

Beyond Politus, Ordinary Democracy in Organization

François-Xavier de Vaujany⁴

Abstract

This article is a report on the 15th Organizations, Artifacts & Practices (OAP) workshop held at the London School of Economics. It looks back at three presences and one absence in our discussions on democracy in organizations. More than ever, we need to go beyond the simple posture of *politus* in democratic conversations to make differences productive. And this is a never-ending task.

Keywords: democracy; organization; organizing; work; differences; politus.

On my way back from a workshop organized at the London School of Economics on the theme of “Ordinary democracy in the making”⁵, I am wondering more than ever about democracy in our societies and organizations. At the end of various presentations by experts in organizational studies, information systems, philosophy, anthropology and economics, four points seem to have emerged from the debates. More precisely, three presences and one absence were at the heart of this rich and intense event co-organized with Université Paris Dauphine-PSL and ESSEC.

The first presence is that of a necessary impossibility: how can democracy be defined without enclosing it, predetermining it, disambiguating it and thus becoming anti-democratic? Can a process of democratization be conceptualized, thought out and theorized (see Harrison and Freeman, 2004; Varman and Chakrabarti, 2004; Desmond and Wilson, 2019; Battilana et al, 2025; de Vaujany, 2024, 2025)? Should we confine ourselves to the conditions of possibility of a democratic process? The debates clearly brought out an idea already well-known to political scientists: democracy is an eternal question rather than a clear-cut answer. As soon as individuals began to cultivate neighborhoods, as soon as it became necessary to superimpose beings and things beyond the confines of a single-family cell in the same space and along increasingly extended communication routes, the major political and democratic questions became obvious. How can we ensure peaceful cohabitation for all? How to distribute power within the “City”? How can we open up the exercise of power to the world and to the practical wisdom of citizens? Of course, the Western nature of this story is open to question. The genealogy of democratic practices and doctrines can hardly be dissociated from the Greek world, and Athens in particular. Ancient Greece was a formidable laboratory for democracy (Farrar, 1988;

Bollen and Paxton, 1997; McCannon, 2012; de Vaujany, 2024, 2025).

With the move away from autocratic power, that of the tyrant or king, and the break with a theology or mythology that made the power of one or a few permanent and unchallengeable, democratic issues became unavoidable in Antiquity, the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Later theorists of representative, participatory, deliberative, radical or social democracy were often drawn from the same “Western” matrix. And, of course, many practical issues need to be resolved to give democracy a framework (see the final chapter of de Vaujany, 2025). The democratic question is inseparable from the arithmetic and logic of numbers. Both the voting base and the voting process must be established. *It is easy to see how democracy has never been the power of all over all. It has required land capacity, a specific age, physical possibilities and procedures that exclude some and include others.* From a more technical point of view, it has been necessary to define democratic functions, volumes, orders and seriality. Today, these dimensions are still the subject of new experiments and active proposals, notably by colleagues at Université Paris Dauphine-PSL. All this contributes to the organization and reorganization of democratic processes.

This organizational dimension (see Battilana et al, 2025) was of course omnipresent in our first LSE debates. Beyond the institutions that guarantee the peaceful functioning of our democracies, multiple organizational processes are necessary for the democratic health of our societies. Beyond the perimeter of the state and its political bodies, the world itself is increasingly organized. Most of our lives take place in organized space-time. From the morning commute to work, through our company or administration, to all our in-between leisure and eating times, we never leave organized space-time. These are part of society, intensely producing and reproducing it. In many ways, they are moments in search of democratization. At work, democracy is often perceived by default. It's when it is missing, when it is absent or incomplete, that democracy is summoned. Silence and the ordinary experience of collective activity are then suspended. Criticism is rife: “They don't listen to me enough”, “I don't have a say”, “There's a real problem of listening in my company”, “My manager isn't participative enough”, “I'd like them to let us draw up the work procedures ourselves - I know my job”.

⁴ Université Paris Dauphine-PSL (DRM). devaujany@dauphine.fr

⁵ The 15th Organization, Artifacts & Practices (OAP) workshop, organized on June 4, 5 and 6 by the London School of Economics & Political Sciences. This event brought together 85 participants from the humanities and social sciences, on the theme of “Ordinary democracy in the making”.

John Dewey came up several times in the discussions at the OAP 2025 workshop, notably in Mark Coecklebergh's keynote⁶ and several presentations in the parallel sessions. For the pragmatist philosopher, democracy is “permanent experimentation”. It is a process, not a predefined norm (Lorino, 2018; de Vaujany and Heimstädt, 2022). In the course of collective redefinitions of the most commonly encountered problems, a certain openness must first be maintained, so that all individuals, all ideas, all techniques can be part of the “inquiry” carried out together. For Dewey, this process is the general movement from an indeterminate to a determinate situation. It associates democracy with collective activity. This, of course, presupposes constant care and attention, what Mukulika Banerjee called in her keynote lecture “gardening” or “cultivation”⁷. Our second guest speaker drew thus a fascinating parallel between the cultivation of agricultural fields and democratic processes. As any gardener knows, it is not enough to sow seeds once in a while (especially by voting...). In our societies, as in our organizations, we need to continually nurture democracy. We need to maintain the soil of our debates, fertilizing it from time to time, leaving it fallow from time to time, and protecting it from harmful insects and parasites.

In a complex way, management has contributed to both participatory democracy (its necessity to complement the logic of experts) and representative democracy (by systematizing questions of representation and governance at the organizational level). In the Fordist context of an assembly line, for example, it is obvious that the organization of work defines neighborhoods just as the city does on another scale. It requires open discussion, both to control and improve processes. In the final analysis, the space organized by management extends democratic questions by multiplying the public spaces juxtaposed to those of the city, or placed alongside it.

The second presence in the debates at the OAP 2025 workshop was that of the normative, in particular the *politus*. Mukulika Banerjee's keynote also illustrated this tropism. The professor used two very interesting examples to show how even the most ordinary activity can induce “civic spaces” and “democratic processes”. The first was a harvest in an Indian village. For three weeks, caste and status were forgotten. Caught up in the need to harvest, all individuals ended up forgetting themselves and became the diverse and sometimes interchangeable roles of field labor. The second was the London Underground. Based on a detailed and fascinating ethnography, the speaker showed how everyone managed to live together peacefully in what were sometimes difficult situations. In

the experience of public transport, each person shapes and adjusts his or her own bubble to that of others. An intimacy of postures, attitudes and tactics are mobilized by users to maintain tranquillity in immobility or fluidity in movement.

Both examples troubled me (and not just because they didn't always reflect my experience of the Paris metro...). With hindsight, I think they illustrate issues of politeness rather than democracy. And I am convinced that it is absolutely essential to make a clear distinction between these two socio-political situations. Politeness implies the (temporary) suspension or neutralization of differences. “Poli” comes from the Latin *politus*, meaning “smooth”. With polite rituals, the Romans (and many others) temporarily reduced differences in status. Politeness puts everyone on the same level, in the same ordinary moment. But like later “courtesy” or “gallantry”, politeness does not exhaust tensions, divergences, differences and dominations. It merely sets them aside temporarily for the space of a public moment. Before and after, differences and conflicts remain. In the street, in a corridor, on a train journey, while shopping, strangers may have to speak to each other or speak to each other again. Politeness governs interactions. And the system of rules is often the product of a dominant social group who has a better grasp of regulations than the others.

Politeness does not necessarily imply respect (you can be polite and limit yourself to a polite relationship with someone you dislike or despise). However, there can be no City without some form of politeness. And while not every form of politeness necessarily leads to democracy, a democratic process will often induce its own standards of cordiality. But in essence, as Mary Parker Follett (1918, 1919, 1949) so aptly put it, the challenge of a democratic process is precisely to enable the expression of differences, to make them productive. Conflict is not tamed, but rather channeled. Far from a romantic vision of democracy, the pragmatist approach is not to say that it would be enough to multiply and superimpose differences for them to speak to each other and move forward together. In fact, the natural trajectory is quite the opposite. It takes a special, recurring and profound effort and care to be constantly on the path to democracy; the “*demos-kratos*” is a destination never reached. And it takes democratic practices to integrate differences and make them productive.

The third presence is linked to sessions dealing with digital issues, platforms, infrastructures and techniques (from social networks to AI and digitized management

⁶ Based on his book Coecklebergh, M. (2024). Why AI undermines democracy and what to do about it. John Wiley & Sons.

⁷ This metaphor and logic are strongly present in the book she published about democracy in India (see Banerjee, 2021).

tools). There is an “extension”, a “change of scale”, a “plasticity” all particularly critical for our societies as well as our organizations. In its original, quasi-mythological version, democracy was born for cities, on the scale of neighborhood and encounter urbanism⁸. The agora is a space of continuous, ordinary conversation. It has an immediacy. Of course, all forms of urbanism have a political force (cf. notably the Haussmannian space of Paris). They are conceived, maintained and animated by the dominant. But there is a possibility of making these processes visible, from which we can also distance ourselves.

Several OAP presentations, the first panel and Mukulika Banerjee's lecture emphasized the inter-temporality at work in democratic processes. Between its great institutional moments (notably voting), democracy is above all an ordinary conversation. Today, this conversation takes place largely in the form of “posts” or “videos” on social networks, ‘prompts’ on generative AIs or “exchanges” on more specific platforms. And most of these events take place in spaces controlled by “big tech”. As Da Empoli (2019) shows in his book *The Engineers of Chaos*, a curious alliance has recently been formed: one that reconciles populism and big business. Ultimately, it is in the interests of a certain kind of business to set up an algorithm of extremes, to encourage the development of extremes and to break down all possibilities of democratic centers and continuities. In this context, hyper-individualization flourishes, spreads and infuses. Connectivity takes precedence over community. Of course, there are alternative platforms (such as cooperatives). But they remain a minority in democratic conversations. Of course, dedicated digital techniques have also emerged over the last two decades, from online petitions to citizen consultations to electronic voting and electronic participatory budgets. They have sometimes contributed to a more direct democracy, as well as to a better monitoring of public action and citizen mobilization on unprecedented perimeters. However, these intense democratic conversations remain anecdotal compared with the ordinary mass of digital conversations.

And let's be clear: the problem is not extension and scaling up as such. In the wake of the Greek world, the whole of political philosophy has been questioning and showing the possible paths to democratization beyond the city as a single place. It has proposed and experimented with an extended social contract. The contemporary problem is the (biased) mediation used to scale up: platforms. Under the guise of liberality, this mediation has become a violent, extreme space, the object of both managerial and geopolitical strategies of

influence. This is certainly not where the real work of democracy lies. We can contest from the usual digital spaces, but we can hardly build a participative or deliberative framework, and it is very difficult to conduct a truly open inquiry there.

It is then tempting to limit the problem and the range of solutions to a *politus*. The reaction becomes: “They're rude, violent, vulgar... well, let's define the rules and apply them!”. But as Gilles Deleuze showed in his day, this focus on the expressed, on activity (at the heart of our control societies), solves nothing. By automatically replacing vulgar remarks with smileys on Meta, by installing a “social credit” system in a country, by ensuring corrective responses to politically incorrect prompts, we no longer really educate the individual (as the panopticon cynically did). We cybernetically regulate the expressed, and abandon all hope for a better Man. Above all, we abandon collective discussion of the rules, and even worse than that, we make the rules invisible, drowning them all in lines of code and anthropomorphized mediations.

To conclude, I would like to mention an absence from our discussions in London. That of an alternative institutional imaginary. I think this fourth point is absolutely key, and completes John Dewey's concrete point, but by restoring a possible role for academics and scientists within the framework of a vast collective experiment.

In its time, the emergence of democratic ideals in Europe was intimately linked to the Scottish and then French Enlightenment. Democracy is possible when we abandon essential, transcendental, divinized authorities. Democracy is a possibility opened up by the exploration and extension of reason and reasonable abilities, nurtured and applied to knowledge. The sciences were born of this movement. As we often forget, the sciences largely post-date universities. Universities (at least in the West, since there is of course a non-Western history of *universitas*) were phenomena at the heart of the city. They accompanied its development. In some cases, they became the whole of their own city. Teachers in the Middle Ages wore a tonsure. They worked and taught in open spaces: in public squares, in private apartments, on the move, in buildings not dedicated to a faculty... Most of Europe's major universities took a long time to get their buildings and campuses integrated. Scholastic methods did not encourage a dichotomy between teaching and research. *Disputatio* was as much a means of disseminating knowledge as of co-constructing it. Although the university was not for everyone, it was part of a widely shared (religious) experience. Theology, the arts, law and,

⁸ *Originally, *demes*, i.e. village units of around ten people.

later, medicine, were central to the lives of men and women in the Middle Ages.

When science developed in the 17th and especially the 18th and 19th centuries, it did so first and foremost outside the academic sphere. Idle priests, bored aristocrats and soon ambitious bourgeois and industrialists contributed to the development of curiosity cabinets, discussion salons and learned societies. Throughout Europe, science was being demonstrated as well as demonstrated. It was entirely a sensory experience, and one of its aims was not unrelated to the boredom of a privileged few.

All this is achieved by breaking with common sense, common superstitions, preconceived ideas and dominant patterns. The imaginary of this “modernity” (a notion that also came up several times in our debates) is an imaginary of rupture. In the long term, I think it has become an infinite distance from the people and, in many ways, from democratic processes. The university itself has taken a turn for the worse (fortunately, of course). In turn, it has become “scientificized”. But along the way, it has moved away from both the ordinary and the mysterious. The knowledge machine born then (and still expanding) has become a curious parallel (European?) world to which pragmatism (Dewey's in particular) proposes a response.

Two pieces of equipment are essential to this modern machinery: the encyclopedia, and scientific conversation. Encyclopedic knowledge was strongly encouraged by the philosophers of the Enlightenment. It is a utopia revived by Wikipedia and, more recently, by generative AI. The idea is to make all knowledge available to everyone. Conversations are above all mentored moments. To be enlightened or awakened, one must first pass through the hands of another. I am not trying to be a demagogue here. I think the figure of the enlightening expert can often be useful. However, the spaces and imaginaries of this support are today tragically truncated. They presuppose a *politus* that makes you feel inferior. They maintain an ultimate truth in the hands of those who master the code of the game. It favors the good at the expense of the intelligent (together).

Today, the walls of the university define the field of play, extended only by the spaces of certain platforms (and I don't think that citizen or open-source infrastructures have really changed things). Popular or open" universities do exist. But they are only moments of suspension of the game, a form of politeness allowing an expert to speak more simply. Beyond encyclopedias and enlightening conversations, what new practices and spaces could give academics a new role in democratic processes? With what

continuities beyond simple courses or publication processes?

This fourth observation, made from the warmth and protection of the walls of one of the world's most prestigious academic institutions, seems to me the most relevant to my subject. Organization scholars could help reorganize public action and higher education in this direction. This reorientation is urgent. Otherwise, academics will become mere spectators, condemned to watch from their ivory towers the end of a democratic care from which they were perhaps the first to detach themselves in order to exist as individuals.

References

- Banerjee, M. (2021). *Cultivating democracy: Politics and citizenship in agrarian India*. Oxford University Press.
- Battilana, J., Beckman, C. M., & Yen, J. (2025). On democratic organizing and organization theory. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 70(2), 297-327.
- Bollen, K. A., & Paxton, P. (1997). Democracy before Athens. Inequality, democracy, and economic development, 13-44, in Midlarsky, M. I. (Ed.). (1997). *Inequality, democracy, and economic development*. London: Cambridge University Press.
- Coeckelbergh, M. (2024). *Why AI undermines democracy and what to do about it*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Da Empoli, G. (2019). *Les ingénieurs du chaos*, Paris : Lattès.
- Desmond, J., & Wilson, F. (2019). Democracy and worker representation in the management of change: Lessons from Kurt Lewin and the Harwood studies. *Human Relations*, 72(11), 1805-1830.
- de Vaujany, FX. (2024). Organizing Democratic Space: The End of Continuum?, *Journal of Openness, Commons & Organizing (JOCO)*, Vol 3, Iss 1, pp. 1-3.
- de Vaujany, F. X. (2025). *Le travail déplacé: plaidoyer pour une démocratie managériale sans lieu*, Paris: Classiques Garnier.
- de Vaujany, F. X. D., & Heimstädt, M. (2022). A pragmatic way to open management research and education: Playfulness, ambiguity, and deterritorialization. *Organizações & Sociedade*, 29, 750-781.
- Farrar, C. (1988). *The origins of democratic thinking: The invention of politics in classical Athens*. London: CUP.
- Follett, M. P. (1918). *The new state: Group organization, solution to popular government*. New York, NY: Longmans, Green.
- Follett, M. P. (1919). Community as process. *Philosophical Review*, 28, 576-588. doi:10.2307/2178307
- Follett, M. P. (1949). *Freedom and Coordination: Lectures in Business Organization* (Reprint 1987). New York, NY: Management Publications Trust Limited.
- Harrison, J. S., Freeman, R. E., & Special Topic Guest Editors. (2004). Special topic: democracy in and around organizations: is organizational democracy worth the effort?. *Academy of Management Perspectives*, 18(3), 49-53.
- Lorino, P. (2018). *Pragmatism and organization studies*. London: Oxford University Press.
- McCannon, B. C. (2012). The origin of democracy in Athens. *Review of Law & Economics*, 8(2), 531-562.
- Varman, R., & Chakrabarti, M. (2004). Contradictions of democracy in a workers' cooperative. *Organization studies*, 25(2), 183-208.