

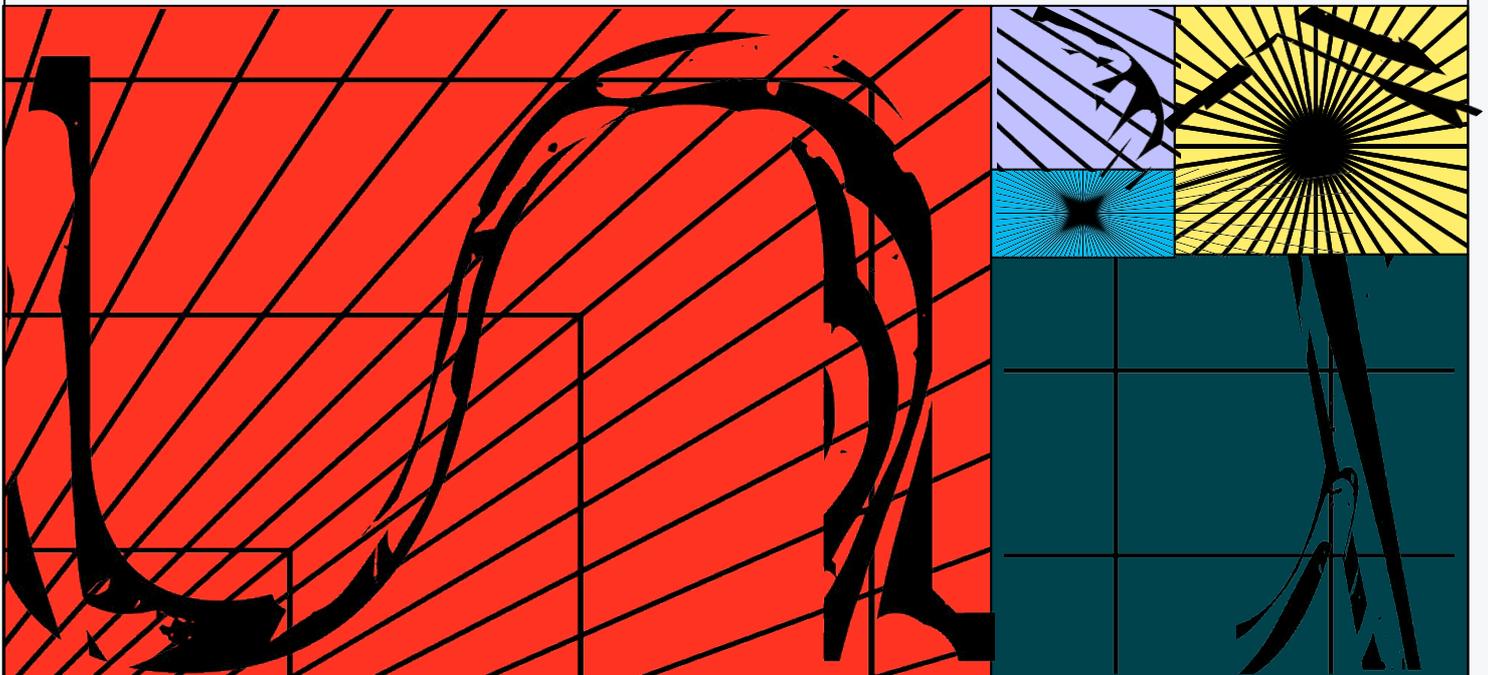
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After participation: Imagining democracy in the age of conflict

Harnessing friction and other ideas for
democracy in the new global context

Nour Attalla, Joseph Harrington & Roope Mokka

based on discussions of Untitled Agenda Group on Democracy,
September 2022, Untitled



After participation: Imagining democracy in the age of conflict. Harnessing friction and other ideas for democracy in the new global context.

Nour Attalla, Joseph Harrington and Roope Mokka based on the conversations of Untitled Democracy Agenda Group in spring 2022. Edited by Outi Kuittinen and Angeliki Vourdaki. September 2022, Untitled.

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UNTITLED is an alliance and an approach to collectively reimagine society, create an agenda for social transformation and experiment on executing it.

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Why are we talking about democracy?

There's a new context for democracy. It has very little to do with participation or digital democracy. Enter imagination.

In the last twenty years, many of us have become accustomed to thinking that if we just add participation and digital tools of engagement to democratic systems, things will improve. Now participation has grown from a radical idea to a number of tried and tested processes in government and has become the modus operandi of the largest – digital – corporations that have ever existed.

The world is different from twenty, ten or even three years ago. We now live in an era of multipolar geopolitics where democratic countries have a weaker global voice and political power cumulates in most democracies. At the same time, the very idea of participation has been stripped of its decentralising powers. In the last ten years or so, three important phenomena have redefined the context in which democracy takes place.

Democracy is no longer the only option: The war in Europe has changed democracy permanently in multiple different ways. The war has shown dramatically that doing business with someone does not make them like you or have them eventually value democracy. At least not on an international scale. Secondly, and more importantly, it has unleashed a multipolar world where democracy is not the power pole that draws others to it. There no longer is a group of the wealthiest and most democratic countries, which the less developed ones gravitate towards. There is not even a power balance between the two main representatives at the top and those at the bottom – which is one way of understanding the Cold War era's polarity. Instead, there is the constant competition of different power alliances for prominence on the global stage, with diverging ideas of how global matters should be run. All equally sure that they need to be listened to when globally significant decisions on technology, natural resources, climate, war, peace, religion, trade and human rights are made. These alliances are, however, not national or even made of nation-states, but global networks of people and organisations, centring around ideologies and values.

Political power accumulates in democracies: The discussion on inequality fueled by the financial crisis in 2008 and the renewed academic interest in the topic (such as Piketty's, Milanović's and the LSE International Inequalities Institute's work) will be further accelerated by decarbonisation efforts and resource wars. What is interesting here for us is the new political frame of inequality: that certain increasing privileges the rich have are, first and foremost, an issue of democracy. According to this view, political inequality is dramatically increasing within democratic nation-states due to economic inequalities. The political class – people working as career politicians – have increasingly started to represent the wealthiest parts of the nation. "Traditional" direct channels of funding political campaigns, lobbying, revolving doors, as well as funding think tanks and academic research, create some of the inequalities. A big part comes from the cultural cohesion between the rich and the political elite: they attend the same educational institutes, live in the same areas and share the same leisure activities.

” Until now developing democracy has been either about defending democracy or adding participation.”

Participation has failed its promise: Participation has its roots in the 1960s and the idea of decentralisation: that power can and should be spread down in the system and that the border between producer and user should be dissolved. We know this has not happened on a large scale. Proponents of decentralisation argue that everything can be decentralised. All human communities with a hierarchical structure of organising can transform into ones where peer groups make and execute decisions. Participation understood this way is not about adding democratic control to hierarchical organisations or letting people choose what is centrally budgeted and produced, but about dissolving power to the many. In the 2020s, participation has a minor role in the public sector compared to business. It has become the de facto business model of many of the world’s largest companies: digital giants are leading the “user-centric” revolution, where the participation of consumers is a vital part of production. In a way, we are all now addicted to the co-production of our consumption through digital platforms.

These three phenomena, we hope, illustrate that the context of democracy has drastically changed. Thus, we think the discourse about democracy must also change. Until now, developing democracy has been either about defending democracy or adding participation, both of which are, in our opinion, not only outdated but also conservative approaches at heart. They aim not to change the form of organising our societies to increase democracy but to defend current institutions or add participatory features to them.

This paper

To test this hypothesis – that democracy now works in an entirely new context – our Alliance members engaged in a series of discussions over spring 2022.

Untitled members (see page 1) working on renewing democratic ideas and practices came together to discuss what they believe is missing in the current debate on reforming democracy, particularly the role of imagination in democracy. Those discussions are the basis of this paper that highlights more hidden issues of the debate on the futures of democracies.

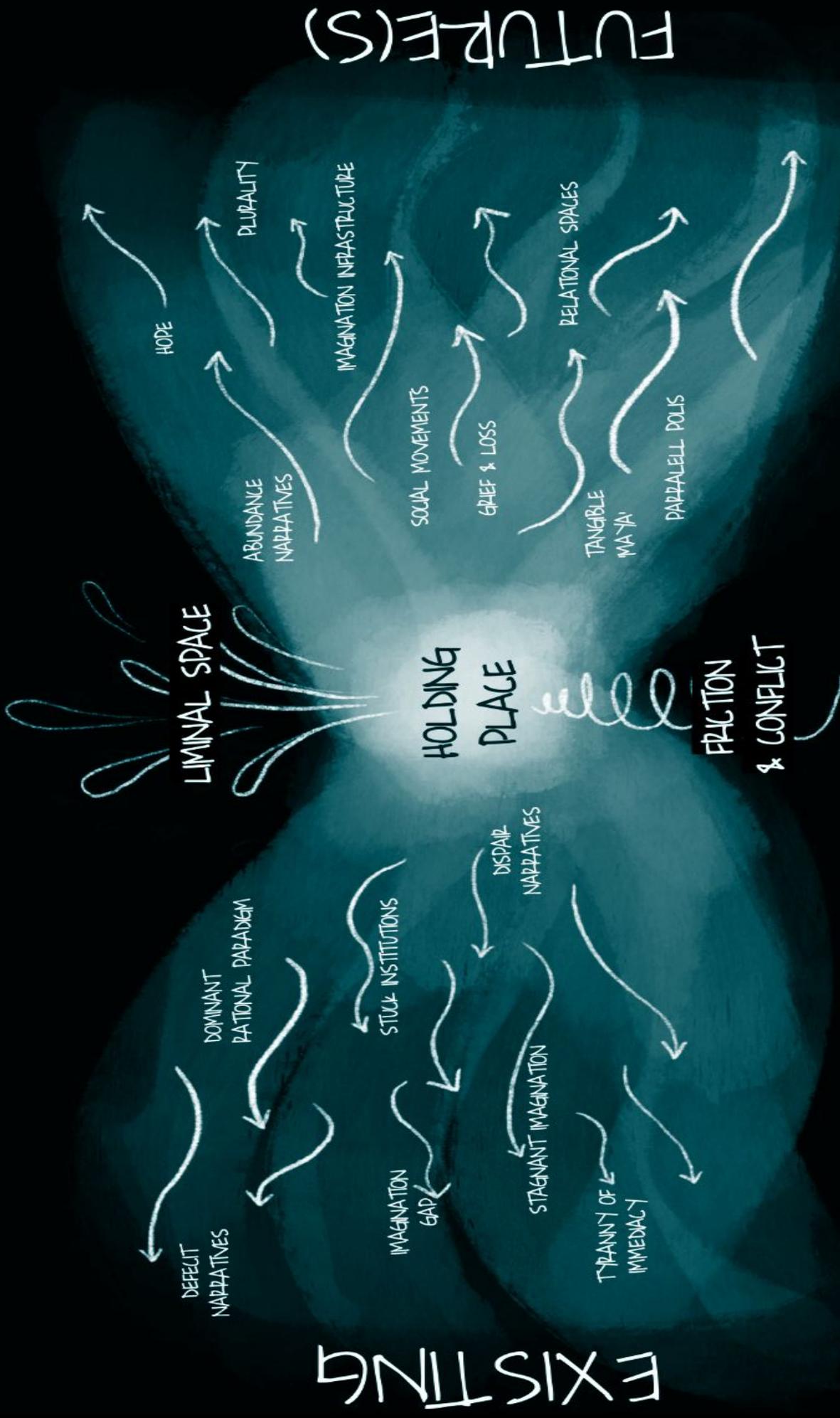
This paper does not intend to provide a holistic overview of the ongoing debate. Rather, it encourages you, the reader, to imagine what’s possible beyond our preconceived notions of democracy and how our imagination can help us collectively move towards new democratic futures.

Our proposal: Step back and look at what happens *before* the formal democratic process and its refined structures

What emerged in the discussions takes the view somewhere new: instead of focusing on structures, processes and institutions of democratic governance, we asked: How do people come together, and what are the new infrastructures of democracy? Or, more fundamentally, how do we form bonds with others to equally discover new ideas and resolve conflicts? What are the necessary social conditions for politics to happen democratically?

In our conversations, we focused on what the prerequisites are for creating political participation that is both democratic and generative. **Our view is thus not on the democratic process understood as an interplay of the free press, political parties, voting rights and parliamentarism, but on the processes, practices and lived environments that can support political imagination, debate and experimentalism.** Seen this way, democracy is a condition in which people can come together to imagine a collective future, form opinions and build belief in what is not yet there. In practice, it means spreading an institutional ethos of dissolving hierarchies yet simultaneously growing powers of collective action and tackling economic privileges as political privileges. It means designing human settlements to support coming together, creating new democratic structures with the knowledge of the marginalised, and decreasing the cost of failure – both in our personal and professional lives.

The idea of social structures as artefacts that we inherit greatly fuelled our discussions: that an essential step in reforming our democracy is to understand that its current structures are imagined and constructed. All institutions – electoral, bureaucratic and executive – are based on the imaginations and ideologies of past citizens, politicians, thinkers, and leaders. There are, therefore, two things that often get confused. Democracy as the democratic institutions, and democracy as an idea that can and will take numerous institutional forms. The idea of a democratic community is relatively simple: it must let all members of the community take part in steering it, have access to goods and assets the community produces, and this community must be non-exclusive. Seen this way, democracy can take many, if not unlimited, institutional forms.



Currents of dominant and new narratives of the state of democracy – Joseph Harrington’s visual notes on the group’s discussions.

Recognise that adding participation to the mix is not the solution

Our group discussed that participation rarely significantly impacts on how elected officials or governments work. Participation as an idea is a thought born from “the Californian Ideology” articulated by writers such as Marshall McLuhan and James W Carey. It has then penetrated nearly all forms of human organisation – the business, public sector, art, media and science alike. Currently, participation is unfortunately often about having the cake and eating it. It is considered to be sufficient not to change or create anything new or permanent but to increase participation and access to what there already is. This arrogance is manifested in the mainstream debate primarily dominated by different “solutions” of renewing electoral systems, increasing citizen participation at all governmental levels or harnessing new technologies. These are all for sure worthy tasks, but they do not go to the heart of the problems of many contemporary democracies.

Imagine new artefacts of democracy

Our conversations highlighted that perhaps imagination is not in deficit but in abundance. Right now, for example, most people’s imagination is tied to reproducing the current system and finding solutions within its limits, bounding the scope of imaginative and creative alternatives. Very few work with imagining new structural alternatives but imagine hard how to stay within the budget, reduce emissions or employ new technologies. Brazilian philosopher and statesman **Roberto Mangabeira Unger** argues that many experience our present times as a “**dictatorship of no alternatives**”. Whilst the issues with our current social and political systems are widely recognised, there is a perceived inability to imagine alternative directions we could collectively move toward. This “dictatorship” exists only within our heads, as all structures are imagined, including the ones we live in.

” The worlds in which we operate are not just an expression of our imaginations; they also shape and instruct our imaginations for interacting back with them.”

MAX STEARNS

” We believe that democracy can bypass friction, and when it arises, people do not know how to respond.”

GABRIELLA GÓMEZ-MONT

Make good use of conflict

We also discovered in our conversation that the role of conflict in politics has changed. Conflict is a central part of the current democratic parliamentarism, where conflict is managed but, we argue, rarely resolved. Conflict in parliamentarism is addressed by bargaining and taking turns on which side or sides of the conflict can decide. It happens through intricate processes of how different parts of the governing system interact. Not much is done to go to the heart of the conflict and its potential long-term resolution. On the contrary, parliamentarism in the current context seems to “freeze” tensions to ideological battle lines, thus enforcing them.

Consequently, **an allergy to conflict** has emerged in our democratic societies. This does not mean that there is no conflict or polarity, but rather that we do not know what else to do when they arise but revert to those ideological battlelines. We now tend to see friction as a failure of the democratic system to produce answers and policies instead of as the first step to generating solutions together. However, the capacity to “hold space” for conflicts and understand the sources of social tensions, frictions and polarities are central to political imagination. It enables us to generate new alternatives collectively.

This kind of generative view of conflict requires a genuine interest in understanding others. As a result, **democratic processes turn into processes of caring**. Instead of debate, there should be dialogue, where groups “take part in each others’ thinking”, as psychologist **David Kantor** said. This reframing of conflict engages the imagination rather than suppressing it in favour of quick and seemingly painless solutions.

Create liminal spaces

Our group shared a belief in the growing importance of liminal spaces. Social transformations create instability as they break down existing or archaic structures whilst new structures, institutions, and human values are still emerging. Furthermore, disagreements about future pathways will arise, dissolving social cohesion. This is both alarming and necessary.

In the era of social transformation, the role of this kind of “generative conflict” is accentuated. In more stable times, the conflict revolves around minor adjustments to the widely accepted vision of a good society. In transformation, the entire course of society itself is at stake. Similar eras in the past have led to democratic backsliding or revolution. They have also produced transformative societal change and leaps forward in human civilisation, well-being, and development, precisely due to the higher degree of conflict.

New liminal spaces have emerged in the previous transformations to host this confusion. For example, civic organisations, universities, political parties and the labour movement have all played a significant role in bringing liminality to conflicts. Liminal spaces have allowed the formation, exchange and testing of new ideas, practices, behaviours and even institutions. In the disagreements that arise in such liminal spaces, there lies an opportunity to resolve conflicts between new and old narratives and structures. Crucial to these spaces has been that they have been, at least in principle, open to anyone whilst still providing enough psychological safety. This helps enable both the questioning of fundamentals and changing one's mind in a reasonably diverse group of people.

Liminality – the threshold between the old and the new – is, however, not just about collective learning and imagination but also has a strong emotional and perhaps even spiritual function. It implies mourning – the inevitable departure from familiar ways of being and entrenched power structures. It also means losing the psychological certainty these systems brought. Additionally, it is hard to think of a transformation with only winners – real social transformations always produce new losers.

Without liminal spaces, conflicts are not managed but end up upholding the old. With them, conflict can be used as leverage for generating and testing new ideas.

The Parallel Polis, an idea co-developed by **Vaclav Havel** in 1970s Czechoslovakia, thinks of spaces that enable the bypassing of the state in creating communities and fostering inclusive political discussions and collective action. As adapted by The Alternative UK, this idea may enable the redistribution of political power and allow the emergence of grassroots discussions, agreements, and collective action in response to critical 21st-century challenges.

” All of us — especially those with privilege — must learn to recognise when the ways of seeing, relating, and working we've held dear obstruct true transformation. And we must be courageous in letting them go, so that new visions can thrive.”

PANTHEA LEE

Don't confuse immediacy with intensity

Our group noted that the tyranny of immediacy has stifled our democracies. The impulse to act on urgent issues quickly has led to limited patience for holding space for conflict and trying to understand each others' viewpoints in politics. And ultimately to a situation where immediacy takes the role of intensity. It seems as if contemporary democracies are incapable of changing established structures except in response to crises, that only then can the structural ambition of political activity be increased. It often happens without the complete democratic process, as was the case in the pandemic and undoubtedly is in terms of security politics. In times outside crises, we tend to give people more power in the least structurally ambitious issues, such as details of public service delivery: how a part of a park should be designed, what routes buses should take, etc.

The tyranny of immediacy tends to promote compromising with the existing and making small, uncontroversial technical solutions. Rather than immediacy, we should be looking at the intensity of democracy: instead of more speed, we should be going for more ambition in social renewal during non-crisis periods also.

Ask whose imagination counts

Our group was very vocal about the conditions through which one gets legitimacy to imagine. In times of transformation – as the surrounding structures and institutions are imagined and remade – the question of equity changes. In steady times it is more about accessibility to existing institutions. Now the question is, whose imagination counts in creating new structures and institutions? Many believe that the ongoing reimagining of our democracies needs to include marginalised voices to succeed – perhaps even starting the reimagining work from a marginalised perspective.

John Dunn has argued that previous social transformations and democratic renewals have followed a certain pattern. New social classes have emerged, and the old elites have reacted by creating a new institution to hold the new groups' interests at arm's length – the parliament, the voting rights and so forth have emerged like this. In other words, new social structures have been designed as a reaction to new powers, but at the same time, not designed from the perspective of the excluded. On the contrary, our group suggests imagining new democratic structures from precisely the point of view of the excluded.

”Stagnant, oppressive imaginations – that are normatively accepted – create and perpetuate tremendous harm to others.”

MAX STEARNS

Start from the physical

Our group proposes to pay attention to the overlooked physical conditions of democracy and imagination. Ultimately, transformation can stem from changes in everyday routines, as these routines are what uphold existing structures. Similarly, structures are felt and lived in as physical embodied beings that populate a space with other physical beings. By changing the point of view to the embodied experience of coming together, new ways to develop democracy open.

We can think of infrastructures of imagination. These infrastructures facilitate interactions that allow imagination to bloom. Civic Spaces, as worked on by Gabriella Gómez-Mont, are public spaces that enable people to interact together and organically allow for political agendas, social movements, and other collaborations to emerge. Civic spaces are not to be confused with participation in the design of public spaces but represent entirely new criteria for them.

Situating ideas in specific human contexts allows the local intimate space to interact with ideas of global relevance and tailor new imaginations to particular needs. The distinction between local and national or international is now fading away, creating the cosmological – a state that does not distinguish between what is known locally or globally. Information is interconnected, and diffusion across communities easier, providing the potential to combine the benefits of large-scale ideas and global interactions with the human, inclusive nature of local imagination and implementation.

How our public and private spaces are designed constructs how we think and behave similarly to institutions. They set the agenda for our interactions. By looking at physical spaces carefully, we can understand how the creator of an environment, its designer, manipulates what can emerge from it. An awareness of the power that agenda-setting or facilitation has on the outcomes of an imagination process is crucial when creating infrastructures for imagination. It goes for physical infrastructures, but the same logic applies to broader structures and institutions.

” Participatory scaffolding needs to be multiple and nuanced. Talking to different groups of people can give you an entirely different perception of the world, even at a local level.”

GABRIELLA GÓMEZ-MONT

Lead by combining local initiative with the central authority

Our group recognised a growing tension between different notions of political leadership. Traditionally, leaders have been expected to provide direction and vision for society, with the people following them.

The other notions of leadership emphasise energising and empowering people to engage with issues directly. Rather than generating solutions top-down, leadership should create conditions in which people can imagine and create their own solutions. It is no wonder that many democracy activists and initiatives have stressed locality and grassroots action – rather than negotiating the tension between central authority and local initiatives.

Direct grassroots action is ideal in a stable system and is a principle that many democratic countries' constitutions enshrine. However, in a state of a large-scale social transformation, large-scale – even universal – policies are needed.

So, the real issue of democratic political leadership today boils down to the ability to combine bottom-up initiatives with the ability to resource, spread, execute or at least oversee chosen things centrally. Many transformative initiatives are universalist. Take universal basic income, for example, which can only be fully realised through a central authority that makes it universal. So it is never a question of bottom-up or top-down or, but a question of leadership's ability to provide the tools for social imagination without boxing imagination itself within current structures, and conversely, grassroots' ability to interact with the leadership.

Next: Let's put our weight behind what matters

Our present reality and its structures have been conjured and constructed in the past to respond to its challenges. It is time to think more actively again about what alternative futures we could be moving towards. Imagination is the omnipresent foundation of the structures that surround us.

This paper has presented some aspects that need to be addressed when renewing democracy in a new context and suggested some ideas for beginning this process. We have touched upon the roles of conflict, instability, space, time, and leadership in harnessing imagination to reform democracy.

There are many more questions left, and even amongst democracy visionaries, there are tensions in how, when, and with whom we should approach the massive task of reforming this perennial political system that has stood the test of centuries.

This paper has aimed to showcase where our conversations have reached so far. It charts the questions that lie in our path as we continue to think about and experiment with alternatives in our democratic systems.

We hope this paper encourages you to engage with these perspectives and questions and perhaps even add your own to our collective force of reimagining democracy.

” Let’s put our weight behind what matters. Let’s not remain focused on all that is holding us back but instead work to make the change we want to see happen. Let’s just do it.”

INDRA ADNAN