

Chapter 5

A Democratic Ethos for Democracy Research

Hans Asenbaum

in Heyne, Lea and Ewert, Christian (eds.) (2022): *PhD Confessions: From Democracy Scholars, Students, and Supporters*, Norderstedt: BoD, p.41–46.

I always had a strong sense of social justice. In school, I was known for defending less popular kids and standing up to bullies. When I started studying political science at the University of Vienna, I was looking for a “political home.” Although I engaged with subjects such as the political economy or the social state, it wasn’t until I came across radical democratic thinking that I felt like I had arrived.

Strangely, it took a long time for me to realize the deep gap between these radical democratic convictions and the academic structures and practices within which I studied them. In other words, I was taught about equality in the midst of hierarchy. Academia appears as an exclusive black box, who admits only a select group of people, which first must pass a series of gatekeepers. Academia works according to neoliberal capitalist principles which stage an increasingly gamified competition between researchers. The system disciplines its participants into thinking and acting in a particular way. As a result, the knowledge produced through academia is rather uniform.

We spend all day reading and writing about a democratic ethos that promotes equality, inclusion, and transparency within an exclusive, competitive, and hierarchal environment. In this chapter, I will engage with this contradiction. In doing so, I will attempt to bring three aspects together. I will, first, tell my own story of my academic development and share some personal confessions. Second, in sharing these insights, I will generate tips for PhD and Early Career Researchers. Third, I will provide a critique of the current undemocratic workings of academia and moreover, share some thoughts on how to move beyond them by incorporating a democratic ethos into democracy research.

Democratic Ideals Within an Undemocratic Context

When I started my PhD in Vienna, I was excited. For the first time in several years of studies, I felt recognized and appreciated. I attended seminars and group meetings and finally mustered the courage to speak up – a courage I was lacking throughout most of my undergrad and grad studies.

I went to conferences and started to publish. Everybody in my research group was friendly and driven by similar progressive convictions that I held dear myself. These qualities easily mask the exclusions that are deeply embedded in the structures of modern-day academia, which mirror the power asymmetries of their capitalist, heteropatriarchal, and colonial context. I hardly realized how privileged I was to join the inner academic circle. I did not reflect on the societal privileges in my biography that had led me here.

Despite the friendly welcome, academia felt like a murky ground. I wasn't quite sure what I was doing and how this whole thing actually works. I am still confronted with this puzzlement today when I talk to others outside academia about my job. "I'm a political scientist." "Oh, so you are a politician? Or one of these TV guys that talk about elections? Ah, you're a teacher at uni." The confusion about what political scientists do – my mum doesn't really understand what I'm doing to this day – speaks of a certain exclusivity. Academia presents itself as a black box. Its opaqueness, I reckon, is no coincidence. Those in privileged positions have several motives to shield what they are doing from public scrutiny. For once, shrouding the workings of academia keeps competition out. It requires friends, connections – the (in)famous "network" – to slowly learn to navigate academia. One needs to convince gatekeepers to open the doors.

So if you are new to all this, first of all, confusion is normal. How do conferences work? What is the H-Index? Do I need to wait for a call for papers to submit a paper to a journal? Do I get paid for research visits at another uni? It might be consoling that to most of these questions, there is no fixed answer – answer vary depending on context and on whom you ask. So, ask many people. Don't be afraid to look naïve. I talked to lots of people who were more advanced in their careers. Just drop them an email, they will mostly be happy to chat. Moreover, peer support is crucial. I had a wonderful PhD community at the University of Westminster, in which we talked about the curiosities of academic life over lunch every day.

Upon entering the black box, one of the first things you will learn is that publishing is key. Publishing is a highly exclusive business, in which the academic institutional system shapes what you can say and how you can say it. Ultimately, academia shapes who you are. Do Foucault's disciplinary institutions come to mind? Yes, that's what it is. Publishing is only partly merit-based. In many ways, the current system discourages from being original and innovative. Reviewers can easily take issue with anything you say. As a result, writing can sometimes feel like walking on egg shells. "What could reviewers dislike? On whose toes might I step? How can I reframe this in a less controversial way?" Writing can easily turn into an exercise of avoiding mistakes. At the same, novelty and originality are key criteria for publishing. Sounds contradictory? It is. So what we often

end up doing is while walking on eggshells making big gestures with our hands. It's like dancing only with your upper body without moving the lower half of your body. You need to "sell your message big" while the message itself needs to be as uncontroversial as possible. Of course, I'm being a bit polemic here. But you get the idea.

This is not to say that we cannot say anything politically meaningful through academic publications. Mostly, however, our texts are kept behind paywalls and guarded by steep access fees. Only those with university affiliations and those willing to pay will have access. This is ironic in the face of the fact that social science research is mostly funded through public tax money. The public has a right to access this knowledge. Research is part of public discourse. It does not make sense to keep ideas, which are meant to benefit society, within what is often referred to as the "academic ivory tower."

Towards a Democratic Ethos

This all sounds very bleak. So what can we do about it? On my journey through the obscurities of academic life, I have met many inspiring people who have opened new perspectives for me. They showed me that it is not always necessary to succumb to academic pressures. They aim at realizing a democratic ethos within a context that is not particularly welcoming.

A good starting point to do things differently is teaching. Often, we begin teaching as PhD candidates when we are still struggling with our own insecurities (not that this struggle ever ends, but it gets better). Applying various teaching methods that require different skills can include students with various talents. Learning can not only be achieved by reading books but by going out there and engaging in first-hand research and political projects. Many aspects of teaching, such as reading lists and grading criteria, can be decided collectively with students. We need to profoundly rethink our relationship with students and move away from a hierarchical student-professor and towards a peer-mentoring relationship.

Realizing a democratic ethos in the actual research process can take many forms. This can be achieved through participatory research methods that invite participants into the research project to collaboratively decide its parameters and generate and analyse data. Crucially, a democratic ethos will steer us towards research topics that shed light on marginalized groups, discourses, and phenomena. Being not only democracy researchers but *democratic* researchers entails playing an active role in society, for example by setting up participatory processes or collaboratively developing them with social movements and civil society actors. I try to realize a democratic ethos

in my own research. I developed a new method for generating democratic theory, which I call *democratic theorizing*. I set up the Democratic Theorizing Project¹, which invites anyone into a joint theorizing process.

Importantly, realizing a democratic ethos in democracy studies entails self-reflection and a critical engagement with our own positionality. Where do we stand? Which privileges do we hold? Which interests do we have? Which impact does our research have? Such self-reflective processes feed into a deconstructive approach that challenges the colonial, capitalist, and heteropatriarchal structures that govern our academic engagements.

When it comes to research output, making academic knowledge accessible to the public is crucial. This includes making an effort in open access publishing. This may entail looking for resources to cover open access fees. But it also includes supporting smaller open access journals and presses such as *The Journal of Deliberative Democracy*, *Democratic Theory*, and Westminster University Press. But open publishing goes beyond open access. It entails writing in an accessible manner. This does not preclude a high level of abstraction or a deep engagement with philosophical work. It may entail writing for different audiences in different styles, translating abstract ideas into more concrete terms, and communicating via various academic and non-academic outlets.

In the face of the criticism I have raised, the question arises whether one should play this game at all. It is a personal choice whether one decides to work on changing the rules of the game or quitting the game altogether. For me personally, despite all its hierarchical and exclusive aspects, academia still provides a space for public debate, a means to develop critical and alternative thinking that challenges the mainstream. Driven by a democratic ethos, democracy research can play a vital role in societal transformations toward democratic futures.

Literature tip: Ackerly, B., Cabrera, L., Forman, F., Johnson, G. F., Tenove, C., & Wiener, A. (2021). Unearthing Grounded Normative Theory: Practices and Commitments of Empirical Research in Political Theory. *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy*, 0(0), 1–27. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13698230.2021.1894020>

Email me at hans.asenbaum@canberra.edu.au.

¹ <https://democratic-theorizing.org/>