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Mending democracies, patching societies

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ABSTRACT

When our democracies are broken, we need to ‘fix’ our societies. There are no quick fixes, but the good news is that society is resilient and people will make new connections. We need to look better for those ‘small democratic wins’ and learn from them to improve our democratic systems. This seems to be the core message of the book ‘Mending Democracies’, that sits within a critical pragmatist approach and starts from the analysis of democratic deficits to offer new language and insights to understand societal resilience to repair institutional wrong-doings...

KEYWORDS

Deliberative democracy;
small wins; policy work;
democratic mending

When our democracies are broken, we need to ‘fix’ our societies. There are no quick fixes, but the good news is that society is resilient and people will make new connections. We need to look better for those ‘small democratic wins’ and learn from them to improve our democratic systems. This seems to be the core message of the book ‘Mending Democracies’, which stands on the shoulders of the giant Dewey, who famously argued: ‘*Democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoined communicated experience*’ John Dewey (1993). The book makes the reader appreciate the everyday practices of democracy, and the ways in which elected representatives, citizens’ groups, and civil servants, build bridges between what Habermas calls the systems world and living world. The authors shift attention from increasing polarization and distrust in democratic institutes and politicians – to what democracy means in everyday life: how people overcome differences, include minorities, mobilize, built trust, and make systems work. As such, it is a feel good read that lifts up your day.

Critical pragmatist approach

Can such an appreciative book contribute to critical thinking about democracy? Not when critical theory from the Frankfurter Schule (e.g. Wolin 2006), or critical discourse analysis (e.g. Howarth and Griggs 2016) are taken as a starting point. In these approaches, the aim is to unravel power structures, such as institutionalized racism and post-colonialism, or the governmentality of neo-liberal systems (e.g. Bevir 2016). Mending Democracy may alienate critical social theorists who shy away from a pragmatist and

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Forum Mending Democracies

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appreciative contribution that shows how democracies are and can be put into practice as a form of ‘associated living’: a combination of communal practices, communication, civic engagement (Dewey 1993). From this point of view, criticism on this appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider and Whitney 1999) is obvious: the book will cloud our abilities as critical policy scientists to see the systematic wrongs.

Indeed, the book offers little analysis of the problems in democracy. The authors take democratic deficits as a starting point and describe a ‘crisis in western democracies’. From there, the chapters (4,5,6) paint colourful still lives or better – stop-motion videos – of practices of connectivity which offer opportunities for democratic reforms. The book could also have studied the *de*-democratizing practices of those who polarize, exclude, misinform. These practices should also be studied in similar bottom-up ways. Critical policy studies need to include the scrutinization of the disruptive and disconnecting language and practices of populists, of the extreme right and extreme left, as well as understand their ways of spreading, deepening and upscaling via internet fora, in society, for example through obtaining formal representative positions in our town councils (Tops and Tromp 2017). In other words, the book does not focus on the everyday practices of polarization in the coal seam debates; of civil servants that make use of their powerful positions and systemically apply policies in unfair ways, as recently was uncovered in the Netherlands where mothers were unrightfully accused of taking advantage of the child care subsidies in the Netherlands. Indeed, critical policy studies need to pay attention to the sustenance of systemic wrongs in our communicated experiences. One lesson the book offers to critical theories: we need to do that with the same approach as the authors offer in the book: from the study of the everyday practical in combination with the general.

But, this is not to be the purpose of this book. The authors connect insights from three in-depth studies into democratic practices to theoretical ideas about deliberative democracy. In doing so, the authors develop what I would call a ‘critical pragmatist’ approach that combines normative democratic political theory with insights from these democratic practices (Metze 2020). This combination enables the development of the type of knowledge that both is an *analysis of* and offers the reader a way to *pursue* these democratic reforms. With this type of wisdom – which is based on an interaction between practical judgment and general theory – the authors make the reader understand and offer alternatives to cope with increasing power of populists, increasing polarization in public debates, increasing distrust in our democratic institutions. This practical democratic wisdom is needed to pursue transformative change (Weick 1984) building on the mending efforts of what elsewhere has been labelled as the ‘silent majority’ (King and Anderson 1971). The book is purposefully based on positive examples, which enable the development of the language of connectivity that may help change societal and democratic practices and through that – democratic structures.

Doing democracy

The book stands in a tradition that is putting centre stage the policy work – the practices of people in society (Colebatch, Hoppe, and Noordergraaf 2010). The new language developed in the book, for example that of ‘democratic fabric’ and ‘connective practices’ offers the reader new ways of thinking about HOW the everyday practices mean for democracy. The language provides innovative ways to understand what it means to ‘do

a democracy'. The conceptualization nicely knits together the detailed study of the cases to conceptualizing (deliberative) democracy of, for example (Mansbridge et al. 2012; Parkinson 2006; Dryzek 2010). The book as such fits within the relational approach (Bartels and Wittmayer 2018; Bartels and Turnbull 2020) in which "governance is not a product of interaction between static individuals and structures existing side by side but a process of 'dynamic becoming' in which all parts 'co-create' the 'situation' through their relationships and are reflexively shaped by this emergent whole' (Bartels and Turnbull 2020, 1331).

Mending Democracies is firmly related to studies that aim to understand the role of 'small wins' – concrete, completed, in-depth changes (Weick 1984). In Mending Democracies, the authors study societal and other initiatives that are already implementing desired sustainable – or in this case democratic – futures. These are small but significant changes (Termeer and Metzke 2019). These initiatives together bundle up and are the democratic fabric that provides us with important lessons and new insights on (representative) democracy. In Mending Democracies, citizens are not necessarily engaged in politics through especially organized 'mini publics' (Elstun 2014; Goodin and Dryzek 2006) that are often initiated by governmental actors to restore disconnects between the public and their representatives; but citizens and others are intermediaries (e.g. Durose et al. 2021) that develop new democratic practices.

In these new practices, it is demonstrated by the authors, that there are 'diverse groups of people' that have the capacity 'to come together and reach common ground despite differences in experiences, values, and identities' (chapter 7). One way to further this approach is to scrutinize and conceptualize this ideal of a 'common ground'. The book leaves questions unanswered, such as: when is common ground contributing to democracy and when may it endanger it? What are the '*developmental constructs*' (Lasswell 1951) for these democratic spaces, networks and stages? What are these democratic fabrics, the connections, beyond their interactions and procedures? How are they contributing to, for example, transitions toward more sustainable energy sources, to more fair distributions of costs and benefits? A further conceptualization, based on the cases – of what good democratic spaces entail and to what values they contribute is ever more necessary in a world of growing populism.

All in all, the book offers a research agenda based on new vocabulary to understand how democracy is 'done', and methodologically offers ways to not only study mending, but also democratic breaking that may be applicable for critical approaches. In addition, it raises questions about what a good democratic practice looks like; when are the networks fair, inclusive, and so on? Most of all, the book celebrates the resilience of our societies, and how publics come together to repair democratic flaws. The book itself is a connective practice: it demonstrates how essential it is for academics and policy makers to listen to those that patch democracies. Rather than giving voice to polarized voices, this book offers a stage for a silent majority, which turns out to have societal intelligence for building new bridges.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

Tamara Metze is Associate Professor at the Public Administration and Policy Group at Wageningen University, the Netherlands. Her research interests are the role of boundary crossing collaborations and conflict in governance of sustainability transitions (e.g. energy, food and the circular economy). With special focus on boundary objects, (visual) framing, knowledge cocreation through research by design, scenario development, communities of practice, gamification and so on. Metze is co-editor of the *Journal of Environmental Policy and Planning*, Chief editor of *Beleid en Maatschappij (Policy and Society)*; member of the advisory board of the international conference on Interpretive Policy Analysis; Principle Investigator at the Amsterdam Institute for advanced Metropolitan Solutions, and scientific director of TABLE Debates.

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