DEMOCRACY, PARTICIPATION & CIVIL SOCIETY

Looking at current practices

Grace Barnett

Compass

Compass   **European Cultural Foundation**

Please get in touch, join, support and work with us.

Write to us at Freepost Compass

Email us at info@compassonline.org.uk

You can follow us on Twitter
@CompassOffice

To find out more about Compass,
please visit our website:
www.compassonline.org.uk/join

About Compass and this project
Compass is platform for a good society, a world that is much more equal, sustainable and democratic. We build networks of ideas, parties and organisations to help make systemic change happen. Our strategic focus is to understand, build, support and accelerate new forms of democratic practice and collaborative action that are taking place in civil society and the economy, and to link that up with state reforms and policy. The meeting point of emerging horizontal participation and vertical resources and policy we call 45° Change. The question we are trying to help solve, as we endeavour to #BuildBackBetter, is not just what sort of society we want, but, increasingly, how to make it happen?

Compass

Introduction

20 years into the 21st century, it's clear that we're living through a period of significant social change. And yet our democratic institutions refuse to adapt. We're still struggling with the same partially unelected upper chamber, unrepresentative first-past-the-post voting system, and rigid two-party politics.

Last year, Compass launched Up to Us, the campaign for a Citizen's Convention on UK Democracy. Here, we made the technical case for a special assembly of the people, called together to tackle some of the toughest challenges faced by our democracy.

If we want to create a democratic culture that invites people in, though, we can't restrict our thinking only to big-P "Politics" as represented by elections, Westminster, and political parties. Participatory and collaborative decision making happens in all sorts of settings and places.

We need a cultural infrastructure for a new democratic settlement. To begin to imagine what this might look like, this paper presents a brief review of current instances where culture and civil society have helped underpin new democratic and participatory societies.

This is not intended to be an exhaustive or a definitive account, but rather to give a flavour for some alternative approaches to democratic renewal.

Compass

Towns, Cities, and Local Authorities

The Municipalist Movement

The municipalist movement is all about leveraging power at the local level to do politics differently. At a time where so many feel disenfranchised or left behind, municipalism operates on the local scale to reestablish individual and collective autonomy based on residency and participation. Municipalism often starts small and local, around a specific campaign or issue, and opens up alternative forms of participation from there.

Individual iterations of municipalism will vary in terms of their values and focus (see below), as each reflects the specific local context in which it was established. All of these are built on shared values, such as the commitment to meaningful democratic participation, bottom-up governance, the feminisation of politics, and a rejection of neoliberalism.

Municipalism usually operates at three levels of equal importance:

- Social movements formed around a particular cause or grievance
- Citizen platforms (loose alliances of progressive parties, social movements, citizens etc)
- Political institutions

The movement does not reject traditional political institutions, but rather recognises their importance for effecting real change through cooperation and constructive tension with other players. The movement is aware, however, that political institutions often embody the top-down governance and structural inequalities that municipalism rejects. So, ethical codes of conduct are often developed in order to ground elected municipalist candidates in the values of the movement they represent[1].

Municipalism in Practice

Autrement pour Saillans (Differently for Saillans):

- In 2014, this small village in southern France elected a group of residents proposing a new system of "collegial" governance.
- The movement began as a campaign against the construction of a new supermarket near the town, before gaining momentum as a group for citizen participation.
- The group developed its own governance structure, and adapted the traditional role of the mayor to complement their grassroots style. Instead of representing a centralised seat of power, the mayor's privelages and responsibilities became equal to all other representatives, and the town hall was opened to all as a public building[2].
- The project was highly experimental and experienced many problems,

Compass

such as fatigue among elected officials and frustration with local residents who did not feel that the "new politics" was serving them as well as it could.

Cooperation Jackson

- Founded in 2014 on the theory that empowering the structurally under-employed sectors of the working class through the building of worker-owned cooperatives will be a catalyst for democratisation.
- Promotes access to common resources and democratisation of the means of production.
- Four interconnected institutions: federation of local workers cooperatives, cooperative incubator, cooperative education and training centre, cooperative bank or financial institution.
- Used people's assemblies to stimulate engagement with the project and gain popular support. This lead to success at the 2013 mayoral elections

Barcelona en Comù (Barcelona in Common)

- Municipalist platform launched in 2014 with a manifesto drawn up through citizen participation.
- Policy priorities include radicalising democracy, fighting touristification of the city, remunicipalisation the city's water company, and reducing economic inequality between neighbourhoods.
- Activists participate as individuals, rather than representing a particular party or interest group.
- The feminisation of politics is a key aim of the movement, which also works hard to ensure gender parity in its representation.

Ne da(vi)mo Beograd (Don't Let Belgrade D(r)own)

- A citizen platform which was born out of protests against a proposed waterfront development in the city.
- Civil disobedience provided the platform on which people began to organise, discuss, debate, and engage.
- A strong sense of local identity and history in the city provided a firm foundation on which to grow the movement.
- Participation is planned for future local elections. As the movement has grown and developed, it has implemented a more organised structure and draws on participatory mechanisms to ensure this is done inclusively.
- The movement's famous yellow duck has become an important symbol and rallying point.

Fearless Cities

The Municipalist groups described above all received their first spark from a specific local issue, such as environmental degradation, gentrification, or political corruption

Compass

in local authorities. Because these are all issues with global significance, they have provided the foundation for an international network of Municipalist movements across the world called Fearless Cities[3].

The first ever [Fearless Cities summit](#) was held in 2017, in Barcelona, and with it a global network of Municipliast movements was established. Since then, multiple summits have been held all over the world, enabling exchange of policy and practice, sharing and debating ideas, and taking part in practical workshops.

Co-operative Councils Innovation Network

[The Co-operative Councils Innovation Network](#) is committed to finding better ways for local authorities to work with and for local people and communities. It aims to define a new model of government based on civic leadership, in which elected officials work in partnership with local people.

For example, the network organises policy labs to discuss solutions and proposals tackling common challenges facing local authorities. This is a platform and an opportunity think about ways that local government can support and grow the co-operative economy as a solution to long-standing social problems such as food poverty, social care, and housing[4].

The Amsterdam City Donut

[The Doughnut Economics model](#) proposes that humanity's principle challenge in the 21st century is to find ways to meet the needs of all humans (food, water, shelter, security etc) without exceeding the natural boundaries of the planet[5]. The model was developed by Kate Rayworth as an attempt to respond to that challenge. Its scope is global, but work has recently begun in Amsterdam to adapt it to the city level[6].

The central question of the project is, how can Amsterdam be a home to thriving people, in a thriving place, while respecting the wellbeing of all people? The aim is to enable a conversation which draws on neighbourhood initiatives, start-ups and civil society as well as the established institutions of government, knowledge, and business.

The first stage of answering the question is to create a "city portrait" using four sub questions or 'lenses' as guidance.

- What would it mean for the people of Amsterdam to thrive?
- What would it mean for Amsterdam to thrive within its natural habitats?
- What would it mean for Amsterdam to respect the health of the whole planet?
- What would it mean for Amsterdam to respect the wellbeing of people worldwide?

These questions were answered using existing official data and findings from workshops held in seven different neighbourhoods. The next

Compass

stage of the research will aim to extend this concept by creating a "City Selfie" made up entirely from listening to residents' own experiences and perceptions.

Compass

Social and Cultural Infrastructure

Social Infrastructure

Libraries, schools, playgrounds, parks, swimming pools, pavements, courtyards, community gardens, community organisations, and places of worship are all examples of social infrastructure. The term was coined by sociologist Eric Klinenberg following his research into the Chicago Heatwave of 1995. Klinenberg observed that deaths caused by this extreme weather event were unevenly distributed across the city. Trying to identify the factors which led to increased risk, Klinenberg found that the strongest predictor of a high mortality rate in any given area was the absence of spaces which encourage people to congregate and spend time outside of their home[7].

As the name suggests, Social Infrastructure provides the material foundation for social life. It can act simply by providing a space for people to be visible to one another, or it can provide spaces for communal activities, community organisation, and even political action. The expectation is that a community supported by a strong social infrastructure will be more connected, more resilient, and consequently a more fertile ground for community-led engagement and action.[8]

Cultural Infrastructure

Cultural activity takes many forms: from more traditional cultural institutions such as theatres and galleries through to craft activities performed in the home. All these iterations of culture have a part to play in the ways people articulate their experiences, their relationships, their hopes and fears. The term "'cultural infrastructure" has been coined as a subset of social infrastructure which supports cultural capability within this ecosystem.

Simply put, cultural infrastructure encompasses the systems and structures, tangible or otherwise, which support cultural capacity. To nurture popular support for projects or radical social changes, people need to be able to tell their own stories, trust other people and institutions, be inspired to democratic action, and to imagine what a better future could look like. None of this is possible without a strong cultural infrastructure in place.[9]

Compass

Theatre and the Arts

By acknowledging the importance of social and cultural infrastructure to a healthy democratic society, we open the conversation out to consider the role of spaces not traditionally associated with "politics" in creating this essential sense of identity and belonging.

To illustrate this further, below are three short sketches of the successful integration of participatory decision making into spaces and practices associated with theatre and the arts.

Dr. Kathleen Gallagher

Dr. Kathleen Gallagher is a researcher whose work considers the power of drama to drive social change. She has facilitated a number of projects using participatory techniques to enable expression of the "everyday" experiences of young people, with a particular focus on civic engagement.

Dr. Gallagher uses a "verbatim approach" to theatre making, which means using exact words from interviews and ethnographic research transcripts to create theatre around a specific theme. The aim is to create a storytelling experience which is outside of audiences' usual lived experiences or imaginations.[10]

Audacious Citizens is a project running from 2019-2024 which will look at questions of environmental degradation, as well as social and political polarisation, using collective theatre to help understand the ways people can listen and learn from each other. It also hopes to encourage intergenerational conversations which position youth as a "teacher". The project has a global scope, with workshops situated in Toronto, Bogotà, Coventry, Lucknow, Kaohsiung, and Thessaloniki.[11]

Luke Barnes

Luke Barnes is a writer for film, theatre, and television who often uses participatory practices in his work. *The Jumper Factory* is a play created by inmates of HMP Wandsworth in collaboration with Barnes.[12]

He explains that the success of this approach depends on the writer's ability to listen. He is careful to distinguish between genuine listening and performative listening, saying "....if you don't live it – you're just intellectually understanding or guessing – then what you're effectively saying is that you know these people's lives better than they do."

The writing process for *The Jumper Factory* began by talking to inmates, one to one. The aim of these conversations was to ask:

- What do you want to say?
- What do you want to change?

Compass

- What do you think the community needs to be talking about but isn't?

Some restrictions are required to create a safe environment, in this case that nothing would be discussed that could affect parole, relationships with prisoners or prison staff, or that would force someone to confront unprocessed trauma. The play also had to be designed around the understanding that participation was optional, and that inmates could attend (or not attend) rehearsals and performances as they were willing and/or able to do so.[13]

Creative People and Places

A national project backed by Arts Council England and Lottery funded, bringing the arts to places where historically there have been fewer opportunities for engagement in this sector. It is guided by the principle that, in order to reach new audiences, projects must be shaped on the ground by the voices and stories of local people. The approach calls for experimentation with different approaches to stimulate new audiences and engagement, but participatory techniques are widely used both in the programming and for decision making within the events themselves.

The project conducts continued assessment and analysis of its progress and learnings, and has therefore produced a wealth of literature on the subject.   The work rejects the idea that low arts engagement is the result of low interest in the arts, and is underpinned by principles of listening, patience, trust building, sharing power, rooting stories in the local, and meeting people where they are.

Working in this way, the projects across the country have helped people to establish authentic personal relationships in their local area, which can go on to strengthen networks and communities. These networks are further strengthened through working with non arts partners, such as refugee groups, interest groups, and churches. Giving people a platform on which to tell their own stories in sometimes unexpected places also helps build a sense of local pride and ownership over public space.[14]

Past Projects Include:
- From Riots to Revolution, Luton: building on real life experience of the 1995 riots on the Marsh Farm Estate, Luton. The project looked to explore and legitimise experiences of this event which is notorious in Luton but little known beyond its borders. At the end of the project, many participants reflected on the renewed sense of local identity, community and pride that it had generated.
- Back to Ours, Hull: Originally part of Hull City of Culture (see below), this project powers a range of arts experiences across the town, all led by local people who can take part as participants, decision-makers, artists, volunteers, and audiences.
- LeftCoast, Blackpool & Wyre: testing the idea of what happens when artists become part of a neighbourhood, rather than visiting a place, and whether this shapes practice to enable the outcome to become more socially useful. Residents and community groups are involved

Compass

in decision making from the programming stage right through to the performance and aftermath.   For example, a fashion label was started in a local pub, challenging the perception that the area, "Isn't really a place where stuff starts, or happens, or moves along."

These are just a few examples of projects under the CPP umbrella. For a full list of projects visit https://www.creativepeopleplaces.org.uk/map

Compass

Cultural Mega Events

We have seen above the potential role of cultural infrastructure, including theatre and the arts, in nurturing participative democratic practice. Similar themes can also be observed on a much larger scale at "Cultural Mega Events" such as the European Capital of Culture scheme. Large cultural events are often publically funded, but perceived to target and benefit higher income groups. Participatory practice has become an increasingly popular way to address this inbalance.

Participation in this context could mean:

- Attending an event as an audience member
- Co-creation of an event
- Contributing to the overall governance of an event
- Volunteering to help with the delivery of an event[15]

European Capitals of Culture

The aims of the European Capital of Culture (EUCoC) scheme were originally twofold: to develop cultural activities, and to promote the European dimension through culture. Since its foundation in 1985, many argue that a new aim of supporting social and economic development has emerged. Indeed, many cities have seen long-term social and economic benefits from EUCoC status. Social benefits include an opportunity for physical and emotional regeneration, with such large scale events often facilitating a renewed sense of local pride. These opportunities for social regeneration have become heavily associated with the idea of participation, either in the design, organisation, and running of the event, or in the form of active participation in the events themselves.[16]

UK City of Culture

Following the success of Liverpool as EUCoC in 2008, a UK City of Culture scheme was proposed and eventually adopted, with the first recipient of the award being Derry-Londonderry in 2013. This was followed in 2017 by Hull, and the next UKCoC will be Coventry in 2021. The regenerative potential of UK City of Culture designation has been acknowledged from the start and all three recipients so far have been motivated in part by a desire to challenge popular perceptions, be it of sectarian violence and social division as in Derry-Londonderry, or industrial decline as with Hull and Coventry.[17]

Hull City UK City of Culture 2017

Hull is a de-industrialising urban region with low levels of engagement in electoral politics. The city also suffers from a reputation for industrial decline, deprivation, and high levels of unemployment. The aim of Hull

Compass

UKCoC 2017 was to challenge these external perceptions by nurturing and showcasing a genuine sense of pride and ownership in the city, in part through the use of participative practice.

As 2017 drew to a close, early analysis showed that the impacts of cultural engagement could be significant. At the end of the year, 75% of residents surveyed said they felt proud to live in Hull, and 75% of visitors said that the experience had changed their perception of Hull for the better. Data also suggested that a significant proportion of audiences were taking part in cultural programming for the first time.[18]

The momentum from 2017 has been carried on into the Back to Ours project outlined above, and the regenerative potential of UK City of Culture Status has been taken up by the organisers of the next UKCoC event.

Coventry UK City of Culture 2021

Coventry is another city using its CoC status to challenge a reputation for urban decline. Although frequently cited as an example of a city past its prime, which never recovered from heavy bombing during WW2 and the withdrawal of industry from the area, modern day Coventry also boasts a culturally diverse community, and an average age 7 years younger than the national average. As UKCoC in 2021, the city aims to explore these contradictions in the content of post-Brexit Britain.[19]

As with Hull in 2017, participation is intended to be central to the way the event is run from the planning stage onwards. Work is already being done to engage community and resident voices through regular open conversations and roundtables. For example, regular "Culture Conversations" are held, each focussed on a specific topic, with the aim of creating a forum to share ideas, network, and bring people in the city together for a conversation.

The principles of collaboration within communities and participatory programming are carried through to the central event of the festival. Event organisers Nigel Jameson and Justine Themen will collaborate with international artists and local residents to tell stories about all the wards of Coventry, in a way which celebrates its diversity and history.[20]

Compass

Online?

The changes to the ways many of us live and work in light of the current Coronavirus pandemic has meant that much more of life has moved online. As mass gatherings are no longer possible in many places, many of the events and movements described above will be forced to make changes to the way they operate.

Although it is important to remember that reliable internet and computer access are not universal, it is also likely that moving participatory discussions to an online platform could lower barriers to participation for certain groups.

For example, *LeJourdApres* is an online consultation on life after the Coronavirus, initiated by a group of French ministers. To lend some structure to the conversation, it is built around eleven themes: Healthcare, Work, Consumerism, Community and solidarity, Education, Digital futures, Democracy, Diversity, Europe, Value and cost, and Defense.[21]

The project is an early attempt at moving consultation online, and as such has some obvious flaws. Most significantly, it makes no effort to encourage those who do not frequently participate in political debate to engage, and therefore is likely to only capture a minority of voices. However, it does provide a good starting point for imagining what ways in which digital tools could be used to complement and improve participatory democratic practice.

Compass

Endnotes

1. An in-depth free online course on the origins and scope of the Municipalist Movement can be found at https://la-commune-est-a-nous.commonspolis.org

2. Source: https://www.mairiedesaillans26.fr/gouvernance-collegiale-et-participative/

3. Colau, A. et al, *Fearless Cities: A Guide to the Global Municipalist Movement,* New Internationalist. (2019)

4. For a full list of Councils in the network see https://www.councils.coop/about-us/our-members/

5. For a short video explanation of the Donut Theory, see https://youtu.be/1BHOfIzxPjI

6. A more detailed description of the Amsterdam Donut Project can be found at https://www.kateraworth.com/wp/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/20200406-AMS-portrait-EN-Single-page-web-420x210mm.pdf

7. Klinenberg, E., (2002) Heat Wave: A Social Autopsy of Disaster in Chicago, University of Chicago Press.

8. Klinenberg, E. (2019), *Palaces for the People: How Social Infrastructure Can Help Fight Inequality, Polarization, and the Decline of Civic Life*, Penguin Random House.

9. Gross, G., & Wilson, N. (2020), Cultural democracy: an ecological and capabilities approach, International Journal of Cultural Policy, 26:3, 328-343

10. https://www.oise.utoronto.ca/dr/dr-gallagher/

11. https://www.oise.utoronto.ca/dr/global-youth-digital-citizen-artists/

12. https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2019/feb/26/a-world-to-escape-into-how-theatre-gives-prisoners-a-way-out

13. http://exeuntmagazine.com/features/making-work-real-people-luke-barnes/

14. https://www.creativepeopleplaces.org.uk/content/our-aims

15. Problematising the question of participation in Capitals of Culture. / Tommarchi, Enrico; Hansen, Louise Ejgod; Bianchini, Franco.
In: Participations: Journal of Audience & Reception Studies, Vol. 15, No. 2, 2018, p. 154-169.

16. https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/creative-europe/actions/capitals-culture_en

17. For more on the history of the UK City of Culture scheme see https://www.britishcouncil.org/research-policy-insight/insight-articles/city-culture-reflects

18. https://static.a-n.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Cultural-Transformations-The-Impacts-of-Hull-City-of-Culture-2017.pdf

19. See the Coventry 2021 manifesto at https://coventry2021.co.uk/about/our-story/

20. https://coventry2021.co.uk/news/nigel-jamieson-and-justine-themen-appointed-as-co-directors-of-signature-event/

21. To access this project visit https://lejourdapres.parlement-ouvert.fr

Compass

COMPASS IS THE PRESSURE GROUP FOR A GOOD SOCIETY

We believe in a world that is much more equal, sustainable and democratic. We build alliances of ideas, parties and movements to help make systemic change happen.

| JOIN COMPASS TODAY | action.compassonline.org.uk |

Compass

CompassGoodSociety

CompassGoodSociety

CompassOffice