

> Valentin Dupouey

Future cities : for a democratic uprising

> About the author

Valentin Dupouey is a youth and active citizenship activist born and raised in Nancy, France. He has experienced different European cities as a student and young professional: Strasbourg, Ljubljana, Copenhagen, Brussels and Paris. He has been working in the NGO sector for the past six years and currently works as policy officer at the European Civic Forum. He also holds responsibilities within the Erasmus Student Network and is a member of the Advisory Council on Youth of the Council of Europe.

“We are not selling the illusion of the direct democracy in the Greek plaza which, let us bear in mind, was not the democracy of all but the democracy of the best.”

> *Cities, our core democratic units*

Cities are the core democratic units. They will represent 75% of the world's total population by 2025. In times of democratic unrest, cities are the foundation on which democracy can be revived through its citizens. Urban decision makers and policy makers have a duty and a responsibility towards larger democratic units, regions, states, and continents. The duty of making democracy flourish from the ground up.

Since antiquity, the fate of democracy has been inextricably linked to urban and city life. Athens is widely known as the cradle of democracy. The Latin and Greek roots of the terms citizens and politics leave no doubt about the longstanding ties between democracy and city life.

The organisation of city life, the necessary compromises of coexistence and the interactions between citizens gave birth to our democracy. This local and urban democracy has evolved, integrating the Greek ‘barbaros’, literally

‘the other’, into its discourse and practices. It has widened its scope from a restrictive and socially homogenous vision of democracy to the multicultural, globally integrated local democracies we know today.

But amid this more complex, globalised, fast-changing environment, a core common trait survives among cities’ decision and policy makers: the ambition of thriving coexistence, the desire for peaceful coexistence in a neighbourly environment. This ‘coexistence unit’ represented by the city has survived for thousands of years. It has been slowly complemented by greater, wider democratic units: regions, nation states and more recently the continental democratic level uniquely featured in the world through the European Union.

However, the health of democracy is extremely heterogeneous across these different levels. At the scale of the wider units, the nation states and the European Union, democracy is under direct and serious threat. Citizens’ growing

disinterest in political matters, the so-called disenchantment for democracy, the growing gap citizens perceive between their decision makers and their daily lives appears very sharply. Ever lower records of voter turnout, in particular among young people, and the rise of extremist parties with openly anti-democratic claims are just two symbols of the challenges democracy is facing today. Should further concrete examples be needed, one can turn his or her eyes towards Hungary and Poland, where democratically elected leaders are openly advocating for an 'illiberal state' jeopardising fundamental freedoms.

At the European level, these threats are equally affecting the object of democracy: the need for thriving coexistence. The inexorable movement of border opening known in Europe since the end of the Cold War has suddenly come to a halt. The refugee crisis is showing the limits of our desire for more open societies. The ongoing talks for a restricted Schengen area are additional signs of the same regressive movement.

Among the main causes would probably be the growing distance between citizens and policy makers; the complexity of democratic structures; the defiance to policy makers tied to private, vested interests; and the perceived inability of representative democracy to improve the state of things and common wellbeing.

The need for citizens to understand their own democratic structures, their desire to see their choices turning into changes, and their willingness to be actively participating in the decisions affecting their life must be taken into account if the hopes to revive democracy are to be turned into reality. A paradigm shift is now crucially needed among policy makers. But they first need to operate a mental concept shift about democracy before adapting their practices to the needs of 21st century's citizens. And that's where cities come into play!

Grassroots local democracy is the first link in a long chain and we cannot afford to see break. The proximity with decision making places allows individuals to better understand the democratic structures they live in. It offers citizens platforms for participation that no other level can offer. The low geographical gap and local scope of decisions allow everyone to witness more discernibly the impact of their choices and actions. Tools and practices are available for policy makers to revive and renew grassroots local democracy. It is all about uptake and dissemination.

> The needed paradigm shift: from representation to participation, from isolation to network

21st century European urban citizens are more educated and better informed than ever. The younger generation will be even more. They live in a fast-paced world where information and data regulates every aspect of their lives. They can access virtually limitless amount of information at any time. They use communication channels which are ever more rapid and flexible. Geographic distances are not boundaries anymore; modes of transport keep getting faster; and borders are a more and more vague concept. Cultural references and lifestyles spread globally at an unprecedented pace. The trends I describe here are nothing new but have sharply accelerated during the past decade.

In this context, casting a vote every few years and being the recipient of imposed decisions taken among elites behind closed doors cannot make for a democratic ideal. Citizens express more and more clearly their legitimate right to make their voices heard, their right to transparency and clarity, their right to share their expertise on specific topics in a complex world. Representative democracy cannot suffice for cities' democratic future. It must be complemented. Participatory democracy, direct democracy, and digital democracy are three overlapping concepts that can be called on to revive this grassroots democracy. In any case, grassroots democracy, the democracy operating at the very local level, is the best scale to turn these concepts into practice.

These new complementary forms of democracy share common beliefs and ambitions. The first underlying belief is that common interest can be best achieved by more closely integrating the opinion and expertise of individual citizens or of their collective groupings in all stages of policy making, from the agenda setting stage to its implementation and evaluation. The second belief, specific to digital democracy but necessary to efficient participatory democracy is that digital tools already exist and can be put at the service of collecting citizens' opinions, ideas and expertise. Their common ambition is simply to revive active citizenship and to engage citizens closer to decision makers to shape our common future and shared living environments.

What does it mean for cities' decision makers? Let's highlight some concrete examples: participatory budgeting in Paris; the student life council in Nancy; and digital democracy tools at the service of urban life in Madrid.

Paris' participatory budget is becoming a well-known experiment among capital cities. Until 2020, 5% of the city's investment budget is open to project proposals from individual citizens. The eligibility of the proposals is checked by the municipality before being put to vote. In 2014, for the first edition, more than 40,000 Parisians voted online and in the polling stations. The 2015 edition mobilised 66,000 voters for 76 eligible projects. The user-friendliness of the online platform, along with a wide communication campaign ensured the success of the initiative.

Nancy is a mid-sized student city located in the Lorraine region in the east of France. It usually ranks as one of the best cities for student life in France, surely not for its climate. But its student life council might be a key factor for this high ranking. The Urban Community of Greater Nancy, which hosts 45,000 students of the University of Lorraine and which holds many municipal competences, has established a rather unique student council. Representatives of students, university staff and teachers, students associations and university services are gathered in a consultative body under the co-chairmanship of an Urban Community elected representative and an elected student. From transport to health or nightlife, all matters of interest to students are discussed, students are encouraged to make proposals and initiate projects that can be debated and implemented. The student council is praised by the student community for its openness and responsiveness to students' issues.

Madrid provides the most recent example of digital democracy in the making through the 'Madrid Decides' platform. In a mere two months of existence, the platform gathered about 4,000 proposals from individual citizens. None of them has so far reached the 2% of Madrid's population threshold required to be discussed by city decision makers. But it is clearly changing citizens' mindsets, allowing them to question what they can do and what they want for their city. The platform should gather even more attention as it gives the chance for Madrid's inhabitants to influence the agenda setting stage.

These examples are a subjective drop in an ocean of emerging new practices. However, my hope is that participatory democracy practices won't remain marginal experiments designed at perpetuating outdated praxis. In order to mainstream these practices, it is crucial that the wider governance framework offered by cities is favourable to their development. Democracy is only one of the good governance

pillars along with transparency, accountability and representativeness of stakeholders. I don't aim to explore further good governance principles here, but it should be remembered that a comprehensive approach is needed to implement these participatory democracy practices.

Surprisingly, while ideas are emerging, democratic innovation transfer and dissemination seems to be lagging behind. Urban citizens all across Europe have never been so mobile, not only within their own country, but also across borders. Students, workers, short-term, long-term, permanent mobility opportunities have never been so diverse and accessible. Along with citizens, their knowledge, their civic experiences and their desire for democracy are travelling as well. One might wonder why then, the obviously successful initiatives of participatory democracy are spreading so slowly. Why Nancy's student life council, Paris' participatory budget and Madrid's online debate platform remain experiments isolated in their own local contexts?

One might argue that resistance to change is the main obstacle to democratic innovation transfer. I would argue that the main barrier is the lack of interest and means to invest into efficient networking. An urban democratic innovation contact point should be established in every town hall desiring to transform democratic ambitions into reality. Analysing successful initiatives from near and distant neighbours; listening to the multicultural buzzing every major city is now made of; the invaluable voices of citizens and their individual civic experiences; sounding out the demands, ideas and ambitions of civil society: such is the mission of a democratic innovation taskforce which every city should be proud to establish. It would then feed on the experiences of others, build its own expertise on existing networks, and facilitate the work of civil society's networks whose flexibility and dynamism should be regarded as an asset to cherish.

> The role of civil society: a catalyst for democracy

The democratic health of a city can probably be measured by the dynamism of its civil society organisations. Sports clubs, youth organisations, art and cultural associations, local solidarity organisations, non-governmental, non-profit organisations and their volunteers should be considered as a city's beating democratic heart. The support they receive to function, the resources they are given to develop their

expert role, the voice they are given in local decision making are additional clues to identify thriving local democracies.

There are plenty of reasons for local decision makers to trust and encourage the development of civil society organisations in a democracy innovation perspective. Their 'expertise d'usage', meaning the knowledge of grassroots realities combined with their individual and collective theoretical expertise qualifies them, without doubt, as relevant interlocutors for local policy development. Their ability to channel information both from grassroots up and top-down as well as to bind seemingly disconnected worlds should not be underestimated either.

Civil society organisations are also to be cherished as the best platforms to develop engagement and civic competences. They provide countless opportunities for engagement and debate, a safe environment to grow for every individual and to take responsibilities at the service of the community, to develop political and community acuteness. They allow individuals to gather in clusters at the service of the common-interest, in flexible low-hierarchy structures.

Finally, these flexible structures are often very well integrated within wider networks. The world of youth organisations is a striking example in this respect. Youth organisations have fully integrated the need for networking, knowledge and practice sharing. Local youth organisation members exchange with their peers at the national and international levels on many different occasions. They build alliances to innovate, to develop new projects, to advocate for their goals. The degree of interaction they achieved is much higher than the one achieved by political decision makers or city administrations across Europe. They have also developed the matching tools to fit this level of interaction. Their networking facilitator's role should be another source of inspiration for city decision makers.

These assets should be considered by local decision makers when developing strategies for local democracy innovation. They should weigh heavily on the scale when assessing the importance of investing in associative life development in local contexts. The instrumental democratic role played by local associations for 21st century democracy within our cities is yet to be fully recognised.

> Ready to take up the democratic challenge?

To quote a famous pop culture reference, (Spiderman for the uninitiated) future cities should be aware that "with great power comes great responsibility". Cities have the immense power of making their inhabitants experience all forms of democracy. They have the power to involve their citizens as never before in shaping decisions affecting their lives and environment. They have the power to build democratic competences from the ground through their citizens' engagement. Great responsibilities stem from these powers. Cities hold the responsibility to revive trust in democracy as they represent the first link in a chain of democratic ambition and desire.

Cities of the future must seize the opportunities lying in front of them, nourish their citizens' democratic desire with their existing experiences and practices, build on their multicultural richness, and use their unprecedented opportunities for networking. In these ways they will be able to transfer rapidly new democratic innovations and build civil society as a key pillar for local democracy.

Cities that will seize the democratic challenge will benefit from it. Achieving a more peaceful coexistence and better shared living environments through renewed democratic practices will be the key to cities' attractiveness in the future. Young people, future active citizens, will look for life environments they can shape together, environments responsive to their needs and ambitions. Besides, cities that will invest in building democratic competences and in renewing democratic practices will radiate as innovators to regional, national and international levels. They will allow citizens to infuse these practices in states and continental institutions for the benefit of global democracy.

Is your city up for this democratic challenge ?

References

- Mairie de Paris (2015), 'Paris Budget Participatif'. [Online] Mairie de Paris. Available from: <https://budgetparticipatif.paris.fr/bp/> [Accessed 27/05/2016]
- Communauté Urbaine du Grand Nancy (2015), 'Conseil de la Vie Etudiante'. [Online] Communauté Urbaine du Grand Nancy. Available from: <http://www.grand-nancy.org/vie-etudiante/conseil-de-la-vie-etudiante/> [Accessed 27/05/2016]
- Ayuntamiento de Madrid (2016), 'Decide Madrid'. [Online] Ayuntamiento de Madrid, Available from: <https://decide.madrid.es> [Accessed 27/05/2016]
- Olivio Dutra, mayor of Porto Alegre, quoted in Aragonès, E., Sanchez-Pagés, S. (2008), 'A theory of participatory democracy based on the real case of Porto Alegre'. European Economic Review, Available from : <http://www.iae.csic.es/investigadorsMaterial/a12231123057archivoPdf88451.pdf> [Accessed 27/05/2016]