Organizing democratic space: The end of continuum?

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Abstract

This essay highlights a fundamental hesitation in the democratic space of contemporary societies and organizations. It focuses on the powerful role of the hemicycle and its right-left continuum in French practices of political representation. Over the last thirty years, this spatial commonality has obviously been challenged both in society and in organizations. And digital technologies have reinforced this trend. But what could be the alternative topology for democratic debates in legislative assemblies and organizational decision-making 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 fundamental question. But what do right and left mean in today's democratic space?

For almost 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. The hemicycle poses a world of continuities that is now being questioned...

Let's remember a too often 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 in Westminster). His idea, implemented by Jules de Joly, was to bring the deputies together in a semicircular space so that everyone could see everyone else and cross-pollinate. 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 of 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 right or left of the king's hand). Above all, right and left are a way of organizing debate and speech. This truism has several implications. First, this geography is part of a personalized political spatiality. You need a point of view to arrive at these places, an overhanging actor staring you in the face with her desk at the center of this hemicycle. To be on the left or on the right is to let a subjective, arbitrated spatiality speak for itself. Above all, it means entering into a logic of position, neighborhood, and continuous axis to locate and oppose parties, ideas, and individuals throughout the hemicycle.

But at a time when some within the extreme right are developing so-called "more social" discourses, when others are claiming to be "both right and left", when part of the "offer" is being "thematized", at a time when the center is no longer centered, when the historical parties of parliamentary geography are sinking, and when some are contesting the entire space and its constitution from within the discussions themselves (this is nothing new), the old topology that ordered 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 are slipping from the continuum to the archipelago, or even to the poles.

For a long time, the logic behind the location of this space has been problematic, with its ambiguities and even inequalities, but without questioning 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, near the pit and the ministerial bench. Or you may sit in a more or less prestigious position, bearing the gilded plaque of an illustrious predecessor. In all cases, the room is less linear than it appears. It is 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 Member knows well. Political and budgetary cycles, the rebroadcast of debates, the vote on a controversial text, the presence of an international guest, all give the debates a particular eventfulness. 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 the 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 have to "make the news". Initially the site of a logo (even a sophist one), the parliament is drifting inexorably towards the stage, the image and the gesture, all of which are immediately connected to the entire public space. This new semiotics is less easily ordered in the rational space of the hemicycle.

Over the last thirty years, it is tempting to point to a hesitation on the part of the democratic space itself: to reconnect with original continuities and collectively clarified inscriptions on the meaning of "more or less left", "more or less right" in a world of language; to develop 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 connected. If democracy is the history of the development of practices and processes that represent the people (with the mandate in particular), then 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. In this sense, 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 that 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 desires of stakeholders who are given the opportunity to make local decisions) is essential.

Today, the places of democratic life in organizations are in crisis, as are the places of legislative debate. 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, represent only their own world in spaces of 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 are all under the dangerous illusion of seeing the world centered and ordered around our own person (forgetting that the spectacle offered to others is always different).* Digital continuities are egocentric and in no way contribute to 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 to egos and hermetic to substantive reconfigurations. Within this digital framework, democratic space and public space merge, and the grand order of debates eludes us.

Parallel to mandated decisions, participatory democracy in organizations is becoming ad hoc, clandestine, often supported 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 our legislative actors also come into focus in the context of major societal challenges. How can we give 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 do we combine order and plurality? How can we articulate representative continuities with participatory discontinuities in all forms of collective activity or coexistence in our societies?

3. To leave or not to leave a world of continuities? The great democratic hesitation of the moment

Fortunately, the death penalty and the instrument that Joseph-Ignace Guillotin had in mind have been abolished. But what about his political legacy?

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

helping to project political conversations). Everything must then be done to restore a democratic nuance and the very logic of continuities 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, both in parliament and in the economy. If, as John Dewey put it, democracy must be a "permanent experiment" (Sabel, 2012), we need a new topology that rebalances the practices of participatory and representative democracies (which today are in simple conflict) and reopens our systems to experimentation[2]. In this logic, we must 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 deputy returns to her constituency, the assembly itself and its committees should sometimes come to the towns 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 should imagine a more open space, fixed, sometimes disconnected, and in regular dialogue with intermediate 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 overcome this reluctance in our representative spaces, both legislative and organizational. In order to preserve a common good that is more than ever at risk in organizations and in society: our democracy.

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[2] See the work of Hoskyns (2014) on these issues. Perhaps the emptying of a space is a prerequisite for a good democratic conversation? Perhaps democratic discussions and decisions should take place in public spaces? But what about their institutionalization?