

Participatory Democracy in Unlikely Places

What Democratic Theorists Can Learn from Democratic Professionals

Selen A. Ercan's Interview with Albert W. Dzur

► **Introduction to the interview:** In an era when democracy is claimed to be in crisis, citizens are portrayed as increasingly distrustful of politicians and political institutions, and change, if any, is expected to be coming from extra-institutional spaces, Albert Dzur invites us to seek and find the seeds of democratic change within the existing institutions of representative democracy. Dzur's work captures the difference democratic professionals can make in these spaces and tells us about the fresh approach they bring to their everyday routines in schools, community centers, government agencies, and even prisons. What links democratic professionals in different institutions is their aspiration to create power-sharing arrangements and collaborative thinking skills in places that are usually characterized as hierarchical and non-participatory. Dzur explains how democratic professionals transform the way institutions function and find solutions to collective problems. Yet such transformative practices often elude the attention of democratic theorists as they fall outside of the established notions of democracy and democratic change. The following interview focuses on the relationship between democratic theory and practice, the difference between social movement actors and democratic professionals, and the challenges of bringing democratic change and sustaining it in existing institutions, organizations and work places.

► **Keywords:** democratic professionalism, democratic schools, grounded democratic theory, institutional innovation, participatory democracy, restorative justice

Ercan: How do you define democracy?

Dzur: My working definition of democracy is collective power sharing over common problems. This captures the historical trajectory of democratization from systems that are centralized and ascriptive in who gets to hold power to systems that are much more inclusive both in terms of the



people who can make binding decisions as well as the kinds of issues that come into such a system.

Ercan: Democracy is claimed to be in crisis particularly in recent years. We have recently edited an issue of *Democratic Theory* dealing specifically with this issue (Ercan and Gagnon 2014). What is your take in this debate? What do you think are the major problems contemporary democracies face today?

Dzur: Two big problems existing democracies face are distrust and civic lethargy. These are different, but they feed into each other. With distrust, I mean primarily, but not only, distrust in political leaders.

Ercan: In this context, can we talk about distrust in the political system as well?

Dzur: Yes, we can talk about a vertical lack of faith in what people in government are doing and what they stand for – whether they accurately represent their constituencies. Equally important, and perhaps more troubling, is a horizontal distrust, where people lack faith in the ability of coequals in contributing to public affairs. This is a lack of trust in each other. I think that has equally disastrous consequences for how we deal with democratic institutions. That we lack faith in our officials has been pretty obvious. That we lack faith in each other is less obvious, though it is quite apparent in survey research.

Ercan: What do you think how new these problems are for democracies? Do you have a sort of time frame in your mind that you say, “From this point onward, people seem to lose their trust in politicians and they seem to lose their trust to each other?”

Dzur: That is a good question. I do not think that there is a golden age of participation. However, survey research on trust, at least in the American context, is pretty clear that you have this kind of institutional distrust starting in the early 1970s, which proceeds in waves: first, distrust in the presidency starts to rise; Congress holds steady for a while, but then Congress starts to lose trust over the course of the 1970s. Horizontal trust similarly starts to erode in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Again, while I would not necessarily point to the 1950s as a sort of golden age of participation, survey research on trust definitely shows a decline.

Civic lethargy is a different issue. It’s not apathy because apathy is an unwillingness to take part of public affairs. Civic lethargy is different

than not caring or not being interested in public affairs; it is thinking that one cannot really make a difference even if one takes part. It is this creeping feeling one has: “What is the point? They’re going to do what they do even if I do get involved.” There is this kind of hopelessness about the attitude that I’m calling civic lethargy, the sense that “Whatever it is that I do, it will just be a drop in the bucket. The system is too big, it is too complicated, I have no way of effectively interacting with it. Just forget about it.” I think this has disastrous consequences as well. Distrust and civic lethargy are widespread in the established democracies.

Ercan: And in your view, they hang together and feed each other?

Dzur: Yes, absolutely. And the effects are pernicious. In the American case, this combination of distrust and lethargy has led to a reluctance to pay attention to what institutions are doing. An inability to see what institutions are doing to other people not like you. This has real moral consequences.

The philosopher Margaret Urban Walker has this great phrase; she calls it, “morally significant non-perception” (Walker 2007). What we are not seeing matters. I think what we are not seeing when we are lethargic and distrustful are the things our institutions are doing – just by their normal functioning – to people who are not like us. In this context, the galvanizing topic area for me has been punishment. What American institutions have been doing, when we have not been looking, is punishing people of color at an astronomical rate and putting them into prison. Even though most Americans think prison does not make people better. Most of us think that many of the offenses driving imprisonment rates should not have harsh consequences attached to them. Even though we hold these beliefs, nevertheless, the prisons are being built and they are being filled, mostly with African Americans from urban areas.

Ercan: In your own work, you are using these type of case studies actually to make a broader point about the democracies and about how the institutions function and how they are being perceived or how they sometimes inhabit the problems that we can not obviously see, or pay attention to.

Dzur: Right. The sociologist Loïc Wacquant resists the concept of mass incarceration because it implies that some sort of a random selection of the mass public is getting incarcerated. But we know this is not the case; it is not a random selection of the mass public that is incarcerated. No, it is people of color from urban areas who are getting incarcerated.

So Wacquant (2009) urges us to call it “hyperincarceration” for that reason. For me, the issues of punishment, in particular, and criminal justice, more broadly, have given an edge to my democratic theorizing. They have pushed me to areas in democratic theory I don’t think I would have gone otherwise (see Dzur 2012a, 2012b; Dzur et al. 2016). Specifically, these issues have made me realize that it’s no small matter that people have civic lethargy and are distrustful about institutions. That we do not want to get involved in our institutions is morally significant; it has real consequences; it will be remembered in the future as a massive democratic failure.

A public that is ignorant of what its institutions are doing is not a moral public. It has lost something. It has become a collaborationist in an immoral set of affairs. Again, back to the idea of morally significant non-perception, not seeing these things because we are not involved, because we are not attentive, because we are distrustful does not mean they are not there. They are there through our taxes, through our non-voting. In all these ways, we are supporting institutions that have very real moral effects. Those effects are there whether we choose to see them or not.

Ercan: There is a line of research that tends to associate political apathy and distrust in formal institutions usually with youth. Whether it is low voter turnout, disengagement from democratic processes, or as you suggest the problem of civic lethargy young people have been identified as part of the problem. What is your view on this?

Dzur: I think the established viewpoint now is that young people are disaffected about formal politics, but they’re not at all disaffected about political work seen in a broader context. They want to be involved. There’s a campaign in the United States called “Just do something.” You can log on to justdosomething.org. Distrust and civic lethargy have led to disaffection with the formal system, but people want to join NGOs, the Peace Corps, and similar groups. They want to just do something and that’s not so bad. And yet, coming back to the point about formal institutions, formal institutions are real, they are doing real things to real people. We might be fairly comfortable with them if we are white and relatively well off, but they’re doing things nonetheless.

Our institutions do things for us. They make certain things easier: marriage between a man and a woman for example. They make other things harder: marriage between a man and a man, or woman and a woman. That is what institutions do. They act for us, they think for us. They make some things easier, some things harder. Not to engage with

them has this consequence that they run freely in the only partially visible background of our lives, which feeds into this issue of distrust where there is this system world out there just doing its own thing. It is doing its own thing because we haven't understood how it works, we haven't gotten involved in it. I don't think citizens are generally disaffected, but they're turned off from the public world in particular ways that can be ultimately very harmful.

Ercan: I agree with your point about young people seeking to do political work differently, and in spaces that are distanced from formal institutions. I think, this in itself is good news for democracy. But at the same time, we do not want these alternative spaces of political participation to be too disconnected from the formal institutions and turning into parallel universes. How should we conceive the relationship between alternative and formal modes and spaces of political participation?

Dzur: Take the example of the Occupy Movement. I'm not an expert on this movement, but it does seem to illustrate a kind of disconnection between formal and alternative politics. Occupiers stressed that one cannot work from within formal institutions to deal effectively with the problem of economic inequality. Because they are already captured by powerful economic forces, one has to work from outside the institutions of government. Yet none of the claims being made were claims that could enter the system world effectively. Even though it was, I think, extraordinarily effective at articulating the conflicts between the 99 percent versus the 1 percent, it was extraordinarily ineffective at figuring out ways the system world could be changed to address them. Again, this is in no way meant to dismiss that movement, which has been absolutely essential to raising economic inequality as prominent political problem. It does illustrate, however, a big gap between the system world and the world of the general public. That has to be bridged.

Ercan: I guess this is where your work on democratic professionalism fits in. Democratic professionals can potentially assume this bridging role and connect different kinds and spaces of political participation. Before moving on to the topic of democratic professionalism, I would like to ask you some questions about the contemporary democratic theory more broadly. If any, what role do you think democratic theory can play in practice? More specifically how should we conceive the relationship between normative democratic theory and practice? Is there a necessary disconnect between democratic theory and practice that cannot and should not be bridged?

Dzur: I have an internal pendulum in how I think about this important topic, and the way I'm going to respond may appear extreme. I'm swinging very critical right now when it comes to democratic theory. I think democratic theory has lost touch with democratic agents and therefore has a very feeble account of agency. Why do people come together to solve problems? How can public institutions reach citizens, involve them in essential and non-trivial work? We in democratic theory world are often very abstract in our thinking about these questions.

For the last three years I have been interviewing people I think of as very capable democratic innovators (see Dzur 2013–2015). These are people who, when they have decisions to make democratically, almost intuitively have a sense of what to do to open up their domains to the voices and actions of others. Their stories about the work they do are just brilliant. At the end of my interviews, I'm always looking for their sources of inspiration and guidance. I'm always listening for names like Jürgen Habermas or John Dewey – people I really admire. But they never talk about Habermas. They never talk about Dewey. They never mention people I would consider to be canonical or at the forefront of democratic theory. At first, it did not bother me very much. But it happened so regularly that it became sobering. The people I talk with who are so creative and so smart about democracy are not learning it from us. In fact, when I press them on their academic experiences, quite often their time at university was negative; they certainly did not learn democracy at the university. They learned it in various ways in communities of practice, with other innovators who serve as mentors.

Weirdly, the gap I see between citizens and institutions exists as well between democratic theorists and democratic agents. I do not know how to bridge it, but we are going to have to work on this to survive as a field with any claim to public relevance. At the root of the problem is the way we talk with each other. Note, again, that I am currently on the critical side of my internal pendulum in thinking about democratic theory. That said, I see a very pervasive kind of public ignorance in academia. This reflects disciplinary ways of understanding and a specific mode of being a professional. What it means to be a professional and somebody who holds disciplinary knowledge is that there are other people who are unprofessional and who are burdened by undisciplined knowledge. There is this built-in gap between academics and the world of democratic agents that comes out in the ways we think, write, and approach the public world around us.

There is a lot we can do, but I think that before we talk among ourselves as democratic theorists about what to do, we need to learn from democratic agents about what they are doing, how they got motivated,

and where they turn when they need guidance. A more grounded democratic theory tries to learn theory from the people we recognize as exemplary in some way or another. We should then move back into the world of constructing categories and concepts with that kind of lived knowledge.

Ercan: In your own work, you seek to theorize this kind of knowledge and democratic practice. Why do you think democratic theorists should pay more attention to practice?

Dzur: Consider Helen Beattie, somebody I interviewed not so long ago. I was looking at the interview today. Helen does not ever use the word democracy in her work. She is facilitating collaborative action teams made up of teachers and students who work together to call attention to institutional deficits in schools through their research. Then they talk about these institutional deficits, these problems, and try to solve them together. That is pretty democratic, but she does not use those terms. Helen does not think of the work as democratic or deliberative. If I were to talk with her about deliberative democracy she would say, “No, what we are doing is we’re making tools people can use together to solve common problems they’re facing in these institutional environments.” When you pay attention to the discourse of people doing things democratically you can learn about the different modes of referring to the work. By paying attention, you open up these layers of democratic action that are actually already happening all around us. It is extremely important for democratic theorists to avoid getting too caught up in traditional concepts, but, instead, start to add to our list of ideas and sets of problems.

Ercan: Contemporary democratic theory consists of various camps and schools of thought. I wonder where exactly you locate your work and your own approach within this wide theoretical topography. Also at a more practical level, your work emphasizes the need for institutions, but at the same time you do not deny the importance of political participation in extra institutional spaces.

Dzur: Yes, I would say that I am a democratic theorist who wants to address some of the issues deliberative democrats have been addressing, but in a slightly different way. That is not to say that the body of deliberative democratic thought is unable to handle these issues. Just that there are ways of thinking about democratic deliberation that are remarkably unhelpful for dealing with the gaps we talked about earlier, which are very troubling for contemporary democracies. There are ways of thinking

of deliberation as being able to meet certain rational standards. There are ways of thinking about deliberation that mainly focus on what is happening inside the individual. There are ways of thinking about deliberation that focus on closed and carefully structured spheres of dialogue. This has led to normative theorizing covering small bore issues of rationality, or the virtues that one needs to be a good deliberator, and so on. That takes us away from the rather messy sphere of collective action and has led to practical examples of deliberative democracy that avoid concrete problems plaguing contemporary publics.

In deliberative polling, for example, you swoop in, do the deliberative poll, and then you swoop out leaving just the same amount of distrust, just the same amount of civic lethargy as when you entered. I have done deliberative polls and have been left feeling, “And then what? How do we connect this – whatever it is that we have just done–to real problems in real institutional spaces?” You should not have those questions after you have done something political. They should be part of a political process.

By contrast, I gravitate toward a way of thinking about democratic theory that has been dismissed by many leading lights as being romantic or sophomoric, namely, participatory democracy. Part of the problem is that the people frequently named as being good participatory democrats, really aren't. Mill, for example, is not particularly interested in the participation of the general public and Tocqueville sees participation, in part, as a disciplinary exercise through which regular citizens learn the rules from those who know more. Or, further back into the canon, Rousseau never thought that a robust, sometimes anarchic, public sphere was at all valuable; his mode of deliberation is extraordinarily confined.

A problem with deliberative democracy is that there has not been very much of it. Then it has been articulated in ways that focus on the expression of individual beliefs or the development of the individual rather than the development of the body politic, which, by contrast, has always been an important sub-theme in participatory democratic thought. I turn to people like Dewey ([1939] 1981), to some of the literature produced by activists in the 1960s like the brilliant Port Huron Statement, as well as contemporary civic studies thinkers such as Harry Boyte (2004) and Peter Levine (2013) who articulate the importance of public work – action done together, in public, with others who are not like you, to solve concrete problems.

Ercan: Can you give an example of this kind of collective action?

Dzur: An example of participation in a public space together with other people not like you leading to better acuity about the institutions that af-

fect us comes from the practices of restorative justice. Restorative justice comes in a lot of different shapes and sizes, of course, so I am not claiming all kinds of restorative justice as examples of participatory democracy.

But consider Lauren Abramson, who runs the Community Conferencing Center in Baltimore Maryland—a city that often leads the nation in its annual homicide rate. What Lauren does is she facilitates group discussion in neighborhoods that are affected by all kinds of problems ranging from low level issues like dilapidated storefronts to more serious matters of physical violence. The idea is to resolve at least some of these conflicts before they get called crimes and get pushed into the formal criminal justice system. So what does she do? Let's say a neighborhood has these kids who play football after dark and they set off car alarms, and they break car windows, and smash mirrors. All kinds of trouble. What would you do about that? You could call the police. Then these kids would get charged with misdemeanor or something even more serious. Or you could bring people together and have a conversation about what to do.

What kind of democratic deliberation does our Baltimore neighborhood do? Is it very sophisticated? It is, in a way, but not like the kind of rules that you would find looking in *Between Facts and Norms*. First, they work hard at getting anybody who is affected to come to the meeting. And then at the meeting they go around the room and ask everyone three simple questions: “How are you affected?” “How does it make you feel?” (And it is worth pausing to notice that it is an explicit part of the practice that people are allowed to show they are angry, to express their emotions.) And finally, “What are you going to do about it?” Three simple questions frame the group deliberation. I don't have a particularly good memory, and I just told you what they were. This group conference produces a space for dialog that has really important consequences for the way a public deals with its institutions. If the issues can get worked out in that conference, that means automatically there are fewer crimes: there are fewer people labeled criminal offenders and suffering the consequences of corrections institutions. That is a really big win in my view and establishes, I think, a better way for a public to get a grip on its institutions than to remain at the default level of lethargy and distrust. Here, we have a public saying, “No, we're not going to hand these guys over to you. We are not going to do that. We are tired of feeding you these kids. We are going to take these problems on ourselves.” How are they able to do that? Though she would deny that she is activating community agency and would insist that she is only helping citizens find the participatory resources they've had all along, in fact they're able to do that because of Lauren Abramson. Lauren is the kind of person I call a democratic professional.

Ercan: How big are these groups? How regular do they get together? Have you participated in any of these conferences?

Dzur: I have participated in a number of restorative justice conferences, but not in Baltimore. The neighborhood conference that Lauren organized included 45–50 people. I think her center has done thousands of these conferences.

Ercan: Would you describe these conferences as examples of deliberative democracy in practice especially if we understand deliberation in broader terms, as a type of communication that allows the expression of emotions and not only rational arguments?

Dzur: Yes, it is possible to understand these conferences along the lines you suggest but I also think they exemplify certain facets of democratic agency that are marginal to deliberative democratic theory. Note, for example, the quasi-voluntary and non-cognitive elements of the process. Some people really don't want to be there. They are there because their neighbor is there, they don't like their neighbor, and they want to stand up for their own view. It is, of course, voluntary in the sense that people can choose not to be there. Yet there is some pressure for them to go. As for the non-cognitive aspects, people are close together in this circular space, so it forces proximity to others you may have not recognized before as fully formed human beings, with feelings and life histories unlike but also like your own. Emotions are also part of the process. This kind of talking openly and truthfully about things that you care about evokes all sorts of emotions.

Then there is this constructive aspect I think is almost completely missing in the kind of democratic theory I have been critical of. When you leave this room, what are you going to do about the problem that brought you here to talk with others? That is what Lauren wants people to leave with. Remember the third question: "What are you going to do about it?" In this particular case, what this neighborhood did about it was organize alternative youth activities. A middle-aged man who was a football star in high school said, "OK, I'll lead a football league. Let's stop the kids from playing football in the streets. Let's go over to the park. I'll set up a football league for them." And it has become a thriving neighborhood project. These neighbors have done something; they weren't just venting. They were constructing a solution to a problem they had, which could have been institutionalized in a really unsuccessful way through policing and criminal justice. But they found a compelling solution on their own.

Ercan: This sounds like an ideal solution to me, but at the same time I am aware that there are some scholars who are trying to demonstrate that anything more than a minimal liberal democracy demands too much of the time, energy of ordinary citizens. Who do you think would be willing to invest time and energy to go to such neighborhood meetings, say after a busy day at work? Also some might think that it is the role of institutions, not the community, to resolve these issues. If we take this line of argument, one step further, the community might feel burdened, rather than empowered to decide and take action on seemingly complicated issues. Do you think it is too much to expect a group of citizens to play a role that institutions are required to play?

Dzur: I think being a moral person takes time. I think having a democracy takes time. If you ask the people I call democratic professionals, that's the kind of response you would get. A community conference takes more time than having a couple of police officers come and bring these kids in. When I talk to people about their innovative participatory democratic work, time is the biggest cost. It doesn't cost more money to have a democratic school. And it costs a lot less money to do community conferences than to hire the guys in black robes and maintain their fancy courtrooms, not to mention keeping the detention and corrections centers in good working order. Informal justice costs a lot less financially and it's more effective. But it does cost more in terms of time.

Sheldon Wolin (1994) famously talks about "fugitive democracy." Democratic movements flare up and they make changes. Then people have to go back home, back to their farms and their workplaces, to rejoin their families and neighborhoods. Democratic movements erupt and then fade away. I don't agree completely with Wolin, actually. If we shift attention to institutions as potential democratic fields of action, and we look at everyday routines in these institutions as having democratic meaning, then we see all the ways that democracy is not external, but it's actually intrinsic and internal to our lives. Helen Beattie's schools doing collaborative action teams, for example. OK, sure: you have a collaborative action team and it takes five hours out of a week, so those are five hours that you cannot do biology, that is true. But they make the rest of the school week go a lot faster for the students who are involved in them, I can promise you that. These students are more interested and engaged when they go back in to their regular run of classes. When democratic action is built into everyday routines it is less onerous and time-consuming for any given individual actor.

Ercan: So what you are suggesting is that we can get better at doing what we are already doing. We can do so by paying attention to the way we do

things and try to democratize these ways rather than seeking democracy elsewhere beyond our everyday lives and practices.

Dzur: That's exactly right. I want to stress, though, how appropriate the term 'counter normative' is to describe these innovations. Dana Mitra, who's written a lot about student participation and agency in K-12 schools in the United States, says, "democracy is counter normative in American schools" (Mitra 2008). That's a really big problem if you go to your school and you have to pass through a chain link fence and there's a security camera and a metal detector for your backpack, and your opinion is never asked when it comes to institutional decisions, and social order is prescribed in a rulebook and imposed from above. In all these ways we signal to people, "Hey, you can't take care of these common spaces. Hey, you can't exercise your collective agency in a reasonable way. Hey, you can't solve these problems. You have to rely on us, the principal, or teacher, or counselor, or superintendent to solve these problems."

The K-12 education we have in the United States is, generally, un-democratic or is, put differently, a civic education in being un-civic. I don't care how many programs you have in service learning. I don't care how many civic engagement electives you have in high school. The fact is that genuine democratic education is counter normative in American schools. I think we can continue to reproduce citizens who are civically lethargic and distrustful, or we can try to fashion democratic schools, democratic city governments, democratic criminal justice practices. We can shape institutions to produce a different kind of environment, in which people pay attention to what their institutions are doing for them and to other people, in which they can work together on certain common problems like social order.

Social order is a problem that will never go away. We just tend to give it over to professionals to handle, and then we don't pay attention to it. Education is another common problem that will never go away. Because the social world is changing all the time, it matters to get people's opinion on what counts as scientifically relevant, what constitutes a good subject matter for study, and so on.

Doing things democratically takes more time to be sure, yet if you ingrain it into everyday routines, it takes a lot less time than you might think. And the consequences of not doing this are just too high. If we continue on this path of having institutions thinking for us and doing for us, over and over, we will continue our patterns of distrust and civic lethargy.

Ercan: In all these institutions, you attribute a special role to those you describe as democratic professionals. What triggered your interest in in-

vestigating this role further in different institutions and situations? How do you define democratic professionalism?

Dzur: I first started getting interested in them by focusing on a question that seemed, at the time, like it was missing from the deliberative democratic research agenda: who's actually putting deliberation in practice or trying to produce sites of public deliberation? That led me to fields of activity I came to think of as democratic professional movements: public journalism, restorative justice, lay participation in health care (Dzur 2008). I was initially interested in these people as deliberative democratic practitioners. These are people who may be no less dissatisfied with the institutions they're working in than the general public. Yet they have decided that they're simply not going to reproduce the same environment. They've got to make some changes. They have one life to live and they're going to find alternatives so that they don't keep down this mainstream path that is not leading to healthy institutions. Democratic teachers and democratic principals don't want schools to be prisons. They're not going to spend their life as wardens. They want to spend their life as people who listen to students and cultivate human agency.

Ercan: What are the common patterns you see in 'democratic professionals' across different institutions? You've been interviewing different people at different institutions in different institutional roles. Is there any common pattern that they all have? Is it a type of personality attribute or a particular kind of skill that people learn along the way as a result of a particular experience?

Dzur: It's interesting to me that they're not 'naturally' participatory democratic, not necessarily brought up this way or encouraged by their surrounding institutions. I was talking to a democratic professional city manager a few months ago, a person who is very well respected in his city. He was exposed to participatory democratic thinking when he studied public administration in college, but he dismissed it at the time as being woolly – not hardheaded enough for the real world of local government. It was only after working closely with citizens on some chronic city problems that he came around to these ways of thinking: "Actually, I *am* a participatory democrat after all!" So they really don't have in common any sort of shared ideological upbringing or cultururation. I think they're all very pragmatic.

This pragmatism reflects back on the question of how democratic theory can become more applied or useful by paying attention to what these people are saying. Take the example of Helen Beattie, doing school

reform. She talks about making tools people can use. That's significant. If you're a tool maker, what are you doing? You're supplying things for other people to solve their problem. You're not saying what the problem field is. You're not defining things. You're saying, "Here, have a tool." In Helen's case, just to be concrete, the tool is collaborative action teams. "Here's a tool you might use: a collaborative action team." She hasn't filled it in. She hasn't said, "You have to do collaborative action about X, Y, or Z." She says, "Here's a useful tool. Try it out." So a focus on problem solving and practical knowledge do seem to be commonalities among democratic professionals.

Resilience is another shared trait: these are people who, when faced with the costs and burdens involved in democratic action, bounce back and press on. They are also non-ideological. Very fluid in their thinking, they draw from lots of different traditions. Other commonalities include distrust of concentrated power and reluctance to wield it. A humility too – a kind of "smart person" humility. These are people who know what they're capable of doing. They're well trained in a field or profession. They know a lot about their topic area. They know enough to know they don't have all the answers. They know enough to respect other people's opinions.

This humility that characterizes them – made manifest in a rejection of asymmetries and inequality – that's very strong and it is a very useful trait. Just because a kid is acting out and probably broke that car mirror doesn't mean you can't listen to him. Prior to the Baltimore community conference, many of the adults wanted to call the cops on these kids. None of the adults realized that the park they thought the kids should be playing in rather than the street was occupied by drug dealers. It took these conferences for the adults to understand, "Oh yeah. These kids aren't playing in the park because of the scary drug dealers in the park. That's why they're playing in the street." Inequalities and asymmetries between people can distort what you can learn from others. There's a lot you can learn from a kid if you're a principal. There's a lot you can learn from a neighbor you may not initially like very much. There's a lot you can learn from citizens if you are a city manager. These are some of the commonalities.

Ercan: You emphasize the notion of democratic change a lot in your work. I would like to know how you differentiate between democratic professionals and say social movement actors or leaders. Social movement actors for example would also say that they're focusing on and putting their energies in achieving a type of democratic change. What are the main differences between a democratic professional, and an activist, if you like?

Dzur: Democratic professionals don't tend to see themselves as part of a movement. They may belong to networks and affinity groups, but they don't see themselves as part of a social movement, in the classic sense of developing claims that you then press on a legislative body or an executive to make some kind of change. They don't see themselves as proponents of change in that respect. The energy involved is not a large burst but a slow burn. It is generated not by raising the public consciousness, but through load-bearing work that fosters relations of proximity within classrooms, hallways, conference rooms, and administrative offices, imbues them with public-ness and remakes them as civic spaces that refuse to be dominated by bureaucratic routines. If you think about it, proximity in public space – the idea of getting close enough to see and understand others as fellow citizens – is taken for granted as an aspect of advanced democracy and yet it is astonishingly short supply. Democratic professionals bring citizens together who had not planned to be together.

What they are doing is modifying their institutions on the inside rather than acting for law or policy change. I also think that social movements are interested in cognitive development, or consciousness raising. To pick one example, I don't think democratic schools have the kind of ideologically alertness one finds in many social movements. A school can function more democratically without having a robust ideological line of thinking. It doesn't have a package of opinions that it's trying to deliver to its students. In fact, if it was it would be entirely unpalatable. Finally, I think social movements are voluntary – the members choose to be involved. Democratic professionals, by contrast, are creating democratic spaces that are not necessarily voluntary, or, if you will, quasi-voluntary. If you're part of a democratic school, you may not have the option of not having to say something from time to time in your class or in an all-school assembly. You may feel a lot of pressure to say things or to collaborate or to think together with others. You may feel a lot of pressure to get involved in some kind of conflict resolution process in which you help create social order together with other students.

In some democratic schools, the kids are quite involved in conflict resolution practices. You've insulted my sweater on the playground and that offends me and I have a bad day because of it. The next day, I approach you and I say, "You know, let's do a conflict resolution about yesterday's insult. You said that my sweater made me look like a cartoon character. That really offended me. This is my favorite sweater."

So look at what is happening with this conflict resolution process. You haven't really chosen to be a part of it, but because it is embedded in the culture of the school when a kid asks to do a conflict resolution practice with another kid that is just what they do. There's this quasi-

voluntary aspect that I think is important, which is also evident in the public spaces created in participatory democratic institutions. You don't get to *not* see this other person. You don't get *not* to interact with this person who thinks something offensive might have happened. That's another way this differs from a social movement. There is a component of non-voluntariness when you're part of this community. This is a community that does conflict resolution. You can either do it or you can maybe find another school. I think those are distinct features of institutions shaped and energized by democratic professionals.

Ercan: I assume that bringing a democratic change in institutions with long histories and legacies might not be that easy. What challenges do 'democratic professionals' usually face in their attempts to bring change and open up the decision-making processes to those who have been traditionally excluded from such processes?

Dzur: There are a number of obstacles to innovation, but each has a kind of mirror image in the sense that if you look at it at in the right way you realize why participatory democracy is possible and necessary. One obstacle obviously is bureaucracy, or formal legal rationality. It's more efficient if you have two students who've gotten into a fight on the playground for the principal just to come in and say, "No fighting, you're suspended from school for two weeks." That's much more efficient. In so doing, the principal is carrying out her legal duties in a straightforward way. She's accountable to the parents. She's accountable to the superintendent of the schools, and so on. That is obviously one obstacle to handling such a thing in a more informal way by having a conference about the offense, getting the offenders together, getting bystanders together, and having a discussion about what might have led to it. All that's much less efficient. And yet, an informal process has the benefit of uncovering things you might never have known about had you just enforced a rule. You might never have known that the kid instigating the conflict had problems vocalizing stress. That at the heart of the issue was a kid who just didn't have the language skills to communicate the kind of anger he was feeling. So even though it's less efficient or rational from a bureaucratic or formal legal perspective, an informal process has this potential for transformative and lasting change that is often impossible via top-down rule enforcement. Of course, there is also the community building – social capital accumulation – aspect of solving problems together rather than just enforcing a rule.

Another sort of obstacle is emotional labor. If you've ever organized a deliberative event, you know what this means. You put more of yourself into a process when you're not just following rules, when you're trying to

open up your institution to citizen agency. It's exhausting. It takes a lot out of people. So the question of democratic professional sustainability has become a pressing topic: What do you do when you burn out? How do you ensure that what you put into place will persist into the future? And yet emotional labor brings with it surprising payoffs: principals and teachers in democratic schools report to me many kinds of spontaneous acts of generosity and creativity from students to their schools, which really do treat them as citizens and stakeholders and not merely passive clients or education recipients. It is not uncommon for restorative justice conferences to produce unplanned patterns of future collaboration unrelated to an initial conflict.

A third obstacle is professionalism itself. "Why did I get an advanced degree if it didn't mean that I'm making some decisions as a teacher or principal that the kids aren't making?" "Of course I'm making some decisions that the citizens aren't making; that's my job as the city manager!" Disciplines like political science and education and others are built up on the basis of these kinds of notions and reinforce them. Yet at the same time, professionalism shields people from certain realities. It impedes awareness of cross-professional kinds of issues like so-called wicked problems, which need different kinds of knowledge, not just one kind of disciplinary approach or methodology.

Each of these obstacles – bureaucracy, emotional involvement, professionalization – has its mirror side that reveals openings for a more participatory democracy. The more we understand what these people are doing, what core practices they have put in place, the more we can call attention to those openings and identify resources for change in the face of those obstacles.

Ercan: Bringing change is one thing, but sustaining it is other. It usually takes more than one person and requires a change of existing mindsets, which is quite difficult to achieve. What other actors are involved in promoting and sustaining democratic change in existing institutions?

Dzur: We've been talking about academics, and how democratic theorists need to be more attentive to what's happening on the ground. What this journal is doing is important in that respect. I think the way universities approach professionalism and professional training could also learn from democratic innovators. There are more democratic ways of doing criminal justice, for example, or doing public administration, or doing education. That need to better model democratic practice in higher education is something I've heard quite a bit, actually, from democratic professionals (see Dzur 2015).

I ask, sometimes, “What would you do to have more people like you?” And they frequently point to universities and professional training programs as being places for modeling this kind of action. Just exactly how to do this is an open question, as universities can sometimes dampen rather than energize fields of action: rubrics, learning outcomes, templates, and the like can extinguish the creative spirit that drives participatory democracy. I’m hoping in my own research to draw attention to how innovators work out changes in sometimes very resistant domains, and to bring these issues out in a narrative form relevant to both academics and practitioners.

Ercan: You have mentioned that those people who put their energy and time to change the way existing institutions make decisions, deal with conflicts, and put collectives before individuals, if you like, would not even use the term democracy while describing what they do. Do you think our theoretical lenses and assumptions about what democracy is and should be prevent us from seeing what is happening on the ground?

Dzur: That was initially sobering to me, too, that a number of democratic professionals I have interviewed in fields like criminal justice, public administration, and K-12 education do not want to use the term democracy. But really, what this suggests is that there is a world of action out there, that participatory democracy may be waiting for us to find while it travels under other names. I think that’s important. Lacking an overarching ideology, they make it up as they go along, developing roles, attitudes, habits, and practices that open calcified structures up to greater participation. Their democratic action is endogenous to their occupational routine, often involving those who would not consider themselves activists or even engaged citizens.

Ercan: I guess it also helps us in a way that we can stop and think about actually what do we mean with democracy. If you called similar kind of activity as something else. If you see sort of parallels, but it makes us think about our definition of democracy.

Dzur: I think that’s right. As academics, we’re interested in definitions. We’re interested in finding the right words and making careful distinctions. But there are a lot of people who aren’t. Maybe it’s time to step back from the work of parsing, subdividing, trying to make as air tight an analytical case for something as possible, chasing the implications of a particularly brilliant explication of something. Maybe it’s time to give that a little bit of a rest and try to describe, albeit roughly and imper-

factly, the messy world of democracy peeking out of the cracks of our broken institutions.

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This interview was conducted by **Selen Ercan** on 15 July 2014 at the Institute for Governance and Policy Analysis, University of Canberra in Australia during Dzur's stay as a visiting scholar at the Centre for Deliberative Democracy and Global Governance.

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