DEMOCRATIC PROBLEM SOLVING AND THE PRACTICES OF CITIZENS IN MINI PUBLICS

Felix Petersen

One story dominating public discourse is the story of democratic decline and backsliding. While this story is no fairy tale, it leaves out positive political developments. Admittedly, traditional institutions, such as parties and parliaments, struggle with decreasing legitimacy and trust. But new sites of democratic practice mushroom all over the globe. In this regard, social movements, NGO's, as well as local, regional, and national decision-makers are increasingly—and justifiably—relying on dialogical, deliberative, and sortition-based participation of citizens in political decision-making. This is often accompanied by the hope of strengthening political trust and thereby countering the undemocratic bidding of populistauthoritarians. In other cases, as in Esch-sur-Alzette, the aim is to involve citizens in processes of societal transformation and thus embed social change within society.

But what actually happens in citizens' assemblies? How do citizens make decisions there? How do they act together, and what role do their subjective political ideas play in their decision making? In my research, using participant observation, I examine how citizens interact in mini publics, how they act politically—both collectively and individually—, which practices become established, what is genuinely democratic about these practices, and what role subjective political ideas play in their decisions.

Approaching democratic innovations from this perspective, my lecture looks into the decision-making space that emerges in citizens' assemblies. I aim to describe patterns of collective action and to identify what we should understand as democratic problem-solving practices, as well as how such patterns of action can be obstructed or facilitated. I develop my argument in three reflective stages, inquiring the work of citizens assemblies around the nexus of structures, roles, and practices. Along these categories, my lecture illuminates different dimensions of the democratic space that emerges between citizens participating in mini publics. Given the specific focus of the citizens assembly of Esch-sur-Alzette, I engage with these issues with the aim of elaborating how mini publics cancontribute to transformative public projects.

FELIX PETERSEN is a democratization scholar and political theorist, based at the University of Münster. He studies political practices and institutions in historical, empirical, and normative perspective. In past research, Felix has worked on democratic theory, constitutions and constitution-making, participation and its mimicry, democratic innovations, and social research methods. He holds a PhD in political sciences (Humboldt-University Berlin) and has worked in research projects and universities in Germany, Israel, Turkey and the United States. Felix is co-editor of the Journal of Political Sociology (https://journalofpoliticalsociology.org/). His research is published in academic outlets such as Cambridge University Press, Philosophy and Social Criticism, Contemporary Political Theory, History of European Ideas, The European Legacy.

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practice

… a way of doing something that is the usual or expected way in a particular organization or situation; a thing that is done regularly; a habit or a custom …

democratic

… the principle that all members have an equal right to be involved in running an organization …

Meanings associated with the composite term democratic practice, based on the definitions provided in the Oxford Dictionary.