



Democratising the Economy: Democratic Theory meets Critical Political Economy

A Democratic Theory special issue

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In this special issue of *Democratic Theory*, we are interested in how heterodox normative and empirical thinking about democratic decision-making and mobilization can lead us toward alternatives that can attenuate current political economic crises and divides (e.g. Fraser's 2014 proposal to look "behind" and, we would add, beyond Marx for further anti-capitalistic theoretical purchase). In addition, we want to explore how we can avoid market-induced corruption of democracy and politics and to limit the leakage of market ethics such as profit gains above all else. To achieve these objectives, we aim to provide a space where democratic theorists can reflect on how best to incorporate insights and respond to critiques from political economy, suggesting the theme of *democratising the economy* as a productive point for such an interaction (see, for contrast, how effective Marta Wojciechowska's 2019 argument is as regards participatory theory learning from political practice).

The conversation we seek to establish is between variants of these disciplines that share roots in classical critical theory (i.e. Marx 1845), seeking to move "beyond those ideas and activities which the existing organization of society instils into its members" (Horkheimer, 1939). As such the kinds of democratic theorising we aim to animate, is not one that accepts as a given the existing organisation of democratic capitalism, but one that questions how capitalism's existing organisation shapes democracy, and how democracy might re-shape capitalism. In doing so, it can reanimate scholarship spanning from that which sees in democracy a project for social justice and transformation (Wood 1996; Young, 1990; Pin, 2022) to approaches seeking an expansion of democratic ownership within capitalism (Dahl 1986, see also Bowles and Gintis 1986; Cumbers, 2020; Wolff, 2012).

The 1990s (and early 2000s), saw a proliferation of scholarship that took a stance on the idea that political liberalism needed to be disassociated from economic liberalism and atomistic conceptions of democratic participation (see e.g. Mouffe, 1993 or Elster, 1997). Some have noted a synthesis has since occurred between liberal and critical theoretical strands, particularly in the deliberative turn which is a dominant strand of democratic theory today. This has obscured the fundamental differences between traditions and objectives (Rostbøll, 2008; Hammond, 2019). The field of democratic theory needs to be reanimated by critical conceptualisations of democracy, outlining how political orders should set requirements on the structure of formal arenas, limiting the material advantages that impact how power of expression and political rights are exercised (Cohen and Rogers, 1983).

Some democratic theorists have productively engaged with questions of power and realpolitik from a systems lens, which aims to regain the macro agenda of critical research (Curato et al, 2019; Bächtiger and Parkinson, 2019). Yet, they lack a theory and empirical agenda of political economy (Vlahos, 2022) which can aid understanding of how institutional designs and associated practices interact with capitalist dynamics, in ways that challenge or reproduce them (see democracycollaborative.org for an example of challenge). Paraphrasing Bebbington (2004: 280): such a "structuralist and political economic dimension" can provide "the tools to understand 'what the fight is really about' [and] the factors that will determine whether the fight is won or lost".

Critical political economists, in turn, focus on capitalist constraints on democratic governance (Streeck, 2013). Critiquing democratic institutional design for advancing neoliberal governmentalities and

mystifications (Davies, 2011; Swyngedouw, 2005), this literature conveys a sober understanding of limitations. Moreover, if we accept that capitalism is a, if not *the* main, structuring element in contemporary society (e.g. Therborn, 1977, Rueschmeyer, Stephens and Stephens, 1992), then a democratic inquiry into it is to be welcomed for breaking down the separation between politics and economics that is characteristic of the (still) hegemonic liberal ideology (Wood, 1995). However, the discipline is hamstrung by its focus on structural constraint and critique. Conferring too much power upon capital (Gipson-Graham, 2006; Dinerstein 2015), it can produce fatalism (e.g. Streeck, 2016) and induce propositional paralysis. Moreover, much political economy scholarship on democracy portrays a limited understanding of democratic politics, simplified to elections and producer group bargaining and reducing citizens to automatons acting in function of interests inscribed by the legitimation needs and interest conflicts produced by accumulation regimes (Przeworski, 1985; Hall, 2021).

The proposition animating this volume is therefore that democratic theory should incorporate political economy's sensitivity to structure and constraint into its institutionalist knowledge and reforming drive. The theme of economic democracy is a productive one for this endeavour. It deals with a sphere of life that is critical to capitalism and can theorize forms of ownership that re-shape capitalist production and distribution, and even question capitalist social relations. It can move critical political economy beyond pure critique, whilst resensitizing democratic theory to capitalism, shifting institutional design to an arena that promises a more substantial deepening of democracy, and which was a key concern of foundational texts of contemporary democratic theory (Pateman, 1970).

As Mark Warren wrote for the 2006 APSA general conference: market logics harm democracies in two ways. The first "is market-induced corruption of democracy" and the second is "by the leakage of market ethics" such as profit gains above all else. Since then – with the GFC, Panama Papers, runaway material inequality, neoliberal austerity, and dwindling quality of life for an increasing number of people as prices inflate and wages stagnate – his two harms, and then some, have been vociferously noted by democratic theorists and political economists alike. At present, contradictory ideologies continue to be at the forefront of current struggles over economic, social, political, and environmental justice. We are observing severe affective polarization, rampant income and demographic inequality, stagnant wages, homelessness and housing unaffordability, unemployment and precarious jobs, extreme debt-to-income ratios, inflated costs of living, all of which dwindle quality of life. Moreover, some regimes outright deny democratic and other human rights despite proffering limited economic freedoms.

Political economy has shifted towards neoliberal austerity and de-regulated financialization over the past several decades, and so the current malaise is not limited to a particular region or continent. The blockage of the Suez Canal in 2021 was a reminder that the international division of labour and global capitalist supply chain links products and services between the global north and south. Moreover, wealth concentration and structural power blocs have been both reconfigured vis-a-vis BRICS countries and further amplified in western countries by global financial and health crises.

Maybe Carol Pateman's encouragement, made at the University of Westminster only a few years ago in 2016, for greater attention to be paid to matters of the economy by democracy scholars has begun to be met. Under the catch-all banner of "democratizing the economy", a kaleidoscope of proposals have been made with the potential to resolve these problems. They range from injecting participatory mechanisms into all imaginable aspects of public economic planning to establishing strong mechanisms to reduce the public and private power of financial elites upon electoral systems and worker's lives. Some examples which stand out, for the editors, include universal basic income as a means for granting individuals more financial security and personal freedoms; proposals for the global regulation of taxes to hobble international corporate tax evasion practices; arguments against the existence of billionaires (there shouldn't be any); and, on a more immediate note for so many of us, the moral necessity of fully democratic workplaces and the transformation of democratic decision-making concerning the governance of national and international economies.

We invite your participation in this special issue of *Democratic Theory* in an open context of freestyle argumentation. What aspects of economics or economies do you, for example, think need to be democratized and what does that look like? Some topics for consideration include the democratization of:

- Social procurement
- Monetary policy
- Fiscal policy
- Workplaces/firms, unions, collective bargaining
- Land planning and development
- Regional economic development
- Job placement
- Spatial divisions of labour, across geography
- Higher education and training
- Sectoral diversification
- Growth regimes
- Just transitions
- Finance/financial services or sector
- Integrated or coordinated spatial planning
- Taxation
- Public budgeting
- Banking and stock markets
- Inheritance
- Political donations
- Public investment
- Retirement planning and pensions
- Welfare and social wellbeing
- Racial capitalism and counter-public movements
- Cooperatives, community land trusts, ESOPs, community wealth building
- Commons-based production
- Corporate social responsibility
- Global supply chains
- The international division of labour and human rights
- Authoritarian economies and social mobilization

Submissions

This special issue is planned for publication in *Democratic Theory* in 2024. We, therefore, offer the following plan for the development of our papers and special issue:

- 1) 800-word abstracts, i.e. your argument in brief, are due by May 15. The editors will read and invite full paper submissions from the pool of abstracts by May 30.
- 2) Full papers are submitted by November 30, 2022.
- 3) Papers are read and responded to by the editors prior to the northern winter break.
- 4) Revisions are required by April 28, 2023.
- 5) Revised papers form the basis for a major conference workshop or large panel in mid-to-late 2023 for discussion by peers participating in the special issue.
- 6) Revisions are required by TBD.
- 7) Papers are sent by the editors for external double-blind peer-review.
- 8) Revisions are required by TBD.
- 9) The issue is submitted to Berghahn (*Democratic Theory's* publisher) for copy-editing either January 15 (publication northern summer) or June 15, 2024 (publication northern autumn).

Submissions of full papers should be made to each of the editors:

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