



(De)futuring democracy: Labs, playgrounds, and ateliers as democratic innovations

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ABSTRACT

New laboratory formats worldwide, including policy labs, innovation labs, and living labs, invite political engagement of multiple stakeholders. Although this format shares the basic characteristics with democratic innovations such as citizens' assemblies, it has yet to be acknowledged by this field of study. This article fills this gap. It finds that labs are torn between the logic of democratic agency and technocratic control, and argues that this power nexus is indicative of a likely future of democracy. Beyond this ambiguous character, labs point to playfulness and creativity as two aspects that established democratic innovations rarely incorporate. Hence, we extrapolate these two aspects to propose alternative formats: democratic playgrounds and democratic ateliers. Instead of the output-orientation of democratic innovations for expected change, playgrounds and ateliers follow the logic of democratic serendipity, an exploratory, open-ended mode of participatory engagement, which promises to open democracy for unexpected change.

1. Introduction

In response to the demand for a more democratic future, the current development of democratic governance is characterized by the re-invention of democracy itself. Old institutions that appear to be stuck in the past are faced with the emergence of novel modes of engagement. In the scholarship on democracy, these sites are framed as “democratic innovations” that follow the logic of experimentation (Smith, 2009). Fung and Wright (2001), for example, describe citizens' assemblies, participatory budgets, and other modes of engagement as “real-world experiments”. Such experimenting often involves bringing together various stakeholders, in particular citizens, state officials, and academic experts, to generate novel solutions to a given problem.

Separate from the study of democratic innovations, a novel format of multi-stakeholder engagement has emerged. Over the past two decades, so called “labs” with their various attributes including social labs, innovation labs, urban labs, policy labs, citizen labs, governance labs, living labs, change labs, and transformation labs, have become a widespread phenomenon around the globe and across various policy fields. While labs are a particularly varied format, they all facilitate multi-stakeholder engagement and often include citizens, innovative participatory methods, and a focus on experimentation and solution generation. Ostensibly, such labs share many features with democratic innovations. It is puzzling that labs have as yet gone unnoticed by the scholarship on democratic innovations.

In this paper, we ask whether labs can be considered as a democratic innovation. We follow Michael Saward, who argues that the

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design of institutional structures “is the key to understanding today’s and creating tomorrow’s democratic governance” (Saward, 2021, p. xiv). Hence, by observing the structural configurations of labs, we engage in a predictive exercise. Our analysis shows that labs are situated at a power nexus that is indicative of a possible future democratic constellation. Labs are located at the intersection of two current trends in democratic governance: the emergence of novel forms of participation through democratic innovation, in parallel with a technocratic tendency for elite control. Democracy is futured when free and equal participation is enhanced; it is defutured when depleted of these features. These two counteracting trends are evident in the way that labs work. With regard to prototyping – the core activity of labs, Kimbell and Bailey (2017, pp. 222–223) observe that “Prototyping enacts a local—and possibly temporary—agency for participants in a policy-making process. But [...] prototyping may also serve to reinforce existing power structures and elites.” We argue that if we follow these two trends of democratic engagement and technocratic control, we can peer into the future of democracy. Democratic governance will present itself as an amalgam of novel participatory channels, which, however, will mainly be accessible to citizens from the upper strata of society. If we understand *futuring* as the process of imagining, exploring, and producing a future object or phenomenon from the position of the present, labs are futuring democracy for some, while defuturing it for others. However, the recognition of these defuturing tendencies, enables futuring democracy in the proper sense (Fry, 2008).

On a basic level, two fundamentally different modes of futuring can be distinguished: futuring that aims to enable expected or unexpected change (Monda, 2018; Szántó, 2018). The predominant mode of futuring today aims at concrete, well-planned results. This solutionism is the mode that prevails in current politics and is also the driver of labs and democratic innovations. Without a doubt, planning and concrete results are key features of democratic participation, as is democratic control over participatory processes and representatives. At the same time, this kind of futuring carries a defuturing momentum for democracy as it operates within a frame of pre-defined settings, path-dependencies, and expected change. As a corrective to these tendencies, we argue that democratic futuring must also engage with the neglected dimension of unexpected change. At the other end of the spectrum of democratic control, we locate untapped potential – democratic serendipity.

By distilling the distinct democratic aspects of labs – their playfulness and creativity – and employing them to sketch novel participatory formats, we open up new perspectives for democratic transformations. In futuring democracy, we shift the focus from a democratic solutionism for expected change to a democratic serendipity of unexpected change. Here, democratic engagement takes the form of a playful, creative, and open-ended exploration rather than decision-making and output production. Rather than attempting to control unexpected change, we propose to “palpate” it and ultimately unlocking its democratic potential.

This paper raises a categorical, an analytical, and a prospective question to investigate how labs are (de)futuring democracy. First, can labs be considered as a democratic innovation? Second, towards which democratic future do labs point? Third, how can the democratic potential of labs be uncovered to develop more democratic participatory processes? To be clear, in this article, our chief concern is not how labs, playgrounds, ateliers or other formats produce certain futures through participation. Instead, we are interested in the futures these formats prefigure through their internal logic and the societal trends these logics indicate. In other words, we are not interested in democratic outcomes, but in democratic prefiguration.

To answer these questions, we proceed as follows. The next section will provide a basic understanding of what labs are and how they relate to the current democratic innovations literature. In the subsequent section, we develop an axial scheme based on the values of democratic innovations. This enables us a pronounced positioning of labs and the democratic future they prefigure, in a force field between agency and control, inclusion and exclusion, transparency and opacity. Finally, we introduce two alternative democratic formats which follow the logic of democratic serendipity: democratic playgrounds and democratic ateliers.

2. Labs as co-governed democratic innovations

At their core, labs provide a space for the participatory engagement of various stakeholders who co-create solutions to a given problem. Moreover, labs generally share a focus on *doing* rather than “just talking”. They manually produce prototypes using building blocks, modelling clay or other craft materials. Prototypes can represent concrete physical or digital objects, such as a new pedestrian zone, or abstract things such as integration policy. These prototypes are then tested and questioned by lab participants and further refined or re-invented in new iterations. This cycle of creation-testing-creation explains the experimental character of labs.

To illustrate what a lab can look like, we will briefly sketch our own experience of conducting a lab. In December 2019, the Institute for Advanced Sustainability Studies (IASS) in Potsdam, Germany held a two-day lab entitled *Toward Democratic Transformations: A Lab on Labs* to explore the potential of the lab format for democratic engagement. The lab invited 35 international lab practitioners, democracy researchers, and public servants and was moderated by professional lab facilitators Rebecca Freeth and David Winter. Participants first explored a variety of lab formats in a lab tour. Four labs from around the world were introduced by their founders in different sections within the same large room. Participants moved in groups from one lab to the next. They learnt about (1) the Transformation Lab in Mexico, (2) the digital CitiLab in Spain, (3) the GovLabAustria, and (4) the Real World Labs in Germany. With this inspiration in mind, participants formulated five questions that were each prototyped in small groups. Participants built ideal democratic labs with Lego® bricks. They then presented their models to other participants, received feedback, and re-modelled accordingly. These prototypes were subject to discussion over the next day. Apart from manual prototyping, the lab also included deliberative walks in the park (see Lindell & Ehrström, 2020) and short sessions of physical exercise.

This lab experience illustrates many of the typical characteristics of labs: their interactive nature, their embodied activities, and their output-orientation. Beyond such common denominators, labs come in different shapes and sizes according to cultural contexts, intentions of lab creators, involved participants, etc. They can be short-lived events or long-term institutions. This diversity has led to a particularly varied terminology for labs as the following three examples illustrate. According to the literature, *innovation labs* do not necessarily involve citizens, are led by small innovation teams within the public sector, are situated in artificial environments, are

rather short-lived, and create ideas. In contrast, *transformation labs* (Charli-Joseph, Siqueiros-Garcia, Eakin, Manuel-Navarrete, & Shelton, 2018; Pathways Network, 2018) – or transition labs (Nevens, Frantzeskaki, Gorissen, & Loorbach, 2013) – aim to empower civil society actors and social movements and thematically focus on environmental sustainability and societal transformation. *Policy labs* produce innovative solutions to policy issues, often conducting empirical research and engaging citizens and other public sector actors (Fuller & Lochard, 2016; Olejniczak, Borkowska-Waszak, Domaradzka-Widta, & Park, 2020). *Living labs*, are described as larger, durable networks situated in real-life contexts at the intersection between public and private sectors that always involve citizens and put ideas into practice (Gryszkiewicz, Lykourantzou, & Toivonen, 2017; Schuurman & Tönurist, 2017). Within the category of living labs, McCormick and Hartmann (2017, p. 18) further differentiate between strategic, civic, and bottom-up living labs. As such, a logic of differentiation is potentially applicable to all lab types. This could result in an infinitely complex and ultimately unusable terminology. Others again, depart from the lab terminology altogether and frame sites of creative prototyping as “design studios” (Fariás & Wilkie, 2016).

Even though focusing on labels can serve as a useful heuristic, labs currently miss a valid nomenclator. This leads to confusion of self-attribution of lab convenors and scientifically assigned attributes that are overlapping, too manifold, and often used interchangeably. In short, labels signal the diversity of labs, but they do not provide a solid basis to differentiate between them. What is more important for our purpose is that the labelling approach only provides scant hints as to whether labs can be considered as democratic innovations. While the discussion of the role of state agents, civil society, and citizens provides clues to the democratic merits of labs, a clearer, more thorough and systematic approach is needed.

To develop such an approach and identify whether labs can be considered as a democratic innovation, we start by looking at the definitions of labs and democratic innovations. The latter are “institutions that have been specifically designed to increase and deepen citizen participation in the political decision-making process” (Smith, 2009, p. 1). Similarly, a lab is “a participatory process that brings together people with different viewpoints” (Pathways Network, 2018, p. 16) in “arenas, where... new solutions are developed” (Evans, Schuurman, Stahlbrost, & Vervoort, 2017, p. 12). Thus, labs share central features with democratic innovations. They both facilitate an intentionally designed participatory processes; the notions of innovation and experimentation are central to both; and finally, both are outcome-oriented and aim to generate concrete solutions.

A clear difference between democratic innovations and labs becomes apparent when looking at their respective relationships with the private sector. Labs regularly invite business and academic actors into their participatory processes, who often function as their funders and initiators. In contrast, democratic innovations explicitly divide roles between the state who facilitates, and citizens who participate.

In the light of these similarities and differences, can labs be considered as a democratic innovation? Looking at typologies of democratic innovations can provide answers. In the seminal book *Democratic Innovations*, Graham Smith (2009) divides democratic innovations into (1) popular assemblies, such as town hall meetings, (2) minipublics, such as citizens’ juries, (3) direct legislation, such as referenda, and (4) e-democracy, such as online consultations. While some common features can be identified, labs cannot be placed in any of these four categories.

However, more recent typologies of democratic innovations include collaborative governance, which has a clear affinity with labs (Hendriks, 2019). In their extensive literature review on democratic innovations, Elstub and Escobar (2019, p. 13) note that co-governance is rarely acknowledged. Co-governance is “internally diverse, including public forums to collaborative partnerships and various participatory arrangements that seek to enable cooperation and co-production between citizens, public authorities and stakeholders” (Elstub & Escobar, 2019, p. 27). Labs clearly fit this description. However, Bussu’s (2019) account of co-governance is the only source we could find that explicitly mentions labs as a democratic innovation. That fact that only one source mentions them indicates that further work on labs as democratic innovation is urgently needed.

3. The democratic-technocratic force field of labs

Beyond typologies that distinguish between different forms of democratic innovations, the literature also provides a rich debate on which values define them. We identify three interacting core values: agency, inclusion, and transparency. Democratic innovations enhance the *agency* of ordinary citizens by *including* as many citizens as possible in political decision-making. Due to their *transparent* nature, those who are not directly included may take part indirectly. In what follows, we will introduce these three values and then apply them to labs.

Enhancing the *agency* of citizens in political decision-making is the defining element of democratic innovations and the *primus inter pares* of the three values. Fung and Wright (2001, p. 27) argue for broad and deep participation through democratic innovations which function as “channels of voice over issues about which potential participants care deeply”. Smith (2009) advances the idea of popular control of citizens in problem definition, solution generation, decision-making, and implementation. Michels (2012, pp. 288–289) focuses on the direct influence citizens have on policy outcomes. Finally, Elstub and Escobar (2019) order modes of participation from least to most influential: observing, listening, voting, and discursive expression. The resultant scale draws attention to the deliberation affinity of the democratic innovations literature. Agency is expressed through consensus-oriented talk that increases participants’ knowledge (Geissel, 2013) and aims for considered judgement (Smith, 2009).

Democratic innovations advance the agency of as many citizens as possible through *inclusion*. This raises the question of access (Geissel, 2013; Papadopoulos & Warin, 2007). While on a normative level, the goal of inclusion according to the all-affected principle appears straight forward, the question of its practical realization is more challenging. Since physical space and the feasibility of a meaningful conversation with large groups are limited, democratic innovations propose several participant-selection mechanisms. Open participation according to self-selection as practiced in town hall meetings and participatory budgets, initially appears very

inclusive. However, it favours those who are more outspoken and better educated, i.e., typically more privileged groups. Hence, random selection, which results in a miniature version of the wider public – a minipublic – might prove more inclusive (Owen & Smith, 2018). Purposive selection can be found towards the more restrictive end of the participant selection scale (Elstub & Escobar, 2019, p. 20). Democratic innovations also face the challenge of “internal exclusion” (Young, 2000) through particular moderation techniques which aim to give marginalized people a voice (Asenbaum, 2016).

Finally, *transparency*, the third defining value of democratic innovations (Geissel, 2012), facilitates the indirect inclusion of those who, for practical reasons, cannot participate directly. It thus expands agency beyond the circle of immanent participants. Transparency also plays a crucial role in bolstering the legitimacy of democratic innovations. Hence, Papadopoulos and Warin (2007, p. 460) call for “procedural visibility” and Smith (2009, pp. 25–26) argues that “The realisation of publicity is crucial if the public is to judge institutions and their outputs as legitimate and trustworthy.” This can be facilitated through sharing documentations, livestreaming or disseminating information about ongoing processes via social media.

When we pit these three democratic values against their technocratic counterparts, an intersectional force field is revealed. This force field expands along three axes between agency and control, inclusion and exclusion, and transparency and opacity. Individual labs can be located within this force field. We can imagine an ideal democratic lab occupying the right upper front of the force field and a technocratic lab occupying the left lower back. In reality, most cases are located somewhere in-between as hybrids (see Fig. 1).

This axial framework enables a pioneering conceptual analysis of labs as democratic innovations. It reveals that within current societies with deeply entrenched inequalities, labs may always be in tension. This tension is reflected in the broader design literature that the lab approach originates in, which describes social design as torn between the ambitions of inclusion and efficacy (Gheerawo, 2016). The trends of democratic engagement and technocratic control are also identified in the current study of political participation, which attests that the increasing political apathy and abstinence from established forms of participation is paralleled by the proliferation of novel and unconventional engagement (Norris & Inglehart, 2019). These two trends intersect in the analysis that citizens engaging in new forms of participation are usually those with more financial and educational resources (Marien, Hooghe, & Quintelier, 2010). Democratic innovations, threaten to amplify the problem of elite control that they set out to solve (Navarro & Font, 2013). Hence, it is true that the tension between democratic and technocratic trends is, to a certain extent, reflected in democratic innovations generally (Hammond, 2021). However, this tension is most pronounced in labs which function as a signpost for a likely future of democracy as a strange amalgam of democratic engagement and technocratic control.

3.1. Agency vs control

This tension becomes apparent when looking at labs on the axis between agency and control. Some labs realize the values of broad and deep participation by understanding participants as agentic subjects who co-create the world around them. These labs are driven by the passions and inner volition of people with a strong desire for change (Neuens et al., 2013, p. 115; Hassan, 2014, p. 129, p. 147;

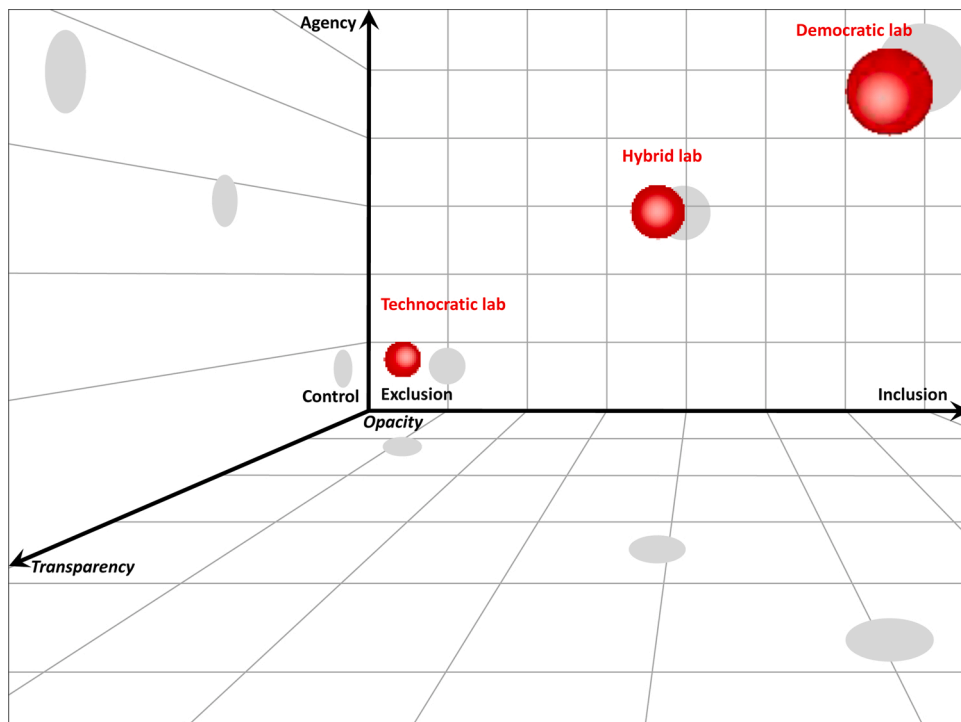


Fig. 1. The force field of labs.

Gryszkiewicz et al., 2017, p. 79; Pathways Network, 2018, p. 8). Labs, then, advance the “agency of users to influence processes that impact them” (Tiesinga & Berkhout, 2014, p. 83). The literature on transformation labs in particular emphasizes agency. Labs serve “cultivating capacities as social-ecological subjects, to shape (and transform) the SES [social-ecological system] of which they are already a part” (Charli-Joseph et al., 2018, p. 2). In comparison with established democratic innovations, labs often are particularly good at realizing systemic impact. This is because they usually involve resource-rich actors and hence maintain “Close ties to authorising power – such as prime ministers, ministers or mayors” (Puttick, 2014, p. 19). In addition, labs affect society by diffusing new ideas and narratives through their communication networks (Tiesinga & Berkhout, 2014, p. 111).

The agency of participants in labs is partly realized through deliberation. Deliberative democratic ideals of talk-based consensus-seeking diversity and equality are reflected in lab accounts that aim “to create insight into the variety of perspectives and values involved in a complex issue and try to create an equal basis for debate” (Neuens et al., 2013, p. 117). However, recalling Elstub and Escobar’s (2019) scale of participation from observing, to listening, voting, and discursive expression, labs demonstrate that there is something beyond verbal deliberation. Developing prototypes as physical objects gives abstract ideas a material form (Heracleous & Jacobs, 2011; McCusker, 2019). Actor network mapping, creating avatars or engaging in simulations are other non-deliberative activities (Pathways Network, 2018, p. 21). Additionally, labs often invite participants to jointly plan activities and hence co-create the lab itself (Hassan, 2014).

Other accounts of labs, however, take a more instrumental approach and frame participants not as *democratic* subjects but rather as *research* subjects. Participants are seen as a source of knowledge and as users whose experiences can be exploited (Evans et al., 2017, p. 14). Here, participants are controlled by the lab conductors who place their subjects into pre-defined settings in which their reactions to certain stimuli are monitored. Labs are employed as tools to generate marketable products when a “crowd [is] used to generate innovation” (Gryszkiewicz et al., 2017, p. 72).

Since research subjects can be manipulated, it has been observed that lab hosts are “instrumentalizing process outcomes for a prepackaged ‘development process’” (Charli-Joseph et al., 2018, p. 2). Such manipulation can be realized through a purposeful selection of participants “based on their suitability to achieve the expected output” (Evans et al., 2017, p. 61). Participation here is only simulated (Charli-Joseph et al., 2018, p. 2). Co-option also presents a widely observed problem in state-led democratic innovations (Cornwall, 2002), but it takes a particularly troubling form if lab founders are private sector actors. In some cases, “Labs can be viewed as instruments or vehicles for the furthering of their founders’ (and/or funders’) visions” (Gryszkiewicz et al., 2017, p. 77).

3.2. Inclusion vs exclusion

Some lab approaches have inclusion as one of their core objectives: “As innovation often emerges from the margins and involves novel recombinations of existing ideas, bringing marginal actors together for the first time can be a powerful enabler of innovation” (Pathways Network, 2018, p. 15). These lab approaches stress the value of “work[ing] directly with ordinary citizens” (Tiesinga & Berkhout, 2014, p. 83). They frame participatory processes in terms of co-creation where citizens along with governmental and civil society actors jointly generate solutions (Evans et al., 2017, pp. 11–12; Nesti, 2018; Tiesinga & Berkhout, 2014, p. 27). Puttick (2014, p. 21) notes that “Citizen engagement can be both a mission and a method for stimulating innovation.” These labs often use open invitation via various networks and employ social media to attract participants (Hassan, 2014, p. 116, p. 132). Labs then resemble open assemblies such as town hall meetings. Furthermore, to enable internal inclusion, they apply special facilitation techniques (Freeth & Annecke, 2016).

However, a generally inclusive rhetoric used to describe labs can at times stand in contrast with their actual intent. The term “stakeholder engagement” often conceals the fact that only experts, politicians, and private sector actors are at the table. Access to labs is highly restrictive when it is channelled via personal networks. Lab convenors then have the power to decide whose agency is realized. Purposive selection is employed, for example, when “‘front-runners’ are selected for the arena-meetings” (Neuens et al., 2013, p. 117). Such exclusive dynamics often run along class, race, and gender lines. For example, in the South African Food Lab, ideation was dominated by a few: “almost all the people speaking from the centre table were white men and... those sitting with folded arms and blank faces were women, several of whom were black” (Freeth & Annecke, 2016, p. 373). Hence, labs and their core practice of prototyping can “dilute differences in political agency, and mask the politics inherent in deciding who, or what, co-emerges within a prototyping assemblage” (Kimbell & Bailey, 2017, p. 222). Even when open invitation is used, the recipients must be part of a network to receive an invitation in the first place (Gryszkiewicz et al., 2017, p. 77). Such exclusive labs amplify power asymmetries and further skew the political system towards elite governance.

3.3. Transparency vs opacity

The transparency of labs is facilitated by their systemic embeddedness. Labs are interconnected with each other, various institutions, and diverse actors in society (Hassan, 2014, p. 14; Tiesinga & Berkhout, 2014, p. 33). Lab findings are distributed as widely as possible through such networks (Neuens et al., 2013, p. 118; Tiesinga & Berkhout, 2014, p. 111). Online tools, such as livestreams, play a crucial role in making labs transparent (Puttick, 2014; Tiesinga & Berkhout, 2014). One lab guide, for example, advises: “Being transparent and making sure what you do is free and accessible, will build trust and foster engagement. For example, publishing progress as online dashboards can help the public follow progress, and hold the innovation team to account” (Puttick, 2014, p. 18).

Such transparency is impeded when labs are constructed as opaque spaces shielded from public view. The participation of elite actors becomes particularly problematic when it takes place behind closed doors. According to this approach, lab participants need to work “‘protected’ from the regime, in mutual trust and at an initially low visibility for the outside world” (Neuens et al., 2013, p. 118).

This safe space approach serves the creative character of labs (Puttick, 2014, p. 17; Pathways Network, 2018, p. 11). Experimentation entails making mistakes and having someone looking over your shoulder does not usually help. Nevertheless, if experts and business actors are permitted to shape policy or other social goods shielded from public scrutiny, this is problematic for democracy.

As we have seen, labs are torn between the democratic values of agency, inclusion, and transparency and the technocratic values of control, exclusion, and opacity. We observed these tensions first-hand in the lab we conducted as described above. Our lab made an effort to realize participants' agency by including different activities such as Lego® play, deliberative walks, physical exercise, and co-creating the lab agenda. The lab also insured the inclusion of women (20 out of 35 participants) and to a lesser extent the inclusion of actors from the Global South. However, the lab did not include other strata of society, suffered from time restraints, and made a rather poor effort regarding transparency. It is the inherent logics of a lab, which raises a highly specialized question, is outcome-oriented, and is based on limited resources, that does not allow for a deeper realization of democratic values. Beyond such structural limitations, it is the natural scientific logic of experimental manipulation and objective results that taint the empowering ambitions of labs.

4. Alternative democratic futures: from labs to playgrounds and ateliers

Our axial analysis shows that labs are torn between the logic of democratic engagement and technocratic control. Labs, therefore, simultaneously future and defuture democracy. Following these trends, we foresee the emergence of a democracy/technocracy amalgam that will supersede the current post-democracy in which political institutions function as a mere façade (Crouch, 2004; Rancière, 1999). This future constellation will be characterized by a plurality of new participatory channels, such as labs. However, these will primarily be accessible to well-resourced actors. This participatory elite configuration will certainly allow for some input into the governance system, but this input will be controlled, channelled, and filtered (see Hammond, 2021; Lee, 2014).

In painting this sceptical picture, we do not dispute the democratic potential of labs. On the contrary, we ask what democratic innovations can learn from labs. In contrast with established democratic innovations, which are often focused on the verbal exchange of reason, we will explore playfulness and creativity as typical lab characteristics. Hence, we propose *democratic playgrounds* and *democratic ateliers* as novel participatory formats. These formats promise to unleash the potential of the experimentalism stressed in the scholarship of both democratic innovations and labs. By connecting arts, play, and politics, these formats function as tools of "conviviality" that aim to overcome the functional differentiation of society into various exclusive spheres (Illich, 1973). Freed from the output-orientation of democratic innovations and labs, their formalized procedures and scientific regulations, the novel formats we imagine are oriented towards *democratic serendipity*. There are certainly merits in the consequentiality of democratic innovations that have a concrete policy impact and in prototyping concrete solutions in labs. However, there is an untapped potential in serendipity, which opens participatory processes for the unexpected (Merton & Barber, 2004). Democratic serendipity aims at an open-ended exploration in which insight, creation, and innovation are stumbled upon. Rather than being the result of a planned and structured process, they emerge organically. The factor that is important to facilitate democratic serendipity is a change in mindset on behalf of the designers, facilitators, and the participants, who playfully and creatively allow the emergence of novelty, rather than painstakingly forcing decisions. Here, we do not present a detailed blue print that might forestall future creativity in realizing these formats. Rather, the debate below aims at providing inspiration as a fertile ground for future endeavours.

4.1. Democratic playgrounds

Playfulness through avatar role play or Lego® modelling is an important feature of labs that stands out in contrast to established democratic innovations. This is not to say that democratic innovations have no affinity with play. Both democratic innovations and playgrounds or games are designed by some to invite the participation of others. Moreover, some democratic innovations contain apparent elements of play, such as citizens' assemblies, which are based on lottery mechanisms and participatory budgets, which involve a playful competition with winners and losers (Lerner, 2014; Meloni, Allegretti, & Antunes, 2020).

As adults, we produce a certain persona, one that is responsible and serious. Play asks us to let go of that persona for a while and just be silly. This also resonates with Jane Bennett's (2010) call to embrace a child-like enchantment in politics to rediscover the vibrant forces of the non-human that surrounds us. Here we propose to take an alternative route to scholars who call upon children as reasoned deliberators (Nishiyama, 2018). This is, of course, a welcome endeavour, but it also involves imposing the rules of adult politics upon children (Lester, 2013). In contrast, we ask what inspirations reasoned citizens can gain from the joyful explorations of children.

To this end, we draw on three areas of research which we will address before sketching out our proposal for a democratic playground. First, child's play is often conceptualized as a method for children to learn values that are necessary for political engagement (Carroll, Calder-Dawe, Witten, & Asiasiga, 2019). Here, children are seen as only *potential* political actors. Others, however, understand child's play as democratic exactly *because* children defy adult rules: "Such a rendition of play places it as a fundamental democratic process, a subtraction from the sovereignty of adults" (Lester, 2013, p. 28). Child's play carves out a space that interrupts the established order for imagination and refiguration. There are numerous examples of how this kind of subversive play comes to bear in politics. Protest movements in particular, both online and offline, embrace carnivalesque playfulness (Asenbaum, 2019), for example, when feminists declared a living sheep to be Miss America (Lerner, 2014, p. 40) or when Anonymous activists prank white supremacists (Asenbaum, 2018b).

Second, the literature on participatory theatre deepens the understanding of play. Rather than seeing this as form of art (which will be the subject of the section on democratic ateliers), what is of interest here is the act of playful make-believe. Participatory theatre constitutes a microcosm for prefiguring alternative realities (Chou, Gagnon, & Pruitt, 2015, p. 610). This is accomplished through various formats: members from the audience are invited to step into a play to alter the story (Boal, 1998), the audience is invited to side

with different characters on stage in an enacted conflict (Neelands, 2015), a play is developed with lay actors based on their real life stories (Chou et al., 2015). Such techniques are also employed as an overt form of political participation in legislative theatre to provide input to parliamentary decision-making (Boal, 1998). What these various formats have in common is that they afford the exploration of inner multiplicity (Asenbaum, 2021), which realizes the democratic value of perspective taking: “We walk, talk, feel and respond to the argument of the drama through the lens of difference. We are ourselves but also not ourselves” (Neelands, 2015, p. 7).

Finally, inspiration for our democratic playgrounds comes from the literature on the gamification of participation. It is important to note the difference between games and play. While both involve pleasurable, exploratory activities, play refers to a free engagement within a given structure; games, in contrast, are governed by predefined rules and often entail an element of competition (Lerner, 2014, pp. 29–30). The vast literature on the gamification of political participation started from a focus on online engagement (Thiel, Reisinger, Röderer, & Fröhlich, 2016) and recently has extended to offline activities (Masser & Mory, 2018). Gamification strives for an “intensification of democracy through playing” (Meloni et al., 2020, p. 568). In *Making Democracy Fun*, Josh Lerner (2014, pp. 190–191) proposes a variety of game types such as animation games as icebreakers, team-building games to practice collaboration, capacity-building games to acquire new skills and knowledge, analysis games to gain a deeper understanding of political problems, and decision-making games. Games can even “become decision-making processes in their own right” (Lerner, 2014, p. 43).

We will now sketch our proposal for democratic playgrounds. To demonstrate that these participatory formats have the potential to overcome the democratic deficit of labs, we will discuss them in relation to the three values of democratic innovations: agency, inclusion, and transparency.

Democratic playgrounds have a particularly strong capacity to unfold the agentic potential of participants. This is because play goes beyond discursive expression – the pinnacle of participatory modes in democratic innovations (Elstub & Escobar, 2019). Play “is an embodied performance that engages sensations, emotions and actions in novel formations” (Lester, 2013, p. 28). Beyond the bodily engagement that play necessitates, play also stimulates the senses. Democratic playgrounds can engage participants through immersive background music, the sound of a bell that signals the end of a game, and colourful toys, posters, and clothing (Lerner, 2014, p. 195).

Democratic playgrounds realize agency through their self-organization either being created by civic initiatives and social movements, or through a collaboration of the latter with governments. Playground focus on a particular political question or topic that is explored over the course of several days or weeks. Activities in democratic playgrounds can be divided into three types. First, free play with building blocks, dolls, Lego®, and Play Doh allows for exploratory scenario building. Unlike output-oriented prototyping in labs, scenario building in playgrounds is open-ended and allows participants to immerse themselves in the activity. The result of this exercise are personal reflections captured in hindsight and discussed with the group. Second, democratic playgrounds facilitate role play, where scenarios are enacted with others. Rather than dividing the roles into audience and actors, here everyone is part of the scene. Third, organized games such as scavenger hunts, speed dating, and computer games are employed to explore political issues. A co-created schedule coordinates these activities, alternating moderated games and unmoderated free play. Participants always have the opportunity to opt out of structured games and engage in free play instead. Playground start with a common animation game and end with phases of reflection to capture insight and learning. Instead of pre-designing playgrounds by professionals, participatory design games invite laypeople to co-design their own participatory spaces, which are hence created from the bottom up (Brandt, 2006).

Playgrounds also advance inclusion. While labs and democratic innovations often require expert knowledge, playgrounds have no such prerequisites. Everyone can play. Hence, “engagement not only becomes attractive, but accessible” (Lerner, 2014, p. 204). It is not surprising that game-like participatory processes “have attracted unusually high participation from poor people and people of colour” (Lerner, 2014, p. 46). Including marginalized communities in playful activities such as role play can enhance empathy. Generally, we suggest a context-dependent combination of mechanisms for inclusion: open participation for many play activities, random selection, overrepresentation of marginalized groups, and exclusive spaces for marginalized groups in some closed play activities.

Finally, play has an inherent affinity with transparency. When a group of people engages in play, an invisible yet real boundary forms around them (Lau, 2010, p. 376). Play creates spaces without walls as “Playful moments transform bordered space into participatory spaces” (Lester, 2013, p. 29). Like any public playground, a democratic playground can be located anywhere. We envision them as simultaneously located in at least three places. First, they have an indoor location, which is particularly useful for closed activities. Second, role play, scavenger hunts, and many other games can be carried out in public spaces to invite further participation. Finally, democratic playgrounds are accompanied by online play that further extends an invitation to a potentially global public.

4.2. Democratic ateliers

In addition to playfulness, the high level of creativity is another feature of labs that distinguishes them from established democratic innovations. The practice of haptically creating material representations of political solutions has a lot to contribute to democratic innovation. Saward (2019, p. 6) claims that “Artworks – not least conceptual artworks whose main product is an idea conveyed or suggested by an object... – can prompt fundamental reflection on political concepts and issues”. In proposing democratic ateliers, we are building on the Rancièrian imagination of a convergence between democracy and the arts. We explore “a regime based on the indetermination of identities, the delegitimation of positions of speech, the deregulation of partitions of space and time. This aesthetic regime of politics is strictly identical with the regime of democracy” (Rancièrè, 2004, p. 14). In comparison with the sterile and structured logic of scientific labs, the participatory affordances of an atelier propose a different way of doing democracy. Rather than seeking objective truths through hypothesis-testing, in the arts there are always multiple ways of looking at things: “Just like democracy, modern art is also polyphonic and post-fundamental” (Gielen, 2011, p. 8). Consequently, a democratic atelier is defined by

openness, freedom of expression, and disruptive change.

Our proposal of ateliers that prefigure a more democratic future is based on research on political engagement through arts. In *Doing Democracy*, for instance, [Love and Mattern \(2013\)](#) showcase various accounts of artistic political engagement from poetry slams to photo activism. Such artistic interventions in politics are also reflected in design activism, whose disruptive aesthetics trouble established power relations ([Julier, 2013](#); [Markussen, 2013](#)). One example of such interventionism is the Atelier Populaire – a student collective which, in 1968, occupied French university campuses, and through the dissemination of their art posters called for a more egalitarian society ([Deaton, 2013](#)). Indeed, the rock music of this era brought the spirit of political revolution into the living rooms of many and disrupted the conservative culture of the 1950s ([Mendonça, Ercan, & Asenbaum, 2020, p. 10](#)). Today, art collectives such as Pussy Riot and the Guerilla Girls stage political protests in public spaces to challenge gender hierarchies and the concentration of political power ([Asenbaum, 2018a, 2020](#)). Another important source of inspiration comes from participatory art, which breaks down the hierarchy between silent audiences and expressive artists by inviting laypeople into the process of artistic creation ([Bishop, 2013](#)).

The notion of agency that we envision being realized through democratic ateliers is reflected in Hannah Arendt's *vita activa* as the essence of being human through the ability and need to be creative ([Arendt, 1958](#)). This resonates with debates about participatory democracy preceding democratic innovations. According to [Pateman \(1970, p. 45\)](#), participatory democracy not only serves legitimacy or well-informed decisions, but also the self-realization of democratic subjects through creative self-expression. This ethos is reflected in the agency afforded by the arts. In *Aesthetic Democracy*, Thomas [Docherty \(2006, p. xviii\)](#) elaborates: "Democracy, properly understood is... something that allows the self to come to full fruition... it is in the arts and in aesthetics that we find a privileged site or a paradigm of the very *potentiality* of selfhood that establishes this democratic condition". Docherty goes on to argue that the arts are central to democracy because they are a primary expression of freedom. The broad and deep participation that [Fung and Wright \(2001, p. 27\)](#) see realized through democratic innovations might be further deepened through democratic ateliers which provide a way to "gain political efficacy through the arts and popular culture. Participating in these alternative political spaces... engages [citizens] deeply and passionately" ([Love & Mattern, 2013, p. 9](#)).

The deep passion kindled by artistic practices points to a different quality of agency. While agency in established democratic innovations is mostly realized through verbal reasoning, in ateliers it takes the form of multi-sensory experiencing. Ateliers allow for political expression through touching, seeing, hearing, and smelling. A growing literature on sensory democracy argues that sensations, which constitute a vital part of democratic exchange, are often inexpressible through words ([Ryan & Flinders, 2018](#)). The crucial role of visual, sonic, and embodied engagement is increasingly acknowledged in the scholarship of deliberative democracy ([Curato, 2019](#); [Machin, 2015](#); [Mendonça et al., 2020](#)). This necessitates new formats that are less talk-centric. Other than the embodied play in the immersive surroundings of democratic playgrounds, sensation in democratic ateliers is focused on the objects of creation.

We envision a democratic atelier as an open space where people can engage in art projects with political relevance. Other than the time-limited playgrounds that follow a schedule, democratic ateliers provide an enabling infrastructure for political artistic engagement without time constraints. They harbour individual and collaborative artwork and self-organized workshops. The political questions addressed are not predefined but emerge out of the artistic processes. Participants create paintings, sculptures, installations, virtual realities, graffiti, photographs, poetry, speculative fiction or plays; they work with clay, stone, wool, fabric, paper, glass, or bits and bytes.

As open spaces, democratic ateliers uncover new potentials for inclusion. In contrast with an exclusive notion of art as a highly skilled craft, we follow Joseph Beuys who famously claimed that "everyone is an artist" and founded the "Free International University", which was open to all ([Beuys, 1986](#)). Building on the inclusive spirit of participatory art, democratic ateliers democratize the relationship between art and society ([Bishop, 2013](#)). Through Beuys, we can understand the societal structures we move in as human-made constructs – works of art. Hence, every member of society is an artist participating in its creation. Art, then, can work to include in particular those with marginalized identities: "For individuals who want to take a more active part in democracy, but cannot due to their education, culture, status or gender, perhaps there is scope in the arts" ([Chou et al., 2015, p. 609](#)). Here we think in particular of migrants with limited skills in the language of the host country, people with physical and cognitive disabilities, and those suffering from mental health difficulties. Artistic expression also harbours inclusive potential for a multispecies democracy, for example, through the artistic representation of non-human animals and natural phenomena ([Hanusch, Leggewie, & Meyer, 2021](#)). The inclusive potency of the arts lies in their multiplicity of expressive means: "Arts and popular culture offer an array of resources for people, especially those in marginalized groups, to use politically. They can contribute to political equality by increasing political capacity" ([Love & Mattern, 2013, p. 9](#)). Feminist democratic theorists have long called for a diversification of communicative methods in political participation ([Young, 2000](#)), such as rap music ([Sanders, 1997](#)).

Finally, democratic ateliers are inherently transparent. Here, again, we draw on [Beuys \(1986\)](#), whose social sculptures rearrange everyday objects, thoughts, language, and actions. Social sculptures that consist of human activity extend beyond the physical space of the atelier into society. An example of this is Beuys' 7000 Oaks intervention that even today alters urban living in the city of Kassel, Germany. Like in design activism, the objects produced in democratic ateliers can infuse everyday life with materializations of participatory practices ([Julier, 2013, p.229](#)). [Rancière \(2004, p. 13\)](#) notes: "Artistic practices are 'ways of doing and making' that intervene in the general distribution of ways of doing and making as well as in the relationships they maintain to modes of being and forms of visibility". Hence, ateliers extend beyond their physical boundaries. They can occur as public interventions in squares or on university campuses and they can bring democracy to unlikely places, such as shopping malls or motorways. A democratic atelier can occupy a fixed place, but it can also travel. It expands and shrinks. It follows the logic of guerrilla theatre popping up at unexpected places and carrying participatory practices into society. Through performances, exhibitions, and open workshops in public spaces, democratic ateliers invite others to join since "A performative aesthetic construes audiences as participants in artistic experiences and stresses the artist's engagement with the wider community" ([Love & Mattern, 2013, p. 7](#)). A democratic atelier "dramatizes public

argument and in so doing becomes part of the social discussion and circulation of ideas and choices in the wider society” (Neelands, 2015).

5. Towards democratic serendipity

In exploring labs, playgrounds and ateliers, this article engaged with the question raised by Saward (2021, p.2): “what do, or can, a wide range of democratic developments and experiments mean for our more general ideas of democracy, now and for the future?” We found that labs share most of their defining features with established democratic innovations. They are participatory spaces for multi-stakeholder engagement that produce novel solutions to political problems. The core values of democratic innovations are, however, only partially fulfilled by labs, which are torn between the logics of democratic participation and elite rule. We argue that this particular format is indicative of a likely future for democracy. Labs are simultaneously futuring and defuturing democracy as they prefigure both democratic engagement and technocratic control. Even though labs point towards this strange democratic-technocratic amalgam, they directed us towards two unexpected, novel participatory formats. Extrapolating the playfulness and creativity of labs, we proposed democratic playgrounds and democratic ateliers. We demonstrated the power of “play as a ‘prefigurative’ tactic, aiming at modelling and creating a more democratic world” (Lerner, 2014, p. 42). Similarly, we explored “Critical artistic practices... as a crucial dimension of the radical democratic project” (Mouffe, 2007, p. 6).

Against the functional differentiation of society where each part is only allowed to act in its own predefined subfield, we call for embracing the playful child and the creative artist in us all for a more holistic expression in democracy. Of course, the effects of creative and playful practices in new participatory sites have to be carefully taken into account to avoid potential burnout, cynicism or commercialization (Lee, 2014; Olejniczak et al., 2020). The new formats we suggest will hardly overcome profound structural inequalities. They will inevitably replicate some of the power dynamics of the larger societal context they are situated in. For example, our suggestions need to be expanded and deepened by incorporating non-Western forms of play and arts. Democratic playgrounds and ateliers need to be sensitive to cultural diversity, reflect on their own cultural particularity, and assume a position of humility and learning towards experiences from around the world (Gaskins, Haight, & Lancy, 2007). Furthermore, their relationship to established democratic institutions needs to be carefully considered so that their role of challenging and innovating is combined with an appreciation of the democratic accomplishments that are already in place (du Gay, 2000).

Yet, democratic playgrounds and ateliers allow us to envision democracy beyond its current output-orientation. They afford avenues towards democratic serendipity which might bring about alternative, more democratic futures. In proposing a shift in focus from the solutionism of democratic innovations and labs toward democratic serendipity, we argue that we do not know exactly what we are looking for until we have found it. Keeping an open mind and moving from expected to unexpected change is an important quality for developing democratic futures.

Of course, currently democratic playgrounds and ateliers do not exist in practice, so they can hardly be subjected to the same scrutiny as labs. Their enabling conditions and unforeseen risks are for future studies. What we are engaging in here is merely a future-making exercise. We see such novel participatory configurations as a reflection of their societal structures. In turn, new participatory formats also affect the structures surrounding them. We therefore understand democratic playgrounds and ateliers as part of a larger movement that reconfigures current societal structures to produce alternative futures. Whether democratic playgrounds and ateliers remain an imagination or translate into practice is up to us all. The future of democracy is ultimately our making.

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