

Organizing democratic space: The end of continuum?

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Abstract

This essay emphasizes a fundamental hesitation in the democratic space of contemporary societies and organizations. It is focused on the powerful role of the hemicycle and its right-left continuum in French practices of political representation. Over the past thirty years, this spatial common has been obviously questioned both in society and organizations. And digital technologies have amplified this trend. But what could be the alternative topology for democratic debates in legislative assemblies and organizational decision processes?

Keywords: democracy; democratic spaces; representation; hemicycle; continuum; commons; eventfulness; mandate; management; history of management; governance; organizations.

Right or left? In the French political landscape, this remains the most essential question. But what do right and left mean in today's democratic space?

For nearly fifteen years, I've been researching questions of space and time, exploring their links with organizational dynamics. This problem of political geography is perhaps the most fundamental of all, not only for the political life of our societies, but also for our organizations and their modes of governance.

1. When the hemicycle poses a world of continuities that is now being questioned...

Let's recall an all-too-frequently forgotten history. In France, this topology is particularly meaningful in the context of the assembly where the debates of our democracy "take place": the hemicycle (see Gauchet, 1995, 2021; Le Bohec and Le Digol, 2012; Mossuz-Lavau, 2020). The famous inventor of the guillotine and the petition, Joseph-Ignace Guillotin, is less well known for his role in designing the hemicycle of the Palais Bourbon (an archetype of democratic spatiality alongside other forms such as the rectangular hall of the English at Westminster). His idea, implemented by Jules de Joly, was to bring MPs together in a semi-circular space, giving everyone visibility for everyone else and enabling cross-fertilization. This practice made it possible to move away from the binary space of "red" or "white" that was still in use until the Restoration, and to move towards more spatially "operational" categories in the organization of debates (Gauchet, 2021).

To be right or left is to be more or less to the right or left in the democratic space. But to the right or left of whom

or what? Of the president of this assembly (there was a time when you were on the right or left of the king's hand). Above all, right and left are a way of organizing debates and speaking. This truism has several implications. First of all, this geography is part of a personalized political spatiality. You need a point of view to arrive at these locations, an overhanging actor looking you in the face with her desk placed in the center of this hemicycle. To be on the left or the right is to make a subjective, arbitrated spatiality speak for itself. Above all, it means entering into a logic of position, neighborhood and continuous axis to situate and oppose parties, ideas and individuals throughout the hemicycle.

But at a time when some are developing so-called "more social" discourses within the far right, when others are asserting themselves to be "both right and left", when part of the "offer" is becoming "thematized", in a period when the center is no longer centered, where the historical parties of parliamentary geography are sinking, and where some are contesting the total space and its constitution from within the discussions themselves (this is nothing new), the old topology ordering debates along a horizontal axis of words is collapsing. Each person creates his or her own topology, abandoning the commonality of the hemicycle, the space at the heart of the political practices and imaginations of the whole of society. We're slipping from the continuum to the archipelago, or even, the poles.

For a long time now, the logic behind the location of this space has been problematic, with its ambiguities and even inequities, but without calling into question the democratic effectiveness of the whole. Within the same group, you can be more to the right or more to the left. In all groups, you can also be higher up, with the eyes of the president within your reach (or, in revolutionary times, the voice of the people) if you're in the back row. You can also be at the bottom, close to the pit and the ministerial bench. Or you may be seated in a more or less prestigious position, bearing the gilded plaque of an illustrious predecessor. In all cases, this space is less linear than it seems. It's even more "Riemannian" than ever, in the sense that we know (although...) what it means to be close to two members of the same group, but not necessarily what it means to be close to two different groups.

Long before space and place, the assembly is made up of "rhythms" and "events", as every MP knows well. Political and budgetary cycles, the retransmission of debates, the vote on a controversial text, the presence of an international guest, all lend a particular eventfulness to

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discussions. The continuous archiving of central and peripheral exchanges, the development of dressing rooms for journalists, the installation of cameras and then social networks have gradually changed the sacredness of sessions around these events. The democratic space has gradually found its place in the society of the spectacle (see Debord, 1967, 2018). Now, more than ever, MPs need to "make the news". Initially the site of a logos (even a sophist one), the parliament is drifting inexorably towards the stage, the image and the gesture, all of which are instantly connected to the entire public space. This new semiotics is less easy to order in the rational space of the hemicycle.

Over the last thirty years, it's tempting to point to a hesitation on the part of the democratic space itself: reconnecting with original continuities and collectively clarified inscriptions on the meaning of "more or less to the left", "more or less to the right" in a world of speech; developing new topologies for the political space of representation (but which ones? for which spatial commons?). And this hesitation is not limited to the French National Assembly and its debates.

2. From parliament to business and the world of work...

Surprisingly, the question of democratic space and its topologies for legislation is the same in the context of companies and organizations in general. We forget to what extent the history of our modern democracies and the history of management are linked. If democracy is the history of the development of practices and processes representing the people (with the mandate in particular), the managerial society of managers is also a representative process. After feudal pre-capitalism and then owner capitalism, we have long since entered "managerial capitalism" (Burnham, 1941; de Vaujany, 2022, 2024). Managers (who do not own the means of production) have a mandate to make decisions. The organization itself is a form of mandate and delegation of this mandate. This phenomenon accelerated with the war and the 40s. Around this, management as a whole is a representation of the world, of stakeholders, markets, customers and employees, through its techniques in search of correspondences with a reality to be controlled.

And the democratic spaces of management, initially very logos-oriented, are also experiencing a crisis linked to the evolution of representations, which are increasingly realistic, visual and intelligent. For management, as for politics, the question of how to articulate the continuities of the representative (we mandate with a clear direction for the future - a course) and the discontinuities of the participative (we listen to the evolving expectations and wishes of stakeholders, who are given the opportunity to make local decisions) is essential.

Today, the places of democratic life in organizations are in crisis, just as the places of legislative debate can be. The boardroom, the CEO's office, the space of general meetings, the moments when managers and workers meet, the so-called decision-making processes and their digitalization, only represent their own world in spaces with problematic continuities. In the wake of the pandemic, Zoom and Teams have become the new hemicycles of management. This is not without its problems. *Through a visual experience, we all find ourselves under the dangerous illusion of seeing the world centered and ordered around our own person (while forgetting that the spectacle offered to others is always different).* Digital continuities are egocentric and in no way contribute to a spatial commonality. Everyone is in the central, overhanging position of the president of his or her hemicycle. Moreover, joining a democratic discussion on a digital platform becomes an instantaneous, effortless process, positioning everyone in a space whose functioning is linked to algorithms that are opaque in their presuppositions of continuity for egos and hermetic to substantive reconfigurations. Within this digital framework, democratic space and public space merge, and the grand ordering of debates eludes us.

Parallel to mandated decisions, participatory democracy in organizations is becoming *ad hoc*, clandestine, often carried by other opaque platforms (social networks), and its points of encounter with representative democracy are here too radical conflicts arriving late. Too late. In the end, everyone suffers. No one feels that he or she is an actor in his or her organization. And an AI or a platform, which are often individualizing universes, will never in themselves constitute a democratic space.

The problems of democratizing management and those of our legislative players also come into sharp focus in the context of major societal challenges. How can we give a voice to a suffering planet, to non-humans, to shifting categories, to invisible actors? How should democratic space be organized, and with what kind of continuities? How can we combine order and plurality? How can we articulate representative continuities with participatory discontinuities in all forms of collective activity or living together at work in our societies?

3. To leave or not to leave a world of continuities? A democratic hesitation to be resolved

The death penalty and the tool envisioned by Joseph-Ignace Guillotin have fortunately been abolished. But what of his political legacy?

Perhaps we need to reconnect with the deeper meaning of this spatial and temporal machine of the hemicycle, whose benefits have been so obvious for our democracies

and organizations (notably in building majorities and helping to project political conversations). Everything must then be done to re-establish a democratic nuance and the very logic of continuums at the service of a spatial commonality.

On the contrary, perhaps we need to abolish or radically rethink the current vision of our democratic spaces, in parliament as in business. If, as John Dewey put it, democracy must be a "permanent experimentation" (Sabel, 2012), then we need a new topology that rebalances the practices of participatory and representative democracies (which today enter into simple conflict) and reopens our systems to experimentation². In this logic, we need to reorganize our democratic space beyond a republic of experts and great witnesses (sometimes summoned to committee rooms in the basement of a building annexed to the assembly). In addition to an office where the MP returns to his constituency, the assembly itself and its committees should sometimes come to the cities outside Paris (beware of the temptation of the umpteenth digital platform...). Breaking with the very geometric logic of the hemicycle (and certain executive practices), perhaps we need to conceive of a more open space, defixed, occasionally disconnected, and in regular conversation with intermediary social bodies? But at the risk of transforming our representative democracies into particularly unstable and fragmented participatory democracies.

In any case, it is urgent to unravel this hesitation in our representative spaces, both legislative and organizational. With a view to preserving a common good that is more than ever at risk in organizations and society alike: our democracy.

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² See the work of Hoskyns (2014) on these issues. Maybe the emptying of any space is a perquisite to a good democratic conversation? Maybe democratic discussions and decisions should take place in public spaces? But then, what about their institutionalization?