Habermas, 1992b, p. 453).

Apparently radical calls for more deliberative fora thus pull back from the brink when confronted with the need for effectiveness. And they do so because they share, with incumbent democracy, the assumption that effectiveness can only ever derive from institutions. Thus, even quite participatory accounts of democracy often retain, in their designs, a central institutionalized and representational core that is largely immunized from popular control.

When we inspect some of the more practical experimentation currently taking place in direct action protests and DIY democracy, however, we notice that it is precisely this organizational assumption that is being questioned. Whereas many deepening initiatives remain wedded to the view that the legitimating principle of participation must, in the last instance, receive an institutional embodiment, these more critical and marginal initiatives focus instead upon democracy as an experience, as a way of life (Shusterman, 1997; Cohen, 1993; Merrick, 1996; McKay, 1998). Organizationally, they are attempts to theorize and develop flat networks, loose associations and informal partnerships based on trust rather than institutionalized procedure (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987; Hardt and Negri, 2000). Such initiatives assert that power and organizational structure can only be made legitimate by an inclusive face-to-face interaction. In the absence of theoretical certainty, it is argued, even the most rudimentary institutionalization of the democratic process is seen to require agreement reached in open discussion (Botwinick, 1985). These critical initiatives therefore mirror the classic anarchist critique of constitutions: that they fix the decisions of the dead for all posterity, and so ensure that the living are bound by another's will (Spooner, 1977). Here, then, attention to issues of exclusion and difference generate a deep suspicion of institutions, a demand that organizational structures be minimal and responsive and, finally, a willingness to reject, altogether, the necessity of a central representative core.

At issue, again, is the possibility that democracy is not one thing which we can deepen from the state down into civil society, or vice versa. Instead, democracy can be shown to present a quite distinct set of characteristics, problems and conceptions when motivated from the centre of political power than it does when it comes from the periphery. What divides democracy into two distinct objects is partly a matter of *location* in the structure of power. Those who are incumbent are more likely to adopt a defensive posture towards social change and a concern to protect existing institutions from excessive participatory input. Yet incumbent democracy is nowadays trying to help others be more democratic and to deepen even their own. What we are here exploring is why these efforts fail, why they generate outcomes that are not democratic. For this, we need to understand just what incumbent democracy actually does to you when it tries to help.

## Communicating between Locations

We have seen that incumbent democracy has a particular conception of participation and the way it should be institutionalized. When it seeks to make more democ-

racy, it does so without questioning these organizational assumptions, and instead simply presses ahead, allocating more resources, redoubling its efforts. Incumbent democracy is engaged in a widespread, yet piecemeal, project of social engineering. We need to scrutinize this engineering project more carefully if we are to understand how incumbent democracy generates undemocratic outcomes.

Attempts to increase democracy by one political entity, be it a government, an NGO or an individual community organizer, are in some ways analogous to an act of communication. One political entity is here attempting to 'communicate' democracy to another, to a target or a receiver. Examples of such receivers range from apathetic citizens at home to villages and governments abroad. Given the disparity of organizational assumptions we have been exploring, there is at least a chance that some of these acts of communication will be internally confused and even contradictory. The speaker in this analogy might, for example, conceive of democracy in a market-like and institutional way, while the receiver in fact holds to a quite different conception. Similarly, the speaker might be motivated to improve and defend existing institutions, while the receiver is working hard to usurp those institutions.

Such breakdowns in communication are particularly apparent when incumbent democracy, flushed with its conception of a single yellow brick road, tries to assist democracy at the grassroots. In these instances, so prevalent in international development and the new associational world of NGOs, we find incumbent democracy trying to directly assist its critical sibling. Here, however, speaker and receiver understand their democratic activities very differently, and the provision of assistance thus amounts to requiring receivers to change their practices to fit those of the speaker. Democracy, assumed to be one object, is given to receivers in such a way as to make them obey the organizational assumptions of those located nearer the centre of institutionalized political power. This is a profound breakdown in communication, one that may indicate why such initiatives so often fail to produce more democracy.

By identifying different ideal types of democracy, the incumbent and the critical, we have seen that democratic intentions may be antagonistic and strategically opposed. Wolin goes so far as to state that the capture of 'revolutionary' democracy in a constitutional form is impossible, and that democracy will always be fugitive (1994). Yet these antagonistic democratic forms do not exist in an either/or relationship. Democratic intentions, be they of a government, an organization or an individual, are usually a mixed affair. Often, those genuinely seeking to increase participation only discover their ambivalence toward popular input at the point where their own power is directly threatened. Grassroots activists with the most impeccable critical credentials themselves report conflicting internal attitudes (*Thai Development Newsletter*, 1995). We should also note that civic associations and grassroots groups attempting to be democratic desperately require all the help they can get. Even the most crass of democratic engineers, though blind to the importance of critical activity, can still provide much needed resources, media attention or pressure on an economic actor.

That our democratic intentions are complex and confused merely reminds us just how very difficult it is to assist others in what must, fundamentally, be their

*own* project of achieving independence. At the individual level, this problem has exercised parents, teachers and psychologists for centuries. And while political science has built up a body of knowledge about the problems faced by those seeking more democracy at the level of the state, its historical disinterest in the actual internal functioning of democratic associations has resulted in a failure to explore constructive interventions in such associations. This lacuna (Cohen, 1991, p. 30; Pizzorno, 1970, p. 57; Moscovici and Doise, 1994, p. 18) is particularly troubling when we consider the widespread intention with which we began: to deepen democracy below the level of the state and down into the associations of civil society.

Within the academy, democratic engineering generates research agendas constrained to an elevated layer of elite and formal institutions dominated by the politics of proxy and bureaucratic procedure. This is evidenced in a series of definitional debates over social categories that at no point engage with the quite distinct mode of action co-ordination that actually occurs within the networks of everyday life. So, for example, accounts of civil society and social capital do not concern themselves with the communicative complexities of civil interaction, benedictions to the public sphere express little interest in the actual functioning of those very deliberative groups which make it up, and calls for deeper democracy concentrate almost entirely on an elite layer of think tanks, NGOs and the various committees of local government, planning offices, and public services. What actually happens within the associations of civil society is, therefore, largely ignored. Even when studying democracy beneath the level of the state, there is a marked inability to recognize critical democracy as a distinct form of political activity. Feminist assertions that the 'personal is political' confronted just this form of paradigmatic blindness.

Similarly, outside the academy, initiatives to aid and deepen democracy all too often betray an orientation to the effective management of participation and the preservation of existing institutions. Indeed, attempts to engineer democracy often place a dead hand upon open communication and significantly constrain the interactions we find within grassroots associations.

By failing to recognize and study critical democracy, and to adequately distinguish it from democracy's incumbent form, we all too often subvert the efforts of those we are attempting to help. For critical democrats, incumbent engineering itself becomes a threat. Returning to our analogy between efforts to assist democracy and the act of communication, we can liken this outcome to what is referred to in systemic psychology as a 'paradoxical command' (Watzlawick, 1973; Haley, 1973). Here, the receiver is instructed to resist control, yet to do so in a specified and controlled way. An example of a paradoxical command is the instruction to 'be spontaneous!' The effect of such a command is to co-opt the resistance of the receiver, to denude it of energy and thereby to maintain the receiver in a subjugated role. Engineering democracy can thus command a receiver to 'be more democratic!' and at the same time, effectively inhibit its democratic development. The paradoxical nature of this communication helps understand why it is that so many democratic initiatives fail to engage the interest of receivers.

We have explored a set of contradictory intentions within the democratic discourse, reflected both in practical initiatives and democratic theory. These intentions, towards critical and/or incumbent democracy, signal what may well be distinct and mutually incompatible political projects. This is a significant, and all too often ignored, source of difficulties, one that clouds our hopes that some combination of democratic initiatives from above and below will fashion a rosy future. In particular, we have noted that the contradictory nature of these democratic projects gives rise to differing expectations of how participation should be institutionalized. For incumbent engineers, institutionalization is an asset, a filter (Budge, 1996), a technique of effective management. For critical activists, it involves a significant change in the experience of participation itself.

### Organizational Paradigms

Different views of how participation should be institutionalized emerge with clarity when we consider the kinds of problems faced by grassroots associations in their efforts to be democratic. Such associations must, as we have noted, empower their participants and at the same time provide for good, quick, decision-making (Mansbridge, 1973). They somehow need to maximize both critical participation and the capacity to be effective. They seek to be fair and inclusive in their deliberations, yet also to cope with their lack of resources and direct threats to their safety. Such groups must, therefore, balance the imperatives of participation and effectiveness (Clarke, 1996, p. 113).

Effectiveness can be achieved in a variety of ways, among them, the improvement of participants' capacities, the co-ordination of collective action, the securing of additional resources and the division of labour. One particular way is to agree upon certain methods of doing things, certain procedures, which can be operated rapidly and without discussion (Baynes, 1992). When a group delegates tasks to able individuals, and when it adopts organizational structures, it is trading-off some participation for a gain in effectiveness.

The democratic trick is to make gains in effectiveness in ways that do not excessively stifle the critical quality of the association's participation (Blaug, 1999). Where such gains proceed by delegating power to individuals and adopting formal procedures, these must be agreed upon openly, and regularly evaluated for their impact on the decision-making process of the group. Excessive dependence on able individuals and unscrutinized procedures are every bit as dangerous as no structure at all. It is precisely the group's struggle to balance participation and effectiveness that is adversely effected by an engineering democratic initiative.

Engineering initiatives often have significant resources at their disposal, and one way they can provide assistance is to offer these resources to a recipient. Whether in the form of funding, expertise, increased media attention, or the ear of powerful decision-makers, such resources are invariably offered with strings attached (Wainwright, 1994, p. 197). These strings are a direct expression of the organizational expectations of the donor, and much is communicated to the recipient through them.

Governments and large NGOs have internal structures which are bureaucratic and hierarchical. Their divisions of labour are differentially rewarded and have become carefully sedimented into static roles. Their co-ordination of action takes place through codified structures of command and carefully bounded forms of interaction which express and maintain an internal culture. They thus embody the assumption that effectiveness is something that can *only* be attained through leadership, bureaucracy and centralized control. As we have already noted, attempts by incumbent democrats to 'communicate' democracy to a grassroots association entail the stimulation of organizational methods that, though 'self-evident' to *them*, may be quite different from those of the recipient. In order to understand the damaging effects of engineering democracy, then, we must identify the ways in which such initiatives function as a carrier and enforcer of a particular organizational paradigm.

Just this occurs with the provision of resources to aspiring democrats, for the strings attached to these resources pose significant organizational difficulties for a critically oriented association. When self-help groups apply for charitable funding, for example, they must provide written constitutions, due processes for accountability, proof of representativeness and bureaucratic registration (Birchall, 1988). Critical democrats suddenly find they must gain organizational structure, the purpose of which is to fulfil conditions for the receipt of resources. Changing themselves in this way requires that they learn new languages in which to articulate their activities and to adopt self-descriptions that more directly address the conceptual categories of democratic engineers. This is an important moment in the life of a democratic association, one that can significantly affect the texture of its interaction and the identities of its members. Often, it results in a general shift away from consensual and deliberative participation toward more institutionalized forms, with the inevitable loss of legitimacy, energy and engagement.

Such a process has been revealingly termed one of 'colonization' (Habermas, 1987). It involves the replacement of face-to-face and interactive modes of action co-ordination with bureaucratic procedure and the institutionalized separation of activists and representatives from the rest of the group (Ferguson, 1983). Though colonization can provide significant gains in effectiveness in the short term, it inevitably reduces the passion and critical engagement that formerly characterized participation within the association's decision-making. In this way, engineering initiatives are the carrier of a particular organizational paradigm that devalues critical participation and sees it as antithetical to effectiveness. Colonization is not, therefore, merely an encouragement of certain organizational forms. It is also a subtle and debilitating process of conceptual capture.

Democratic engineering swamps critical associations with an organizational paradigm in which solutions to problems of action co-ordination inevitably involve the progressive reduction, and domestication, of critical participation. Now, moments of institutionalization within the target association increasingly result in structures primarily designed to protect the decision-making capacity of the few. By so alienating themselves from their wider critical community, activists themselves become incumbent democrats.

Democratic engineers, in viewing democracy in terms of institutions, encourage institutional solutions to problems, offer resources with colonizing strings attached

and are, in the last instance, unable to relinquish the power they control. This kind of help closes down discussion, domesticates participation and gives rise to discussions and meetings which are, fundamentally, unengaging. It is little wonder, therefore, that no matter how democratic reforms seek to reduce the costs and widen the opportunities for participation, a recurrent problem for democratic engineering is the failure of the people to actually show up (Miller *et al.*, 1995, p. 21; Tsagarousianou and Tambini, 1997). This is in direct contravention of the cost/benefit model of participation sported by democratic engineers.

Distinguishable from this type of aid are the efforts of critical democrats. Often, community activists, mental health advocates, conflict resolution facilitators and participatory development workers have been able to relinquish their power and control and refrain from fuelling institutional colonization (Freire, 1983; Pilisuk *et al.*, 1996). To do so, those genuinely seeking to be catalysts for grassroots democracy must struggle within themselves (Servaes *et al.* 1996, p. 24). They must try not to inadvertently assist what are extremely subtle processes of conceptual capture. They must accept divergence between their own hopes for their target groups and what actually occurs. In so doing, catalysts for democracy are involved in a process of self-creation that reflects that of the critical democrats they are trying to assist. Once again, democracy appears here as an ongoing ethical dilemma, as a struggle to understand the good, as a way of life constantly threatened by co-option.

## Conclusion

While we laud the reformation of the House of Lords, regional devolution and the placing of voting machines in Tescos, we do not seriously consider the possibility of critical democracy. We do not study it in the academy. We do not experiment with it in mainstream politics. In a world which daily entertains the possibility of market and infrastructural failure, as well as political, humanitarian and environmental crises, we can, however, expect significant eruptions of critical democracy to continue to occur. Such eruptions will reject centralized power and domestication within parties and will attempt to co-ordinate their activities in quite different ways (Dalton and Kuechler, 1990). And precisely because we do not seriously consider it, the sudden appearance of critical democracy will continue to take us by surprise, be demonized and studiously misunderstood.

When democratic theorists grope deep in the plastic bag, they should acknowledge that democracy is not one object with intriguing, and protruding, lumps. It is a struggle over power, and as such, it provides an entirely different experience to those who hold power and those who do not. To raise the possibility that incumbent bureaucracies and critical networks are compatible, that they can work together to fashion a rosy and engineered future, is to assume that struggle for power to be at an end.

Democratic engineering is today in the ascendancy. It unquestioningly conceives of effective associational life in terms of institutions. It unwittingly colonizes those it seeks to help. Such attempts to aid and deepen democracy constitute a serious breakdown in communication. When the British Government uses a policy forum

and calls it democracy, when the World Bank adopts the rhetoric of participation, when social capital theory forgets that associational life can just as powerfully be a force for institutional *change*, we are witnessing a profound and collective addiction to a particular organizational form. Today's political activists are giving up this addiction. They are experimenting with different ways of co-ordinating collective action. Yet when they turn to 'radical' democrats within the academy for help, they are merely told to behave themselves.

The London Borough of Enfield's advertisement for a 'Head of Democratic Services' cited at the beginning of this paper, is a perfect illustration of engineering democracy. Such initiatives will not work. Indeed, they are not intended to work. Rather, their purpose is to adopt the appearance of democracy, to protect elite institutions from critical attack and to propagate the unreflective and deeply ideological assertion that democracy is a single political project to which all can be safely harnessed. For the receiver of such initiatives, participation is a process of independence, an ethical ideal of self rule which recalls ancient understandings of democracy. Critical democrats do need help, but that help must nurture *their* democratic characteristics. Otherwise, like their engineering counterparts, they will merely degenerate into institutional and authoritarian forms.

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### Note

1 *The Guardian*, 4 March 1998 and Job Description.

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