

SITUATING DEMOCRATIC FUTURES

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Abstract:

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Abstract

Following on from the forthcoming book *Democratic Situations* (Mattering Press 2022), this panel invites papers interested in going beyond democracy as an assortment of abstract ideals, an off-the-shelf theoretical construct or taken for granted political reality. It encourages participants to ask what shapes democracy might take and how democratic encounters and situations may surprise us if they are allowed to emerge through analysis or other types of active engagement rather than deployed as a theoretical starting point.

Democratic politics has been conceptualized as an incredibly broad term in STS (Brown 2015) and is often invoked to argue for making science and technology more ‘democratic’. But what is the relationship between STS analyses of democratic politics and ambitions for a politics that can be called ‘democratic’? While politics and the political have been widely explored, there has been a tendency to simply assume that democratic politics is an ideal available to guide analyses and interventions.

We find this challenge topical yet underexplored in current STS research. How can democratic politics be understood and studied based on the empirical-conceptual repertoires and methods of STS? We welcome papers that aim to contribute to the study of democracy with a small d, by investigating democracy as a rapidly shifting and techno-scientifically entangled moving target. We are interested in exploring how, through empirical analysis of practical encounters, democracy may emerge as something that fluctuates; something that must be practically coordinated and is often contested as well as mobilized for different purposes. Through such situated analysis, democracy as a singular model vanishes and becomes a multiple phenomenon.

We are also interested in exploring how to study and re-describe central categories of political life

such as the electorate, the community, or the public, without either reifying or delegitimizing them. And, following from this, how do we understand less obvious sites of democratic politics as exactly that: sites that are, in perhaps surprising ways, relevant to democracy today? These questions are especially urgent in a time when democratic politics, foundational to many contemporary societies as well as to our technoscientific futures, seems to be endangered and under attack from many sides. What risks are involved, if any, in unpacking institutions and practices assumed to secure and support ‘modern democracy’? And, conversely, under the current circumstances, do we dare not to unpack the workings of our systems in time to learn more about them?

We invite papers which study what we call democratic situations empirically, and which do not take for granted that all politics are democratic or that democracy is what political scientists claim it is. These might include papers about formal or informal procedures involved in democratic politics, technologies invested with democratic capacities, or controversies over what counts as democratic in specific empirical contexts.

Key words:

Democracy, Politics, Democratic Futures