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**Phronesis, deconstruction, and democratic theory:
A hybrid interpretive approach to democratic systems**

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1. Introduction

How must the democratic theorist proceed today? For some decades now, democratic theory—no doubt in tune somewhat with political science’s resonating Perestroikan chord—has announced many (re)turns: participatory, deliberative, interpretive, pragmatic. Now, a systemic turn is taking place, which makes sense of democracy more holistically around interrelated responses to empirical problems (of democratic organization) rather than exhaustively through one value- or method-driven theory. Indeed, recent research on systems thinking in democratic theory has led to a deeper, more nuanced sensitivity towards power and domination (and thereby legitimacy and responsibility) that reach more widely and inter-connectedly beyond whatever any idealized conception of democracy instantiates here or there. But as democratic theorists become increasingly interested in what democracy is in light of context, experience, language, and the relations (institutional or otherwise) between them—that is, in what democracy *means* within and across times and places *for* the very people working through problems and making decisions—there remains only modest attention to interpretive and practice-centred ways of inquiring into such areas.

This perhaps unsurprising observation is nevertheless strange, especially given the dialectic appeal of the systemic approach in democratic theory. Consider how the remarkable conceptual clarity with which democratic systems capture power and legitimacy *generally*, within a systemic division of (democratic) labor, depends on understanding power and legitimacy *particularly*, as they constantly emerge and are acted upon within more concrete and situated parts of any system. Becoming more attentive to how people understand themselves to be acting democratically or not in order to discern and even advocate for a more democratically balanced system, the democratic theorist today must proceed not towards mere methodological plurality, but towards greater commitment to do research and theory that matters to actual democratic goals and efforts in the everyday.

Below I present two ways of doing such research—Bent Flyvbjerg’s phronetic social research and Jacques Derrida’s deconstruction—as options more necessary than ever for critical inquiry in democratic theory.¹ First, I begin by demonstrating how the recent (re)turning direction of the latter field today relies on key critical aspects of the former two strategies for research, with all striving towards explicitly democratic ends. In particular, I trace how contemporary democratic theory up to Mark Warren’s problem-based approach has moved closer and closer to adopting four common and crucial features of both phronetic and deconstructive research. Next, and in light of this methodological “overlapping,” I argue that the latter two research strategies are therefore indispensable to the study of democratic systems. Here I discuss two general areas in which such a hybrid interpretive approach would be most effective: in understanding how to do what Warren calls “functional sorting” for the sake of democratizing political systems; and in understanding how social movements “function” in democratic systems today. The last section deals with some bigger concerns regarding my serious engagement with Derrida. I argue against what has long been the conventional view that distances Derridean deconstruction from democratic theory by hinting at the democratic project (if not method or theory) that Derrida was developing, especially in his later years, and the growing recent scholarship around this overlooked development.

¹ Other ways of doing research, such as Paolo Freire’s (1970) praxis-based *conscientização*, Edward Said’s (2004) critical humanism, or James Tully’s (2009) “public philosophy” approach, may be appealing options to the democratic theorist too; they also share (or so I would argue) certain critical aspects that both phronetic and deconstructive research strategies necessarily employ. However, I limit my argument here strictly to the latter two, for reasons that will be clearer in section four.

Moreover, I reconsider Flyvbjerg's own rejection of Derrida and demonstrate how phronetic and deconstructive ways of doing research can, in fact, complement each other. Ultimately, I advance a hybrid interpretive approach to doing democratic systems research that combines methodological and democratic insights from both Flyvbjerg and Derrida. In other words, a general research strategy is what I hope to develop below, one that helps democratic theorists (as situated political actors, and vice versa) consider more sincerely and seriously how they and others understand and act towards democracy.

2. Flyvbjerg, Derrida, and democratic systems

The recent change in focus within contemporary democratic theory closely parallels the direction that both phronetic social research and Derridean deconstruction have adopted. Here I sketch out what each of the latter modes of research most significantly entails, as well as highlight some similar aspects between the two, including a fundamental democratic trajectory that runs through both of them. I then present a more detailed description of some of the key proponents of the pragmatic and systemic approaches to democratic theory, before weaving together the main affinities between the critical movements, parts, and aspirations of all three.

2.1 *Phronetic social research*

In *Making Social Science Matter*, Flyvbjerg develops a well known case for a research methodology that challenges much of the scientific observation and quantitative modeling so commonly emulated as the standard of methodological validity in the social sciences. Rather than focusing exclusively on the instrumental rationality inherent in positivist methods to explain societal phenomena, social scientists should pay more attention to the “value-rationality” or shared conduct that dynamically motivates people to comprehend what “society” is and how to act within it. Without any study of the practical judgments among those who are particularly affected by a certain social problem, or without taking into account the contextualized reasons and practices behind local responses to broader issues, social science risks offering a detached explanation of empirical causes and effects that become intelligible only through a researcher's pre-conceived understanding of an examined problem. Such findings provide no substantive insight into why an issue is actually an “issue” and thereby no real benefit to the people acutely affected by the problem at hand. Thus, Flyvbjerg proposes phronetic social research, the result of a nuanced account of Aristotelian *phronesis* coupled with a Foucauldian lens of power, as a more receptive approach towards studying and contributing to the experience of social problems outside their epistemic and technical stranglehold within positivist social science.²

This contemporary construction of *phronesis* as a research methodology engages researchers in closely conducting case studies on how a certain issue or concept practically matters to involved parties and within particular contexts.³ Flyvbjerg lists four key value-rational questions

² As Flyvbjerg puts it with regard to Aristotle's three intellectual virtues: “Whereas *episteme* is found in the modern words ‘epistemology’ and ‘epistemic’, and *techne* in ‘technology’ and ‘technical’, it is indicative of the degree to which thinking in the social sciences has allowed itself to be colonized by natural and technical science that we today do not even have a word for the one intellectual virtue, *phronesis*, which Aristotle saw not only as the necessary basis for social and political inquiry, but as the most important of the intellectual virtues.” See Flyvbjerg (2001), 3-4.

³ Flyvbjerg does mention that case studies are not always an appropriate method and that the phronetic researcher should choose—collectively, with others—what methods and tools to employ (including large-N studies, for instance) according to the kind of problem studied (2001, 86-7). I use case studies here in a very broad sense, in a way that should encourage taking into critical consideration the particular circumstances and values in play that give actual

that should chronologically guide the phronetic researcher.⁴ The first one, *where are we going?*, focuses inquiry towards how local institutions and practices currently frame and address a particular problem or issue, which requires a diverse array of data collection from archival research to participant observation. For instance, Flyvbjerg offers the example of his own work on the state of democracy in the Danish city of Aalborg, in which he asks “where the residents of Aalborg are going with democracy.” He proceeded with the Nietzschean tendency to look through “the little things”: in this case, various official documents and correspondence that detail, among other things, how government and corporate actors approved infrastructure and urban planning projects.⁵ Such a specific investigation revealed the largely behind-the-scenes collusion between elected representatives and particular corporate representatives from automobile industries, despite the formal appearance of democratic decision-making processes that the municipality of Aalborg touted to the public.

Once getting some sense of what direction a community is heading towards on an issue (e.g. the extent to which public decision-making is democratic in Aalborg), the second question emerges: *who gains, and who loses, by which mechanisms of power?* In Flyvbjerg’s example, the supposedly democratic deliberation between elected representatives and public officials on decreasing automobile use in Aalborg quietly reserved an important space for certain third parties that were very partial to the automobile industry. This situation, in turn, greatly empowered their position over many other citizens who voiced contrary views but lacked such a public platform. This institutionally entrenched position at the municipal speaking table further privileged those favourable to increasing automobile use with the ability to interpret empirical conditions and statistics in a way that could persuade government decision-making and still work in their benefit. Following (again) the Nietzschean insight that “interpretation is itself a means of becoming master of something,” Flyvbjerg here captures an undemocratic practice in which unelected actors have undue influence over the narrative of reality or the legitimate “facts” with which the city of Aalborg officially makes public decisions.⁶

The third question, *is it desirable?*, refers to the situation that the previous two questions uncovers and thereby demands the phronetic researcher to take a stance on the issue as it has been exposed through practical research and experience. In Flyvbjerg’s case, the present specified situation of “democracy” in Aalborg was not desirable: there was an earlier city council vote that clearly demonstrated the city’s approval of more environmental protection and better public transit at the expense of driving cars; and additional interviews and testimonials from many residents and groups in Aalborg reinforced such views favoring a general decrease in automobile use. It is here that phronetic research requires assessing the value-rational claims on the present “tension point” of how democracy (and modernity) should function in Aalborg, with the Aristotelian end of taking a stance on what is better for *us*, that is, for the residents of the city (or all reference groups within the present study) and the now involved researcher.⁷ Identifying this common good or effective

meaning to a certain problem or “tension point.” This understanding of case studies is present in Flyvbjerg et al. (2012).

⁴ Flyvbjerg (2001), 145.

⁵ Ibid., 146-7.

⁶ Ibid., 153.

⁷ Flyvbjerg et al. (2012), 288-294. In all of the eight examples of applied phronesis in this book, Flyvbjerg et al. retrospectively discover what appears to be an intrinsic feature in phronetic social research: *the identification of a tension point within current power relations that belies legitimate social conduct*. Flyvbjerg explains the significance of recognizing, problematizing, and resolving a tension point through a Foucauldian analogy of hitting a rock with a

truth involves the quasi-Foucauldian step of exposing current power (or discursive) relations and thereby the actual winners and losers behind a particular matter. In this sense, what is good is that which ameliorates—or better, empowers—the positions of those who are unjustly subject to others who have the exclusive “power [to define] physical, economic, social, and environmental reality itself” through economic and social, rather than democratic, privilege.⁸

The last step for the phronetic researcher is to contribute positively to the common good manifest in the assessed particular circumstances and shared values—hence, *what should be done?* This contribution can depend variously on context and collective judgment. In his Aalborg example, Flyvbjerg decides to orient his research “in ways that would make it relevant to practical politics, administration, and planning.”⁹ He focuses on problems already apparent within society writ large and actively calls public attention to his results, which then happened to contrast with several claims made on behalf of the municipal government (and third party collaborators). More broadly, however, Flyvbjerg is clear that “we must effectively communicate the results of our research to fellow citizens.”¹⁰ In doing so, and in a manner of communication that is accessible to an everyday audience and directed at all who are involved in the research, phronetic social research escapes being a “sterile academic activity” and becomes actually useful for particular communities to understand and respond to problems that matter to them. In other words, it is “an activity done in public for the public, sometimes to clarify, sometimes to intervene, sometimes to generate new perspectives, and always to serve as eyes and ears in our ongoing efforts at understanding the present and deliberating about the future.”¹¹

Phronetic researchers cannot be afraid of getting their hands dirty in the very partisanship, conflict, and exercise of power that they seek to reveal and resolve. To do so, they must, in Pierre Bourdieu’s words, get a “sense of the game[, which] is that sense of the forth-coming of the game, of what is to be done ... in order to bring about the forth-coming state of the game ... [or] the sense of the history of the game, which is only acquired through experience of the game.”¹² Such habituated, practical knowledge of, say, the (currently skewed) game of democracy in Aalborg, then feeds back through public dialogue and social action to everyone who presently participates in the game. Flyvbjerg’s contextually informed hope is that such research will encourage rules or styles of play leading to a fairer, and more inclusive, reality. This phronetic process of research is ongoing, however, and, at best, it “[contributes] to society’s capacity for value-rational deliberation and action,” which is the democratic goal towards which Flyvbjerg’s *phronesis* always strives.¹³ Without engaging practical judgments that revolve locally around an issue, social science fails to expose the particular social construction of rationality—largely that of a strictly scientific, modern, and instrumental kind—through which few individuals and groups interpret what is universal or real for the rest of society. This silence on the everyday conduct that habitually enables

hammer: “If you hit the rock at random it seems unbreakable, even if you hit it hard. If you hit the rock strategically at the small, near invisible fault lines that most rocks have, the rock will fracture, even if you hit it gently. Tension points are the fault lines that phronetic researchers seek out; that is where researchers hit existing practices to make them come apart and create space for new and better ones, where ‘better’ is defined by the values of phronetic researchers and their reference groups” (2012, 289-290). Examples of tension points include “economic growth versus environmental protection in aviation” and “elite university education versus the needs of marginalized communities”—for other examples, see Flyvbjerg et al. (2012), 289.

⁸ Flyvbjerg (2001), 155.

⁹ Ibid., 157.

¹⁰ Ibid., 166.

¹¹ Ibid., 167.

¹² Pierre Bourdieu (1997/2000), 211-12.

¹³ Flyvbjerg (2001), 166.

and constrains our responses to empirical problems is what makes an exclusive focus on science, or on the *episteme* and its aim for theoretical omniscience, not really *matter* in the social sciences. Rather, such analytical study needs to occur in tandem with a power-sensitive mode of *phronesis* that uncovers value-based reasoning and contextual meaning behind social action and thus offers a more direct benefit that only a more balanced mode of research can offer.

2.2 Poststructuralist deconstruction

Like Flyvbjerg, Derrida puts to task the underlying epistemic origin of Western metaphysics and science from which our understanding of what is true, legitimate, and right is too often taken for granted within the human sciences. Assuming such a self-evident basis, in turn, unjustly conceals an asymmetrical distribution of power that privileges specific ways of being and knowing over others. The Derridean critique of the particular structural roots of universal(ized) ideas and theories, which “thrust deep into the soil of ordinary language,” takes a largely linguistic or textualist route, one that focuses on how we responsibly interpret and use language, symbols, and signs, as well as the act of interpretation itself, within a specific text.¹⁴ Deconstruction enters here as a critical strategy to expose the everyday semantic slippage in written words, gestures, and tones that are not only articulated inescapably within an encompassing conceptual field of knowledge, but also able to challenge their epistemic confinement in any such finite field of purported theoretical validity. In this way, deconstruction demands a critical awareness to the aporetic conditions of concepts and the text, or to the always present fact that “language bears within itself the necessity of its own critique.”¹⁵ That is, we need to be open to the unpredictable (but linguistically exhaustible) possibilities of meaning that the structural boundaries of “true” or “accepted” concepts and propositions historically foreclose, as well as cognizant of the latter necessarily and paradoxically being the deconstructive medium through which we articulate such a self-threatening recognition. In doing so, Derrida attempts to open more inclusive, public spaces for us to communicate, comprehend, and act upon diverse perspectives and meaning that are always irreducible to alterity and, thus, subject to change.

Deconstruction focuses most intently on the present, particular mode of interpretation that we assume legitimate in order to understand what is true and right, and this concern leads Derrida, *à la* Montaigne, to outline “two interpretations of interpretation” within the structural discourse of the human sciences in general.¹⁶ The first one attempts to uncover the capital-T truth behind social reality, a key motive behind positivist social research. It is an interpretative process that “dreams of deciphering a truth or origin which escapes play,” or avoids being justifiably replaceable in meaning, and which also seriously confirms what *is* through founding the very conceptual structure or order that semantically situates everything that can be known.¹⁷ Such an absolute presence of what is truly “there,” according to this more classical version of interpretation in social science, assumes an illuminating fixed origin or center both within and outside of the discursive structure of coherent meaning that it makes explicit. Within the structure, this center—which, for Derrida, predominantly establishes the epistemic conditions of Western science and philosophy—enables and restricts our linguistic and expressive field of possibility for playing with our understanding of the world in which we live. At the same time, the center paradoxically sits outside the structural

¹⁴ Jacques Derrida (1978), 278.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 284.

¹⁶ The epigraph to Derrida’s “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences” (1978) is a quote by Montaigne: “We need to interpret interpretations more than to interpret things.”

¹⁷ Derrida (1978), 292.

boundaries of potential meaning and knowledge that it makes possible, because it is what motivates one to conceive the totality of a full presence—the “structurality of structure,” everything *as it is because it is formed as such*—in a way that is without play or an alternative way of being. Here the center becomes “a fundamental immobility and a reassuring certitude, which itself is beyond the reach of play” and, as such, embodies an initial pre-structural desire for making coherent sense of our world and being, “the centered structure” itself.¹⁸ Assuming this irreducible desire to be one always for the axiomatic objectivity of “the” center, origin, or truth permits the human sciences to “[live] the necessity of interpretation as an exile”; that is, it enables social scientists to assume a standpoint outside of the social in order to decipher the *episteme* that explains the structural totality of historical meaning from its ahistorical center.¹⁹ Thus, interpretation of this first type seeks to eliminate the playful uncertainty of linguistic and symbolic meaning to the extent that it can discover how the epistemic origin *truly* forms or totalizes all social meaning into a coherent structural order.

Identifying the human sciences as tantamount to only this first kind of interpretation would be similar to what Flyvbjerg decries as the vain attempt of the social sciences emulating the natural sciences, and Derrida, of course, recognizes this too. Enter the second interpretation of interpretation, or the particular reading strategy of deconstruction, within the human sciences. Here the focus lies not in the center but at the margins, where substitutions of what is meant by this term or that turn of phrase can be made through, as well as contribute to, destabilizing the centered meaning or totalizing presence within a text—or, in other words, through play or what Derrida calls *supplementarity*.²⁰ The origin is no longer sought after as such (i.e. capital-T truth) but rather as the unconditional (or incalculable or undecidable) that we come to know through particular conditions (or calculation or decision). In turn, these conditions supplement the very meaning of their origin and the ways in which it structurally coheres our field of discourse and knowledge. Here Derrida’s second interpretation of interpretation, then, “affirms play” that continuously scrutinizes the supplementary status of any assumed center, rather than deciphers the true center by way of eliminating any play that, by definition, only obfuscates. Accordingly, deconstruction becomes the strategy for uniquely locating and amplifying aporias within the text. It can expose the structural limits of that text’s (i.e. western logocentric) center through playfully pushing its inherent boundaries between the unconditional/conditional, universal/particular, reasonable/unreasonable, etc.²¹ Crucially, the purpose behind deconstructing the aporetic conditions of any structure of discourse or knowledge is a democratic one, too, as it serves or promises to renew—that is, to set aright in the here and now—the textualized meaning and legitimacy of the material world and how we inhabit it.²²

Like the phronetic social researcher who engages with the “tension point” that others more particularly situated discern between their own experience and more universalized discourses and theories, how Derridean deconstruction chooses to play with any given text is “always caught up in tension.”²³ To find and interpret a particular aporia, perhaps through some semantic slippage,

¹⁸ Ibid., 279.

¹⁹ Ibid., 292.

²⁰ Ibid., 289.

²¹ Throughout Derrida’s extensive and diverse body of work, a somewhat nearly consistent “deconstructive” logic is present, though it goes by many, often ever-changing names: aporia, undecidable, double bind, double constraint, contradictory injunction, antinomy, autoimmunity. See Samir Haddad (2013), 7.

²² Derrida (1978), 292.

²³ Ibid., 290.

can disrupt the (universalized) history and presence of the coherent structure of meaning that contains that contradiction, putting at stake the legitimacy behind why that structure (of discourse, text, knowledge) is structured or centered *as such*. Here the tension that deconstruction seeks out resembles a democratic practice not unlike Flyvbjerg's phronetics. Both are ongoing in their respective inquiries, self-aware of their own (im)perfectibility and, thus, promise to critical repetition.²⁴ They also happen necessarily within the here and now—or, for Derrida, “here-now” [*ici-maintenant*]²⁵—and, therefore, through and for the critical/contradictory interplay between the universal/unconditional and particular/conditional.²⁵ Yet what remains unclear here is just how the deconstructivist locates the specific tension that emerges from the aporetic conditions of a text. Many critics of Derrida charge deconstruction with arbitrary relativism on this point, to be sure.²⁶ But the more serious question here goes beyond whether Derridean deconstruction can be a democratic way of doing research not just in the sense that it radically opens up (or promises) other possibly legitimate understandings (or futurity) outside of whatever the centered structure of (textual) meaning forecloses. We should also ask whether deconstructive research can be democratic in the sense that the particular tensions one locates actually matter and are accessible to those who are affected by them.

The answer, I contend, is an affirmative one, especially when we consider Samir Haddad's reading of the democratic significance of inheritance in Derridean deconstruction. Any and every confrontation with aporias can be understood as inheritance, since the deconstructivist must inherit particular language and ideas (*via* traditions, norms, experiences, etc.) prior to discerning and interpreting any sign or mark of necessary contradiction in a given text.²⁷ So, how one goes about exposing and deconstructing a particular tension within the universal(ized) semantic/structural limits of a text depends on the specific context(s) that one inherits at the moment of interpretation. Such is the necessity to inherit; but with this injunction to inherit there is space for choosing how one *should* inherit, or what end this ongoing, democratic inheritance should legitimate. Haddad develops Derridean inheritance further from locating and amplifying (again and again) aporias to actively (and therefore normatively²⁸) deciding to raise the stakes [*surenchère*] of the contradiction between the universal/particular or center/margin of a text.²⁹ Here we can understand Derrida's enigmatic equation of deconstruction and justice in his long-form essay “Force of Law,” and, as Haddad puts it, how “deconstruction responds to justice by intensifying the aporia in which the latter is necessarily entwined.”³⁰ There is no assurance that exactly how we inherit and decide to

²⁴ Mathias Fritsch (2002) focuses on these aspects (of the promise to repetition and perfectibility) and others (its historical orientation) to demonstrate a normative case for Derrida's “democracy to come.” Haddad criticizes how Fritsch's account privileges the future too much, however. The really normative core of Derridean democracy is to be found by looking in the past (in order to then look ahead, to the future, to the “to-come”) and thereby acknowledging the significance of inheritance in Derrida's work. See Haddad (2013), especially his introduction and chapters 2 and 3.

²⁵ Derrida (2005), 90; Haddad (2013), 39.

²⁶ Perhaps the most notorious criticism of this kind can be found in Foucault (1979), especially the last two paragraphs.

²⁷ Haddad (2013), 22.

²⁸ I cannot develop here how Haddad carefully demonstrates the normativity in the choice—possible only through what Derrida identifies as a “hesitation”—to fuse the constative analysis (of the present, the “here-now”) with a performative commitment (towards a particular normative goal, or towards what is understood as just in the present) when deconstructing or raising the tension of aporias that have been inherited in a particular way. See chapter 3, 66-68, and chapter 4, especially 94-99.

²⁹ Haddad (2013), 35-40; 43.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 43.

raise the aporetic tension will be on the side of justice or not.³¹ Yet, the deconstructivist nonetheless sifts through an entanglement of language, histories, and the values embedded within them in order to identify a particular problem within an inherited stability of a text or discourse, and this observation alone demonstrates just how normatively engaged the researcher can be. Situated between inherited language and context, on the one hand, and the unconditional openness to the future, on the other, it is quite possible (and even preferable) for deconstruction to be collectively informed and guided by those who experience, more directly and urgently, the very problem or aporias at stake. This is actually the non-violent and democratic commitment the Derridean deconstruction undertakes: how we respond to the necessity of inheritance in the here and now determines the “democracy to come [that] names a kind of political action involving a very specific engagement with the past, in which the aporias of past democratic thinking are inherited through intensification of their tensions.”³²

Thus any aporetic tension within the totalizing structure of a discourse or text is neither the object of Derrida’s infinite fancy nor the promise of some airy democratic openness; it is the locus of two interrelated events: first, a shared inheritance of a socially contingent problem; and, second, a shared decision in how to understand, interpret, and resolve it. The necessary injunction to inherit here is democratic because it requires the deconstructivist researcher to include and reflect on the very language, histories, traditions, context, and so on that configure values in a particular, situated way—in a word, legacies—through which tensions or problems can be interpreted and amplified to expose the unconditional/conditional limits of a text or discourse. And being aporetic, these legacies are “resolved” insofar as they are renewed, set aright for now and for those who inhabit within them, but simultaneously left open to be inherited, interpreted, and challenged once again. Such is the democratic game (of interpretation) at play here within deconstruction, initiated by the democratic act of Derridean inheritance and sustained by how we inherit democracy across time and space and through practice.

At this point, I hope that, without losing too much to some swift generalizations, the preceding exposition of Flyvberg’s phronetic social research and Derrida’s deconstruction point to some shared aspects of methodology that are all oriented towards an overall democratic purpose. At least four such characteristics should be discernible beyond immediate contention. First, both methods *locate a tension* (or aporia) situated between universal (*episteme*, objective, fact-oriented) and particular (*phronesis*, intersubjective, value-oriented) ways of understanding. Second, this tension manifests only in *the here and now*, in a particular context and among particular people/communities who inherit and practice the very language, histories, rules, etc. that render the tension valuable and urgent. Third, given the emergence of any tension within the present, both methods must be *ongoing, repetitive, and (im)perfectible* as they interpret social problems on legitimacy and justice, which constantly change across context, time, practices, and so on without any definitive end or solution.³³ And fourth, due to its indeterminable state, any tension between universal and particular meanings and values demands (as a democratic injunction to inherit, perhaps) the phronetic or deconstructivist researcher *to interpret and address the problem in a way that is normatively engaged, or democratically desirable to those affected*. From this brief

³¹ Haddad qualifies the preceding claim by showing how such a particular *surenchère* may lead to either justice or injustice, since “there is nothing inherently good in an increasing openness or increasing intensification of an aporia” (2013, 43).

³² *Ibid.*, 71.

³³ To be clear, by “(im)perfectible” I mean that which cannot be perfect or perfected, that which is always open to revision. With this specific term I allude more to Derrida than Flyvbjerg, but both agree on its significance in their respective research strategies (or so I argue).

conceptual mapping, we see that both phronetic social research and Derridean deconstruction overlap on some key methodological features. In considering further their shared democratic aspirations that motivate their respective ways of doing research, then, I next evaluate what they have in common with some recent methodological shifts in democratic theory.

2.3 Democratic systems, before and now

Contemporary democratic theory has been moving, in large part, away from the model-based divisions of democracy (and the debates between them, like aggregation *versus* deliberation) and towards conceptualizing democracy more broadly and diversely through how it can respond to specific empirical problems.³⁴ In particular, democratic theorists are becoming more aware of the restrictive framing of practical issues within value- and method-driven democratic conceptions, as well as how such everyday problems and limitations should critically inform how we theorize democracy—rather than the other way around.³⁵ Looking into how people actually perceive, organize, and act around the empirical gaps within theoretical explanations of democratic institutions is thus one way to work pragmatically from particular cases of democratic practice to more generalized notions of how democracy can and should function in a more systemic way.³⁶ In doing so, we also see democratic theory as becoming more closely aligned with the critical, interpretive concerns and features of phronetic social research and Derridean deconstruction.

Let us quickly identify some notable shifts in the field of democratic theory as of late. First, there has been a recent pragmatic turn in democratic theory, which we may follow through either the common emphasis on moving back-and-forth from experience and practice to ideal (participatory or deliberative) theories,³⁷ the “second-order priority” of democracy as a self-correcting and experimental institution,³⁸ or Archon Fung’s “pragmatic equilibrium” that “takes problems and the contexts in which they occur as the domain of democratic theories.”³⁹ In the latter, Fung “tests” different substantive conceptions of democracy, each centered around a particular value or method, through recording the actual consequences of the collective decision-making that that conception prescribes for a particular public problem. Through the application of these steps and a later final one reflecting on the consequences of alternative conceptions, the pragmatic democratic theorist endeavours to locate the theory that synthesizes most with its empirical consequences, or that encompasses a wider range of problems and contexts.⁴⁰

Around the same time, a turn towards other interpretative methods, largely from anthropology and philosophy of language, had emerged in the study of democracy. Directly reacting to the positivist capture of democracy through minimalist definitions and quantitative measures, Lisa Wedeen advocates for more “Wittgensteinian attention” to the very concept of democracy, wherein “the confusions and arguments the concept generates reveal to us important tensions in how we think and act in the world.”⁴¹ By uncovering etymological roots, tracing

³⁴ Mark E. Warren (2017), 2-6.

³⁵ Ian Shapiro (2002).

³⁶ The word “function” here should not be understood in terms of classical functionalism but rather in the way that Warren (2017 41-3) discusses it with regard to a problem-based or functionalist approach to democratic theory, on which I elaborate below.

³⁷ Jane Mansbridge (2003).

³⁸ Jack Knight and James Johnson (2011).

³⁹ Fung (2007), 445.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Wedeen (2004), 281.

historical usage, scrutinizing family resemblances to other words, and following ‘meaning as use’, the interpretative analysis through Wittgenstein’s ordinary language games—and more contemporary proponents, such as Robert Brandom—has indeed opened up some critical space to understand democratic action and institutions *via* practices of legitimation and interpretation.⁴² Moreover, ethnography surfaces as another desirable method that “can and should help ground [abstractions]” in politics or, more particularly, conceptions of democracy.⁴³ Accordingly, the interpretive democratic theorist focuses on how to understand, on a case-by-case basis, truth claims about democracy through their meaning and representation that are situated and constructed in language, history, culture, and so on.

Both these pragmatic and interpretive strands of democratic theory arrived and developed on the scene when certain ideal (deliberative, participatory, aggregative) standards of democracy could not adequately explain or anticipate a growing number of real world issues. Thus, deliberative democratic theory—being perhaps the most popular and well researched of these earlier conceptions of democracy—concurrently put its ideal normative claims to empirical test and practical application at discrete sites of deliberation, before later changing once again its general focus towards the broader democratic process across varying deliberation-inducing sites, i.e. deliberative systems.⁴⁴ This even more recent turn⁴⁵ towards systems thinking has no doubt revived theorizing about (democratic) deliberation in ways that usefully make sense of its past thorny empirical issues, such as self-interest, power, pressure, and expertise, as well as of its more legitimate time and place in relation to other practices and values.

Such systems thinking and the complementary (and now largely reconciled) pragmatic and interpretive turns in deliberative democratic theory contribute to what Mark Warren articulates as a problem-based direction towards democratic systems today. Deliberative systems track and evaluate a broader sense of legitimacy in democratic decision-making through observing how three deliberative functions or goals—epistemic, ethical, and democratic—are realized within and across different sites of decision-making and action.⁴⁶ Accordingly, a healthy deliberative system would generate and sustain persuasive solutions to political conflict and problem-solving through a deliberative division of labour among and between its situated parts. Here we see how sites and institutions that are strongly or weakly deliberative, non- or even anti-deliberative nonetheless contribute to broader deliberations in the system at different times and places, thereby shifting the research question of (democratic) deliberative legitimacy to a wider, interconnected array of concrete practices and context-specific meaning.⁴⁷ Warren builds on the systemic approach’s insight here into how social and institutional ecologies situate the democratic function of any practice or institution; however, he does so without privileging deliberation as the ideal to which

⁴² Ibid., 281. See also James Tully (2009), 39-70, and Melissa Williams and Mark Warren (2014).

⁴³ Wedeen (2010), 257. Wedeen chiefly follows the interpretivist call to action in political science that Clifford Geertz (2000 chap. 11) most likely initiates.

⁴⁴ Mansbridge et. al (2012), 24-6. See also David Owen and Graham Smith (2015), 214. For a systemic view of deliberative capacity building, see John Dryzek (2009).

⁴⁵ This systemic turn is perhaps best understood as a “rediscovery of systems thinking,” given that Habermas (1996) offered what was the first well-developed account of deliberative democracy as a systems approach. See Warren (2017), 41, and Owen and Smith (2015), 214-15.

⁴⁶ Mansbridge et al. (2012), 10-13. “The successful realization of all three of these functions promotes the legitimacy of democratic decision-making by ensuring reasonably sound decisions [epistemic function] in the context of mutual respect among citizens [ethical function] and an inclusive process of collective choice [democratic function],” which any deliberative system strives to realize as a whole but not in each and every one of its parts (12).

⁴⁷ Ibid., *passim*.

all other values, practices, etc., are evaluated as democratic or not. Deliberative systems, in short, remain beholden to the “models of democracy approach,” through which democracy is (and has been) theorized more or less exclusively around one particular practice, institutional device, norm, or outcome.⁴⁸ Rather than consider the research questions that a model of *deliberative* democracy narrowly frames—i.e. democratic problems being largely ones concerning deliberation—, Warren flips the script and asks what problems should we expect deliberation, among other practices, to address within a democratic political system.⁴⁹ In following this problem-based approach, then, there is a clear “pragmatist and consequentialist” emphasis on how context and practice co-generate both the normative and systematic, or *democratic*, conception of these problems (as functions), as well as an evident interpretivist sensitivity in identifying “democracy-relevant generic practices” that “*people can understand and perform*, especially but not only within the developed democracies,” within and across their own situated languages, histories, traditions, and knowledges.⁵⁰

To be clear, a problem-based approach to democratic theory entails assessing the problems any political system needs to solve in order to be democratic. Warren abstracts three problems—empowered inclusion, collective agenda and will formation, and collective decision making—that intuitively and generally become the normative and systemic functions of a democratic system.⁵¹ How these functions are achieved, however, depends on the particular function-specific strengths and weaknesses of practices, seven of which Warren identifies as “democracy-relevant generic practices”: recognizing, resisting, deliberating, representing, voting, joining, and exiting. The more we understand which practices offer the most democratic effects (i.e. serve a function best, or address a problem most democratically) at any given site or situation, which is what Warren calls “functional sorting,” the more we can democratize a political system through institutionalizing, incentivizing, and protecting those context-sensitive democratic practices as they work in a wider democratic division of labour.⁵²

By asking what are the problems to which certain practices, like deliberation, are the democratic answers, Warren indeed problematizes earlier “models of democracy” from without

⁴⁸ Warren (2017), 40-1. And, hence, the “proliferation of adjectives that name and differentiate models” of democracy (40). See also Smith (2009) for another (and perhaps precursory) way of analyzing democratic institutions, practices, and innovations beyond models, i.e. through the extent to which they realize four democratic goods as well as two institutional goods.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 40. For another (and related) argument in support of *democratic* rather than *deliberative* systems, see Owen and Smith (2015).

⁵⁰ Warren (2017), 42, 45, respectively (and emphasis mine). Warren acknowledges his debt to Weber and Searle in accepting “generic political practices” as “ideal-typical social actions” that are rule-oriented and thereby able to be institutionalized. As rule-oriented, however, these social actions (as practices) can and do vary widely by context and so on, especially in relation to the social intentions that action is supposed to express in a more immediate sense. This all appears to demand more interpretive tools and care to understand and conceptualize. Moreover, and as a side note on the interpretive side of (comparative) democratic theory, Warren’s observation that none of the seven “democracy-relevant generic practices” (45) are *inherently* democratic leads us closer to understanding how democracy is indeed practiced throughout the world, that is, through practices that are not essentially democratic (i.e. only seemingly and problematically so through prevalent, dominant western/liberal discourses and values) but imbued with a context- and practice-driven understanding of what is (recognized, experienced, felt as) democratic.

⁵¹ These functions are normative insofar as they function in ways that support democratic ideals, and systematic insofar as they contingently frame how a practice may be more normatively desirable than another given the context. Such functionalist thinking is therefore different (i.e. more normatively up front) than the “objective” or “mechanical” functions that a more classical social system requires. See Warren (2017), 42.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 45. See also Table 1, 46.

rather from within and broadens the (systemic) scope of democratic legitimacy to include all practices, norms, and institutions that are potentially democratic in the right context. As with Flyvbjerg's phronetic approach, Warren's shifting attention from a modelling strategy to a more constructive, problem-based one in democratic theory turns, at least in some ways, to a "post-paradigmatic" or "nonparadigmatic" way of doing research.⁵³ And as with Derridean deconstruction, there is an inescapably constant suspicion towards anything idealized more than it should be—the "mere presence" of an institution or norm, perhaps—that centers any "supplemented" meaning of democracy against its more dynamic, functional meaning manifest through its situated practice.⁵⁴

Moving further in this direction, we can also begin to see how a problem-based approach to democratic theory encompasses the four shared features of both Flyvbjerg's and Derrida's research methods discussed above. Indeed, a problem or *tension* necessarily situates how we are to understand the value-based (democratic) significance of practices that we intend to research. The problem itself becomes particularly intelligible and practicable through concrete cases, through context in the *here and now* that meaningfully situates and validates certain practices over others. "Functional sorting" of these practices into democratic institutions, then, is an *ongoing, repetitive, and (im)perfectible* process, as contexts change in time and interaction with other situated parts of any political system (not to mention with other political systems) and, along with them, the extent to which problems and their solutions are actually democratic. Finally, the researcher of democratic systems is *normatively engaged* insofar as she ultimately contributes to particular, protean problems—Who is included and empowered and how? Who forms collective agendas and wills and how? Who organizes collective decision capacity and how?—in ways that not only include and understand but also value and struggle for a context-specific practice that is more effectively democratic than another. The problem-based approach to theorizing democratic systems acknowledges that democratic legitimacy is, in partial and concrete terms, at stake—and it requires the democratic theorist to locate the solution with/for certain people and communities and in/through their varying, shared practices, rules, and meanings.⁵⁵

⁵³ Schram (2006), 31. This is so especially if we consider the "useful paradigm" that deliberative democracy is for systems thinking in democratic theory (Mansbridge et al. 2012, 4). But there are also some well intentioned reservations with this claim of moving beyond paradigms in Warren's problem-based approach to democratic systems (or theory), concerns that both phronetic social research and poststructuralist deconstruction might probe and address against if arbitrarily restrictive and anti-democratic.

⁵⁴ Warren (2017), 51. With connection to Derrida here, I'm also interested in one of the advantages to his problem-based approach that Warren lists in his conclusion, that of demonstrating many so-called democratic paradoxes as actual problems and not strict paradoxes. Warren's emphasis on how certain institutions and norms *function* democratically (as practices, in the here and now) in order to identify whether or not they are indeed democratic may render analytically useful Haddad's (2013) account of Derrida's democratic act of inheritance, as much as the latter may render the former more critically aware of its unstable, (im)perfectible status as a promise (of what is and is not democratic).

⁵⁵ Perhaps to an extent, however. Warren does stress that a problem-based approach can be very context-specific but without surrendering its more highly abstracted, stand-alone democratic norms and goals (2017, 51). Yet, at the same time, it's clear that there remains a lot of ideally normative space for interpreting and engaging in "democratic" practices the more we descend Sartori's ladder here and consider what sort of democratic legitimacy is at stake (and what solutions are intelligible and desirable) case by case. The important point here, I suppose, is that the democratic system supports a democratic ideal by virtue of its (democratic) functions, which means that the democratic theorist must also uphold and advance this ideal, though by discerning its more concrete and subtle understandings of it through engaging in various, interconnected problems and practices.

3. Phronetic and deconstructive research on/for democratic systems

Recent methodological development leading up to a problem-based approach to democratic theory invites Flyvbjerg's phronetic social research and Derrida's deconstruction, most clearly through their shared emphasis on actual problems in the here and now and the ongoing, repetitive, (im)perfectible, and normatively engaged ways in which we reflexively interpret and respond to them. In this section I discuss two general areas where these two research methods can and should contribute to research on democratic systems, especially to safeguard against any conceptual captivity of concrete meaning and experience necessary for informing the right practices for the right problems.

3.1 *Understanding the problems that inform democratic functions and practices*

How do we come to understand—not just discern—the problems in political systems *as democratic problems*, which then become functions in a democratic system? How do we come to understand the solutions to these problems *as democratic ones*, which then become the practices and institutions that achieve democratic functions? To these questions Warren provides some convincing answers with great analytic appeal; but by no means should we find his answers definitively exhaustive or accurate, least so in concrete terms.⁵⁶ The very context-sensitive ways in which people understand the normative pull behind this or that practice as “democratic,” or perhaps as the best solution to a locally situated and urgent problem of political organization, remains both clear and somewhat vague here. In one sense, it is quite clear to follow how people commonly perceive particularly contingent cases of one of the three abstracted problems or functions of a democratic political system, before responding to it by way of a particularly contingent form of one of the seven abstracted practices that serves (well or not) a democratic function. In another sense, it is not as clear as it should be in regard to *how* people in a particular context perceive problems as democratic ones—they being aware or not of the analytical definitions that Warren provides us—and how such a common (or contested) perception informs the ensuing, and perhaps equally contested, democratic practice in response to it. Interpreting and understanding more of these micro-moments and -movements—all taking place within the entanglement of histories, languages, traditions, events, rules, and so on that situate any immediate sense of democratic problems and practices—would be crucial for framing democratic possibilities and defects through a finer, more accurate analytic lens.

There have already been closer and more context-sensitive analyses on the democratic-ness of certain practices, though these have focused largely on deliberation.⁵⁷ For instance, Jensen Sass and John Dryzek explore why and how the practice of deliberation varies idiomatically in character across time, space, and culture, for the purpose of contributing to the universality of deliberative democracy. They focus on what they call a “deliberative culture,” which “comprises the meaning and symbols in terms of which deliberative practices are afforded significance within a specific political context,” and they show how each of these cultures deserves further inquiry into its historical emergence, conceptual (social, political) order, and communicative norms that its inhabitants dynamically perform.⁵⁸ Some of these brief cases of deliberation done differently include peculiar emphases on the role of listening (and the listener) in Egyptian deliberative contexts; strict eschewal of aggressive talk in Botswana; and dutiful evasion of any challenge to a

⁵⁶ Warren (2017) explicitly raises this concern, too.

⁵⁷ Jensen Sass and John Drzyek (2014) and Wedeen (2007).

⁵⁸ Sass and Dryzek (2014), 8. For the latter three lines of inquiry, see 13-20.

speaker in Madagascar. By “[examining] democratic potential wherever it appears” rather than “[taking] Western practices as a yardstick of democratic performance,” Sass and Dryzek conclude with the intercultural aim of locating “diverse expressions of the universal human capacity to deliberate collectively.”⁵⁹ Quite clearly, then, cultural and local meaning of practices like deliberation are increasingly significant to understanding their democratic potential, in western and non-western contexts alike.

Yet we should not have to equate this democratic potential with *deliberative* potential, as Sass and Dryzek do, when we set out to interpret the meaning of norms, rules, and symbols that regulate and innovate democratic practice.⁶⁰ Of course, deliberation (and the culture that embeds it) is a conspicuous practice to study given both its near ubiquity (i.e. public and private; micro-level to systems) and its popular possibility in places where access to other democratic institutions are nil (e.g. Wedeen’s Yemen). But democracy can and does occur without or outside of deliberation in all of these places too, and here we should recognize the other generic practices that Warren typifies in his problem-based approach to democratic systems. More importantly, it is necessary for democratic theorists to inquire into the background (deliberative) culture of these other practices, which no doubt retains and renews, along with the people as political agents themselves, what Pierre Rosanvallon calls the “works” of democracy.⁶¹ Fred Dallmayr puts this last point on interpretation rather well in his most recent book, *Democracy to Come: Politics as Relational Praxis*:

...[deliberative democracy] has to be open (more than the past) to hermeneutics: to the fact that human thinking or deliberation always occurs in an idiom, a “language game” or linguistic framework which is historically and culturally sedimented, but has to be continually reinterpreted. To this extent, deliberation cannot just rely on an abstract universalism, on fixed universal “validity claims,” but has to be attentive to different idioms and frameworks of understanding, and explore patiently the ways in which differences can be mitigated through dialogue or concrete practical interactions.⁶²

Though Dallmayr also moves within the model of deliberative democracy here (in order to combine it with what he calls “apophatic” democracy, his own glossing of Derrida’s “democracy to come”), he nonetheless spells out the priority of historical, cultural, and linguistic interpretation in democratic theory, and specifically in the *democratic* meaning behind practices and how they are understood *as such* within and across time, context, and tradition.

Both phronetic social research and Derridean deconstruction would be useful interpretive tools for the democratic theorist to engage more directly (and democratically through collective, non-violent, and inclusive inquiry) the discursive/textual power that inevitably shapes historical, cultural, and linguistic meaning. More specifically, they would help to locate and trace certain forms of power (and legitimacy, responsibility, etc.) within and across certain contexts that render intelligible and valuable particular problems and practices to certain people and communities.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 20.

⁶⁰ “The study of deliberative democracy is best conceived as a normative project informed by empirical findings, and what we propose is entirely in this spirit.” Ibid., 20.

⁶¹ Pierre Rosanvallon (2008), 307. In short, Rosanvallon argues that democracy should be described through the works it creates and not the institutions it may be. These works are three-fold: 1) a legible world in which people perceive and act with each other, forming 2) a symbolization of collective power in light of 3) social differences that are ongoing and problematic enough to resist and renew 1 and 2. See Ibid., 307-13.

⁶² Dallmayr (2017), 40.

Perhaps some kinds of practices, though generally strong as a democratic response to collective decision-making, are just not (i.e. culturally) practicable in some cases, despite the problem being widely perceived as one of inefficient or unclear decision-making rules. More context-specific questions regarding the relative democratic strengths and weaknesses of generic practices could also emerge through more patient and grounded research on situated tensions between two or more of them, or maybe even through the productive tension between generalized and more contextualized understandings of a particular democratic practice. For instance, how should we distinguish between recognizing and joining, or resisting and exiting, when those who practice one does so with or without the intention of doing the other in terms of, say, empowering inclusion? How do we understand certain people at certain times and places understand themselves to be addressing specific democratic problems—that is, to be practicing democracy—in the ways that we democratic theorists understand them to be?⁶³

3.2 Understanding how protest movements situate and theorize democracy

Another area in the study of democratic systems worth investigating and (re)interpreting further through phronetic and deconstructivist analysis is the democratic role (or function) of protest movements and activism. Until somewhat recently democratic theorists gave little or contrived attention to activism (too small and unorganized to count on its own⁶⁴), social movements (a near residual category for all things informal, dissenting, resisting, and thereby belonging to “civil society”), and protest (a form of pressure that is not money but people shouting, singing, and placard-waving down a street). For the most part, different models of democracy captured the “democratic” significance of protest movements⁶⁵ in different ways: participatory democrats championed social movements and their inclusive aims; aggregative democrats explained protest as a more unruly extension of the electoral system; deliberative democrats admonished social movements for their anti-deliberative practices.⁶⁶ However, and especially through the renewed systems thinking in deliberative democratic theory, protest eventually became situated more relationally between different sites of political talk and decision-making, and thereby revalued as anti- or non-deliberative pressure that enhanced larger swaths of deliberation.⁶⁷ Now, moving beyond the deliberative model—or any other one-dimensional idealized account—of protest movements and towards the latter’s place within *democratic* systems, the emphasis on its democratic role also shifts from relative value (i.e. protest is democratic because it induces deliberation or participation, etc.) to separate practices able to address problems (i.e. protest is democratic because the resisting or representing of protesters can be effective to empower inclusion or to sharpen will formation).⁶⁸ This problem-based approach interestingly and

⁶³ Another similarly put question is: How (or to what extent) do people’s understandings of their own place and significance within a democratic political system influence their own perceptions of democratic problems and possible democratic responses (or practices) to them in certain cases (but perhaps not in others)?

⁶⁴ On this specific claim, but in the wider context of the social sciences, see Kathleen Blee (2012).

⁶⁵ I use the terms “protest movement,” “social movement,” and “activism” interchangeably here, though only for convenience and *not* because I find compelling reason to equate the three terms otherwise.

⁶⁶ For instance, see Young (2001). Others have attempted to locate the deliberative aspects of activism and social movements, though still within the model of deliberative democracy. See Fung (2005) and Donatella Della Porta (2005). Francesca Polletta (2002) discusses deliberative aspects of participatory democratic decision-making within social movements. Leslie J. Wood (2012) observes how activist deliberation affects the diffusion of direct action tactics.

⁶⁷ Mansbridge et al. (2012), 17-19, 26.

⁶⁸ Warren (2017), 40-1.

productively analyzes the multifaceted democratic practices that activism and protest movements initiate, organize, and facilitate, especially in contexts of domination or extreme injustice. It also can consider with more nuance the specific, interlocking problems that particularly motivate and validate activism and protest movements as such.⁶⁹

Curiously, however, there have been very few attempts to seriously bridge the fields of democratic theory and social movement theory.⁷⁰ This is especially unfortunate, given that the latter field's increasing internal dissension between more structural, method-driven paradigms—such as resource mobilization theory, political process theory, and new social movement theory—and the more action-based movement-relevant theory, insightfully echoes the former field's move beyond idealized models of democracy and towards problem-based strategies for theorizing democratic systems.⁷¹ Here the overarching concern for how ideal modelling theory fails to illuminate different answers to explain problems that are usually not *real* problems or *right* ones given the context—and thereby rethink and begin with “questions that specify the domain boundaries of problems”—no doubt appeals on both sides.⁷² Many social movement theorists, in their varied and nuanced attempts to explain how or why people mobilize and so on, find it necessary to detach themselves from the object (i.e. social movements, activism) of their research. As a result, the people who participate, experience, and act in protest movements often do not meaningfully relate to the abstracted problems they are theorized to address, never mind the practices and identities they take on.⁷³ Such non-engaged ideal theory, therefore, is more often useless than not. Movement-relevant theorists realize this, and so they take a crucial step back and ask: Does your social movement research matter?⁷⁴ Here the reasons for why and how research is produced should be co-determined with those who are being researched, which then renders research more useful to the knowledge and practices of activists and protest movements. This sort of “activist theorizing” or research, then, engages the real problems and practices that activists and protest movements alike consider on an ongoing, mundane basis as well as the broader traditions and reflexive “movement discourses” that constitute a distinct body of activist theory and movement-driven knowledge.⁷⁵

⁶⁹ Rosanvallon (2008) offers a very compatible view of the (counter-)democratic role of protest movements here through his “new realist theory,” which involves distrust as the key motivation behind various forms of resistance and associations to maintain democratically accountable and innovative institutions.

⁷⁰ Notable exceptions include Polletta (2002) and Della Porta's growing interest in using ideal theories of (participatory, deliberative) democracy to frame how social movements and protesters organize, mobilize, and act. See Della Porta (2005; 2014) and Della Porta and Rucht (2013).

⁷¹ For a brief critical summary of this split in social movement studies, especially with regard to the more structural theories, see Aziz Choudry (2015), 43-66. See Douglas Bevington and Chris Dixon (2005) for another well known critique, as well as for a classic exposition of movement-relevant theory.

⁷² Warren (2017), 41.

⁷³ Not many activists read Tarrow, Tilly, McAdam, etc. for help in theorizing and understanding how and why social movements (should) work. For more development of this point, and a quick list of “actually useful words of social movement theory,” see Bevington and Dixon (2005), 193-4.

⁷⁴ Choudry (2015) and Bevington and Dixon (2005) both repeatedly make this claim. The latter work also sets out three further guideline questions for movement-relevant (or-driven) theory: 1) What issues concern movement participants? 2) What ideas and theories are activists producing? 3) what academic scholarship is being read and discussed by movement participants? (198-99). For another particular case for why researchers should be engaged or partial in their research on/for activism, see Blee (2012).

⁷⁵ Choudry (2015). See Bevington and Dixon (2005) for more on reflexive “movement discourses” (196). Polletta (2002) also discusses how activists depend on generations of earlier activists and their traditions, theories, etc., which become a deciding factor in deliberation on what protest movements do and why. Tully (2009, vol. 1: chaps. 1 and 2)

This growing significance of movement-relevant or activist theory in the larger field of social movement studies is important to map onto a problem-based approach to democratic systems here. However, a comprehensive account of this general claim is something I cannot develop here. Instead, what is necessary to demonstrate here is how the critical interpretive strategies that both Flyvbjerg and Derrida develop respectively are indeed useful to democratic theorists because they are useful for theorizing activism and protest movements more carefully and seriously. Normatively (or democratically) engaged research must not be only sensitive to problems and tensions both immediate in the here and now and mediated and iterated constantly across context and time, but also oriented towards the knowledge production of social movements and activists. In doing so, it may help to reveal the extent to which such overlooked traditions and theories influence how people perceive and legitimize problems and practices over others towards democratic ends in certain contexts. The close overlapping between movement-relevant research and both phronetic and deconstructivist research attests to this possibility of learning more about how people reflexively understand democracy through the emergent practices and problems that situates and drives that understanding.⁷⁶ For instance, Aziz Choudry begins his account of activist learning and theorizing with questions of power before emphasizing ongoing critical discourse in looking for the answers—a reflexive, practice-based process of research that involves locating and producing “knowledge [that identifies] weaknesses, contradictions, conjunctures, or pressure points that organizers and movements can exploit.”⁷⁷ The shared aspects of Flyvbjerg’s *phronesis* and Derridean deconstruction here are patent, which should also suggest a great deal of applicability and translation between them and democratic systems research.

Another productive example of such methodological overlapping is Sean Chabot’s “social movement phronesis.”⁷⁸ Through interpreting two cases of social movements (the U.S. Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, and Egypt’s 2011 Revolution), Chabot finds Flyvbjerg’s account of *phronesis* to “offer new ways of exploring the significance of institutions, relationships, and democratic practices in social spaces.”⁷⁹ In particular, phronetic social research underscores that conceptual distinctions (i.e. violence vs. non-violence) are always problematic; that context and practice largely informs how social movements choose to think and act; that power always pervades social spaces; and that the revolutionary or transformative “virtuosity” in social movements often rests on emergent experiences, experiments, and intuition.⁸⁰ Here we see that, by interpreting “the phronetic capacity of activism and social movements,” especially within the interconnected (con)texts of more recent and innovative protest tactics and strategies, we might interpret and understand better the democratic strengths and weaknesses of specific practices within and across democratic systems.⁸¹

highlights the significance of protest movements and everyday actors inheriting and theorizing problems and their “problematization” in ongoing, concrete struggles.

⁷⁶ For example, how activists act upon an emancipatory theory of adult education and, therefore, endeavour to produce theories and opportunities that “[help] people understand the cause of their conditions and change them” may be useful for looking deeper into shared or contested discourses (intentions, perceptions) that understand certain practices or problems to be more or less democratic in any given context. See Choudry (2015), 83.

⁷⁷ Choudry (2005), 10, 23, 56-7.

⁷⁸ Chabot (2014).

⁷⁹ Ibid., 247.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 251.

⁸¹ Ibid., *passim*. For an interesting “infrastructural analysis” of one of these innovative protest tactics and strategies, protest camps, see Feigenbaum, Frenzel, and McCurdy (2014).

Whether through the interpretive lens of “social movement phronesis” or “activist theorizing,” a case-by-case inquiry into how tensions are inherited, understood, and resolved collectively by those involved would help us further understand what context-specific democratic function activism and social movements serve within the wider political system. Thus phronetic social research (i.e. goal-oriented, practice-based communal search for meaning in the here and now) coupled with deconstruction (i.e. Derridean inheritance as democratic act) permits the democratic theorist to interpret the multi-faceted traditions, practices, contexts, etc. behind protest movements and organized resistance, which, in turn, are often hotbeds of democratic innovation within society’s wider arena of political participation.⁸² This hybrid interpretive approach, then, can be employed to understanding more comprehensively (as well as tentatively) each case of a social movement or activist group -- the problems it locates and how, the practices it considers and how, the democratic function it fulfills and why -- and its actual (and desired) place and role within democratic systems.

In this sense, such an interpretive research strategy would be significantly to recent research projects such as Participedia, a global online database of democratic innovations and participatory processes and practices. By interpreting democratic activism more closely through its own understanding of the *democratic* problems and practices it engages, we can capture more clearly how and why certain innovative ways of organizing and acting emerged within and across contexts. To what extent do protest movements or activism impact how people understand a problem or practice to be a democratic one? And how exactly do they theorize or collectively understand their own democratic role or function within a democratic system -- or even across democratic systems? Such in-depth cases of engaged interpretation would be available on Participedia to researchers and practitioners -- or theorists and activists -- alike as educational material for further comparison and analysis, not to mention for ongoing interpretation by variously concerned and organized communities themselves.⁸³ Also, in employing phronetic and deconstructive research strategies here, a more self-reflexive step can be made in terms of analyzing just how social movements and activists engage Participedia itself as a tool: to what extent does Participedia’s collection of cases and methods preserve and challenge activist history and traditions? To what extent does it influence how other protest movements and forms of organized resistance assess the democratic-ness of their own actions and goals?

4. Some critical remarks; or, why Derridean deconstruction?

After illustrating above two areas of any given democratic system that demand mixed interpretive ways of doing research, such as employing phronetic and deconstructive analyses together, I now return to these two critical research orientations themselves. Here I discuss the compatibility between the two, largely through how Flyvbjerg himself claims phronetic social research and Derridean deconstruction to be, methodologically speaking, mutually exclusive. I argue against this and, albeit briefly, present how Flyvbjerg and Derrida can be productively aligned within a hybrid research strategy.

Perhaps now beyond the nascent stage, serious scholarship in what we might call Derridean democratic theory has been growing.⁸⁴ Two significant contributions include Samir Haddad’s

⁸² Smith (2009); Warren (2001).

⁸³ Fung and Warren (2011), 347-9.

⁸⁴ Whether this particular interest in Derridean democracy is a unique and direct consequence of a distinct Anglophone tradition of reading and translating Derrida’s work, I cannot answer here, though I wonder.

2013 book, on which I rely a great deal in this paper, and Aletta Norval's earlier work, which attempts to theorize a democratic ethos on the basis of Derrida's inheritance of a promise, largely through the interplay of traditions and practices.⁸⁵ The point here is that the usual suspicion and reluctance with which the democratic theorist, let alone the political or social scientist, considered the deconstruction of Derrida (if at all!) has been shifting towards greater interest and urgency.⁸⁶ Further inquiry into Derrida's complete *œuvre* and commitment to the emergent democratic logic in his style of deconstruction will no doubt spur new insights into how we interpret and understand democracy in the more practice-based, processual ways that inform democratic systems and vice versa. This present and promising direction of studies on Derrida and democracy is one reason why I specifically chose deconstruction here as a crucial way to do research in democratic theory today.

Another and more significant reason, however, arises from my attempt here to demonstrate the democratic theorist's need for Derridean deconstruction *and* phronetic social research. Flyvbjerg mentions Derrida once in his 2001 book, and he does so only to side with Foucault's derisive criticism of Derrida's "little pedagogy" [*une petite pédagogie*], or with the former's contextualism of practice-based analysis against the latter's relativism of textual analysis.⁸⁷ Flyvbjerg takes no more than a paragraph to dismiss deconstruction and its "textualisation" of practices as a pretentious kind of interpretation not conditioned by actual practices and power and, thus, not anchored to the effective truth that the Foucauldian genealogist and phronetic social researcher seek to uncover. Here Derridean deconstruction unrealistically privileges the text and ignores the power within social dialogue and praxis that Flyvbjerg's *phronesis* primarily investigates. In short, it cannot be a part of phronetic social research.

This incompatibility between Derrida and Flyvbjerg, though, becomes increasingly tenuous the more we consider both of their methodologies in light of each other. In his rather comprehensive reflection on the Foucault-Derrida debate, Edward Said finds both writers to be engaged with more or less the same critical orientation towards interpretation:

Derrida and Foucault therefore collide on how the text is to be described, as a praxis on whose surface and in whose interstices a universal grammatological problematic is enacted, or as a praxis whose existence is a fact of highly rarefied and differentiated historical power, associated not only with the univocal authority of the author but with a discourse constituting author, text, and subject and giving them a very precise intelligibility and effectiveness.⁸⁸

Both indeed acknowledge a dynamic textuality that exposes and contributes to constitutive social relations between discourse and author, practice and institution. Derrida's move *into* the text is not

⁸⁵ Norval (2007). Haddad (2013, 2-3) offers a concise overview of the related literature. Another somewhat lesser, but very recent, contribution is Dallmayr (2017), whose own stylizations of Derrida's "democracy to come" has been present in several of his previous books.

⁸⁶ Relatively speaking among social scientists, that is, if we regard the largely positivist suspicion of Derrida, on the one hand, and the more visible political traction of other poststructuralist approaches like Foucault's, on the other. On this latter point, consider Richard Rorty's sweeping remark (that is, admittedly, also less discriminating between Derrida and Foucault than I am here) that the tradition to which Derrida belongs is "largely irrelevant to public life and to political questions." For more on the purported divergences between Derridean deconstruction (and poststructuralism) and liberal pragmatism, see Patton (2006).

⁸⁷ Flyvbjerg (2001), 115. See also Foucault (1979), 27, for the part of the debate to which Flyvbjerg refers here.

⁸⁸ Said (1983), 213-14.

disconnected from historical conditions and discursive power that situate it, just as much as Foucault's move *in* and *out* between the text and discourse does not detach power from the text itself.⁸⁹ The aporetic elisions and elusions that deconstructivist play identifies and interprets within a text necessarily involves a particular inheritance of actual identities, traditions, and contexts, all productively enabled and restricted by Foucauldian power.⁹⁰ Likewise, such power is able to discipline diffusely through a contested cultural space that mediates more axiomatic or deeper truths in context. This invites the critical Derridean call to read well the aporetic conditions that found, or render intelligible, such context and power. Although the two diverge with respect to method and emphasis, most notably on the primacy of writing *versus* speech, the mutual contributions of each towards the textual significance of social *praxis* and power remain. It is therefore difficult to accept Flyvbjerg's quick and neat distinction between Derrida's text-without-practice and Foucault's practice-without-text, since, as Geoffrey Bennington warns, "it is not at all clear how Foucault can pretend to remove his own writing from inevitable collusion in the metaphysical presuppositions Derrida patiently interrogates."⁹¹

Rather than deem deconstructivist and phronetic social research mutually exclusive, or even choose one method over another, the phronetic social researcher would in fact benefit from employing deconstructive strategies, perhaps even in most cases. For instance, Flyvbjerg's hasty omission of Derrida returns, so to speak, in William Paul Simmons's more recent effort to apply *phronesis* to social justice research. Curiously, Simmons uses the word "deconstruct" at least four times throughout the chapter, including in the very first sentence and in presumed alignment with Flyvbjerg's *phronesis*, yet with little reference to Derrida himself.⁹² More substantially, though, his concern primarily lies in precisely what kind of discursive communities the phronetic social researcher enables and engages. This move justifies paying closer and continuous attention to the undue and often invisible power between the researcher and (especially marginalized) others who participate collectively in the research. Hence the demand that "we must continuously deconstruct how we continue to privilege or stage certain voices," as well as "[deconstruct] the privileging of the researcher's voice over those in the community."⁹³ Such are the deconstructive aims within what Simmons calls an "anti-hegemonic phronetics," which ultimately propose three additional guiding questions to Flyvbjerg's original four in order to open up (and pass on) the possibility of more inclusive, anti-hegemonic knowledge. With these three questions—first, who is without a voice (*aneu logou*, according to Aristotle) in the political community?; second, what does it mean to speak for the Other?; and third, are our attempts at empowerment actually perpetuating the hegemonic discourse?⁹⁴ —Simmons suggests understanding Flyvbjerg's phronetic aim of producing knowledge with communal validity or a "polyphony of voices" through deconstructing the hegemonic system that contradictorily contains it.⁹⁵ By doing so, the phronetic social

⁸⁹ Ibid., 183.

⁹⁰ Derridean inheritance *grounds* deconstruction as a situated act of reading a text, we might say. See above subsection on poststructuralist deconstruction. Cf. Said's (1978, 92-6) notion of "textual attitude" and how it particularly helps to connect the text (Derrida) to practices (Foucault), and vice versa.

⁹¹ Bennington (1979), 7.

⁹² Simmons does not cite Derrida (though he does cite G. Spivak, one of Derrida's well known English translators) but alludes to him once when discussing the ideal of his MA programme's action research curriculum to be in "'Derridean' fashion forever *a-venir* (to come)" (2012 257).

⁹³ Simmons (2012), 254, 261.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 261.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 248. Flyvbjerg (2001), 139.

researcher carefully listens to and works with others according “to a different epistemé, one that is resistant to appropriation and manipulation, and one that resists becoming the new hegemonic system” through which ensuing (phronetic) knowledge nonetheless privileges some over others.⁹⁶ In other words, Simmons attempts to graft (what he calls) the regulative ideal of Derridean “to-come” [*a-venir*] to the methodology of phronetic social research in order to make the latter more inclusive and able to do justice.⁹⁷

At this point, and to reiterate, we see that Simmons’s phronetic-deconstructive style of research on social justice can be a useful interpretive strategy for locating and understanding more accurately the functions of a democratic system, particularly the function of empowered inclusion. In turn, it can then consider and assess more effectively the democratic strengths and weaknesses of certain practices in light of both the pragmatic *and cultural-epistemological* forms of hegemony that prevent serving a democratic function well.

Conclusion: The promise of a hybrid interpretive approach to democratic systems

As democratic theory now searches deeper into context and shared meaning, which shapes and validates certain practices as more or less democratic answers to problems in democratic political systems, so should it consider more interpretive strategies for research. Flyvbjerg’s phronetic social research and Derrida’s poststructuralist deconstruction are two prime candidates, two complementary methods that can be necessary for the democratic theorist today. Both methods indeed converge on four key aspects and orientations that now a problem-based approach to democratic theory adopts: 1) locate a tension that 2) is in the here and now, 3) entails ongoing, repetitive, and (im)perfectible problem-solving, and 4) requires the engaged, normatively democratic stance of the researcher. Given this methodological overlap, we can further see that phronetic and deconstructivist research may help to interpret context-sensitive understandings of *democratic* problems and practices as they emerge through concrete and changing conditions that higher abstractions might not capture and consider. We can also see how social movements and activism might be more usefully researched and interpreted in ways that can make sense of (and contribute to) how people evaluate and learn from the democratic strengths and weaknesses of practices within and across contexts. All of this would be of obvious interest and benefit to the study of democratic systems, not to mention necessary for deeper, more practically relevant interpretation of Participedia cases and methods and the linkages between them.

Such need for further interpretive attention may become clearer, too, in light of Derrida’s persuasive and increasingly substantial democratic theory, which can indeed complement Flyvbjerg’s practice-based approach to social science research. By demonstrating how Derridean deconstruction is helpful in exposing and checking for critical blind spots in phronetic social research, my hope is that democratic theorists will find appeal in combining these two research strategies in order to study—that is, to learn from, to participate in, to contribute to, to understand more genuinely—what democracy means and how it matters to those who understand, speak, and practice it at a certain time and place. In other words, deconstructive and phronetic ways of doing research are far from disparate enterprises once we consider both the methodological and normative features they share with doing problem-based research on democratic systems.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 255.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 257. More precisely, Simmons discusses how a specifically applied kind of phronetic social research—action research in the MA programme in Social Justice and Human Rights that he teaches—responds rather well to such a Derridean ideal. Also, for the problems inherent in calling Derrida’s notion of to-come an “ideal,” see Haddad (2013), 18-20.

There are notable desirable consequences to this hybrid approach. For one, the democratic theorist will find it necessary to take more seriously certain actors (e.g. activists), histories, traditions, texts, and contexts as interrelated producers of democracy-relevant knowledge -- no matter how trivial or nuanced they seem to be. This enlarged, more critical reception promises to sharpen rather than hinder the analytical abilities of the democratic theorist, largely by means of constant criticism and collective re-purposing. Another consequence lies in the democratic theorist's more justified pursuit of other interpretive ways of doing research. The hybrid approach I demonstrate above is only one way to research the inexhaustibly context-specific understandings of democratic problems and practices that the problem-based approach to democratic systems requires. Other more diverse interpretive strategies may be needed, then, for more suitable or illuminating research into a specifically contextualized democratic problem or practice, thereby rendering these same strategies more appropriate to democratic theorists.⁹⁸

However, the ultimate appeal behind a hybrid interpretive approach to democratic systems research -- whether it be through a certain combination of Flyvbjerg's phronetics and Derrida's deconstruction or otherwise -- is that it addresses and sustains a very important question that continues to haunt democratic theory, one which the late Sheldon Wolin poses rather concisely: "Should the democrat be suspicious of the theorist, especially when the latter professes to be a 'democratic theorist'?"⁹⁹ What the academic theorist generally abstracts and analyzes as democratic systems inevitably depends on what situated communities and actors, most often non-theorists, particularly understand and act upon as what is and is not democratic. How the former "theorist" knowledge must privilege certain contextualized kinds of the latter "democrat" knowledge over others, then, only conceals conceptually the aporetic conditions through which democratic systems can only become more intelligible. Thus more critical, situated, tentative, and normatively engaged interpretation can significantly help to theorize more cautiously about which practices serve which democratic functions, as well as to draw more serious attention to its own suspicious activity across time and place. I end with noting that this critically inclusive impulse is akin to the one that animates the diffusive, complex, and transnational traditions of activism; Rebecca Solnit defines it as "[a] gift for embracing paradox[, which] is not the least of the equipment an activist should have."¹⁰⁰ Now it is high time, I believe, to equip the methodological toolbox of the democratic theorist today with that same gift, too.

⁹⁸ For some of these other interpretive strategies, see footnote 1 above.

⁹⁹ Wolin (2016), vi.

¹⁰⁰ Rebecca Solnit (2004), 17.

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