



Democratic Innovations, or Innovating Democracy

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In his essay 'Politics and the English Language' (1946), George Orwell writes: '... Many political words are similarly abused. The word *Fascism* now has no meaning except in so far as it signifies "something not desirable." The words *democracy*, *socialism*, *freedom*, *patriotic*, *realistic*, *justice*, have each of them several different meanings which cannot be reconciled with one another. In the case of a word like *democracy*, not only is there no agreed definition, but the attempt to make one is resisted from all sides. It is almost universally felt that when we call a country democratic we are praising it: consequently the defenders of every kind of régime claim that it is a democracy, and fear that they might have to stop using that word if it were tied down to any one meaning. Words of this kind are often used in a consciously dishonest way. That is, the person who uses them has his own private definition, but allows his hearer to think he means something quite different.' Following the news and contemporary politics now in the 2020s, it's hard to disagree with Orwell's adage.

Many of the central terms of politics are slippery and consequently open to a wide array of different interpretations. Sometimes distortions, euphemisms, and other linguistic maneuvers simply aim to obfuscate political debate. Orwell points to insincerity and argues that when there is a mismatch between one's real and declared aims, 'one turns as it were instinctively to long words and exhausted idioms, like a cuttlefish spurting out ink.' But in many cases, terms and concepts are in fact open in the sense that there are legitimate disagreements concerning their meaning. Democracy, for sure, is one of those terms.

The articles in this issue of *Redescriptions* all in their different ways address the topic of conceptualizing democratic politics. Democracy as an essentially contested concept has seen many defenders, many enemies, and many attempted redescriptions. It has also often been considered to be in some sort of 'crisis,' which however remains elusive. We may here refer to various crises of legitimacy, efficiency, and so on. Institutions like the European Union are famous for wrestling with democratic deficit. In international comparison, the post-war triumph of democracy has turned from triumph to debacle.

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Orwell; language; political
theory**TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:**

Korvela, Paul-Erik. 2023.
"Democratic Innovations,
or Innovating Democracy."
*Redescriptions: Political
Thought, Conceptual History
and Feminist Theory* 26(2):
95–98. DOI: [https://doi.
org/10.33134/rds.419](https://doi.org/10.33134/rds.419)

The last 15 years or so have witnessed more countries moving away from democracy than toward it. Even established democracies have exhibited signs of democratic backsliding. It should be remembered that many critics of democracy are not based on hatred of democracy, but quite on the contrary, existing democratic processes, people, and institutions are criticized for not being democratic enough. Not many question the idea of democracy; the critique is often based on actual processes and actions falling short of democratic ideals.

Since the 1960s at the latest, there have been calls for a more participatory democracy as a remedy for its various crises. Many of the contemporary democratic innovations that are devised in many countries are based on the credo that democratic participation or civic engagement will cure some of the ills of representative democracy. These calls for more participation can be motivated by different ideologies, even though they offer the same solution. The political left has usually seen these attempts to increase participation as deepening and widening democracy, and attached to this some hopes of more egalitarian politics. The right, on the other hand, has seen, for example, in networked governance, a way to curtail the role of the state and move some of the previously state-provided services to the third sector, private corporations, and ‘big society.’ Also academic research, many radical theories of democracy, direct democracy or deliberative democracy, have provided leverage for calls for more participation. There is, however, a discrepancy between authentic grass-root democratic participation and top-down patronizing participation. In the latter, people mainly participate because the state, municipality, or government wants them to participate. Many of these democratic innovations do not in fact increase or widen democracy but may instead widen the already existing cleavages in political participation, create grey areas of democratic legitimacy, and lead to a diminishing of accountability. The use of democracy’s language does not make them democratic. One is tempted to call some of these ‘innovative democracy’ instead of democratic innovations. Here again, language is central. The Finnish language, for example, makes the distinction between *osallistuminen* (participation) and *osallistaminen* (top-down imposed participation), a distinction unavailable in the English language. The articles in this issue of *Redescriptions* all focus on the relation between democratic politics and language, which is now as timely as ever.

Christine Senigaglia’s article also discusses one of the essential features of democratic politics, publicity. Her article builds on Max Weber’s writings and especially on the distinction between domestic and international politics. According to Senigaglia, while internal politics in Weber’s view expressly requires publicity, which is instated by public and free debates as well as by a form of control over the institutions regulated by law, international affairs can be correctly and successfully pursued in conditions of secrecy and confidentiality, thus greatly differing from domestic affairs. Additionally, in her article, Weber’s explicit reference to the principle of confidentiality is confronted with two other philosophers’ issues, which oppose in general the idea of confidentiality and explicitly plead for the use and significance of publicity: Immanuel Kant and Jürgen Habermas. She argues that this difference in Weber’s view does not signify a rough contraposition between the criteria respectively qualifying internal and foreign politics, but that they pursue in different ways the same objective of attaining a more reflected and equilibrated decisional process.

The article by Matti Hyvärinen, Jussi Kurunmäki, Risto Turunen, Kari Teräs, Mykola Andrushchenko, and Jaakko Peltonen scrutinizes the apparent similarity of two Finnish terms denoting democracy: *demokratia* and *kansanvalta*. Their analysis of the usage of these terms reveals that their similarity is only apparent. Although they are both translations of democracy, they in fact refer to different conceptions of democracy. The first one, a direct adaptation of the Greek term, refers to the procedural aspects of democracy. The second one, combining two Finnish words, people and power, on the other hand conjures up the idea of people's will. By examining how *demokratia* and *kansanvalta* have been used by Finnish parliamentarians between 1980 and 2021, the authors study the implications and extensions of these terms. Despite their apparent interchangeability, they seem to imply different understandings of democracy. Through linguistic analysis, the article finds interesting implications concerning different variations of democracy. Thus, the article also connects with the debates concerning contemporary attempts to supplement representative democracy with more participatory forms.

Karin Bischof and Marion Löffler also address the essential features of democracy from one perspective. Their article traces the signs of changing political culture in parliamentary speeches. Focusing on rhetorical strategies used in the post-war Austrian parliament regarding the issue of antisemitism, they highlight how these strategies shift the boundaries of what is sayable and possible. Contextualizing the changes in rhetoric and explaining them in connection to Austrian political history, the authors make important observations on how changes in political culture manifest themselves in parliamentary speech. The results of the analysis also bear contemporary relevance, for example, in the way antisemitic or similar themes are sometimes defended in the name of free speech.

The fourth article in this issue is by Uros Ugarkovic. In a similar fashion as the others, it studies the features of democracy through one of its central concepts. It addresses the issue of parliamentarism from the viewpoint of populism. The case study is post-Milosevic Serbia and the redescription of parliamentarism there by the populist Serbian Progressive Party. The article interestingly studies the significance of parliamentarism through populist discourse. While the commonly cherished assumption would have it that the populist reliance on strong executive and leadership would imply downplaying the importance of parliamentarism, the article inquires into the effect that the political discourse of populist political agents might have on what is perceived to be the meaning of the concept of parliamentarism.

Thus, all the articles in this issue of *Redescriptions*, through different case studies, study the central concepts and features of democratic politics. The emphasis is on the idea that concepts and discourses shape our understanding of democracy, as well as processes, institutions, and ideas associated with it. All these observations bear significance not only in their country-specific or context-dependent case, but also more generally. They point to the logic and maneuvers of how contemporary democratic politics too is conducted and redescribed. In a rather cynical manner, Orwell ends his essay on language and politics with the idea that: 'Political language—and with variations this is true of all political parties, from Conservatives to Anarchists—is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind.' Often this may indeed be the case, but one must bear in mind that conceptual innovation is open to anybody, and one does not need to accept everything that is done under the moniker 'democratic' if it seems to be a far cry from one's own understanding of democracy.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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*Redescriptions: Political
Thought, Conceptual
History and Feminist
Theory*

DOI: 10.33134/rds.419

98

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Korvela, Paul-Erik. 2023.
“Democratic Innovations,
or Innovating Democracy.”
*Redescriptions: Political
Thought, Conceptual
History and Feminist Theory*
26(2): 95–98. DOI: [https://
doi.org/10.33134/rds.419](https://doi.org/10.33134/rds.419)

Submitted: 06 November
2023

Accepted: 06 November
2023

Published: 06 December
2023

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Thought, Conceptual
History and Feminist Theory*
is a peer-reviewed open
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Helsinki University Press.