Do-It-Yourself Democracy

The Rise of the Public Engagement Industry

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Public Engagement, Normative Control, and Modern Solidarity

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There are at least two major reasons why any scholar with even a remote interest in politics should read this book: empirical discovery and theoretical challenge. Here, I want to reflect on those virtues, but also suggest why it is important to push further than we see in *Do-It-Yourself Democracy* to fully absorb its implications.

First, Caroline Lee offers us discovery– observations about our socio-political world we have almost certainly not seriously considered

before. The observations are obviously important because they cast a new light on more familiar topics like social movements and conventional political engagement.

Second, Lee does not settle for sociologically easy arguments and interpretations as she explains the public engagement industry. Her analysis is shot through with the sort of paradox and irony that comes with the recognition of complexity. The irony of the title– "Do-It-Yourself Democracy" which is organized and managed by hired professionals– is only the beginning. The book keeps challenging us as readers and challenging our "go-to" theories, and that is a stimulating and productive accomplishment.

Empirically, Lee introduces us to a fascinating form of "collective" action which, I'd venture to guess, most people never even knew about before. It can be seen as a movement, a field, and industry, a profession– or maybe just a management tool. It is constituted as different logics are mixed. And the ambiguities that the mixing generates are more an advantage than a disadvantage for practitioners and sponsors.

At its core, public engagement involves "facilitation services aimed at engaging the public and relevant stakeholders with

organizations in more intensive ways than traditional, one-way public outreach and information... [it provides] rich information to administrators on participant preferences and ....may determine the course of organizational action" (56). Lee uses extensive fieldwork, close archival analysis, interviews, and surveys to bring this field of cultural production to light.

I want to highlight and emphasize the contribution she makes with this. The many ambiguities in "public engagement services" make the field inchoate and quite intractable, as I know first-hand from my own similar experience with business associations (Spillman 2012). For instance, practitioners may work independently or in large organizations; they work for many different sorts of clients– colleges, governments, businesses, non-profits (48); most work on small-scale processes, but around one in five on very large-scale projects with large global organizations (52). They use many different methods and tactics for generating deliberation and participation, but these are usually highly "produced" and involve all sorts of marketing, recruitment, and other choreography, even as they disavow control and value self-effacement. Even making a straightforward empirical picture of a new, complicated, dispersed social phenomenon like this is very difficult, and Lee has done an important service developing this picture.

But this very important empirical contribution leaves me wanting to know more. For instance, it seems important to know more about the distributions of main topics across events with different types of sponsors. Do different types of sponsors– local and regional government, nonprofits, business, etc– tend to focus on different sorts of goals– restructuring, teamwork, financial performance, etc (163)? I realize this information is not easily accessible, but it does seem important to probe somewhat more deeply, because it seems very important

for the conclusion late in the book that "topics and outcomes are linked to business discipline– the moral virtues of thrift– to a much greater extent than scholars focused on civic and political values have realized, in part because civic outcomes are sold alongside fiscal ones as linked priorities" (161). This claim is important and plausible, but it seems to call for broader evidence relating various outcomes and topic to various sorts of sponsors.

A related point I wonder about is the question of how reliant the field is on clients in business. Lee notes that seventeen per cent of sponsors are business, industry associations, etc., and later reports that business is among the top three sponsors for almost half of public engagement professionals surveyed (48, 135). Perhaps the relatively few business sponsors generate a larger financial volume than others, but it seems important to know more, because the answer could make a difference to our interpretation. In a way, the public engagement industry is *less* paradoxical, puzzling, and disturbing the more it is simply a business service. In that case, it is easy to categorize as a management tool of normative control, just like the corporate ideology and ritual process that scholars like Gideon Kunda (1992) describe. Indeed, features of the public engagement industry identified in the book, like the way dissent is absorbed in process, and the moral ambivalence it generates, are certainly foreshadowed in Kunda's study of normative control in corporate culture.

So Lee is offering a really important and impressive empirical discovery in this book, and my questions here push for even more, especially about business.

The second big virtue of the book is its theoretical challenge. It never really quite lets us settle into sociological formulae. Yes, the standard formula of sociological argumentation is certainly important: a romantic vision (participation) is challenged (industry) and

ironies of cooptation and unintended consequences are drawn out. The classic critical theory polemic by Horkheimer and Adorno– "Enlightenment as Mass Deception" (1972 [1944]) – certainly crossed my mind several times while I was reading. But as Lee plans, her view goes beyond one-sided views of "thrilling alternative" or "cynical window dressing" (25). You could read it that way, but you would be missing something important, because the "public engagement industry" is more complicated and paradoxical than that.[1]

Here are a few of the many paradoxes Lee identifies. First, attempts to increase regular participation call for expert facilitation (the public sphere as seminar room?). Second, public engagement practitioners are probably more idealistic and more fearful of manipulation than any of their sponsors or audiences. Third, they generate real, not false engagement, real short-term solidarity (28). Fourth, successful public engagement work increases individual responsibility, without increasing power (7). Fifth, successful participatory dialog events can leave participants with the sense that the ritual is enough, and that other people will do the work (195, 202). Sixth, sometimes real discussion is silenced with the "real work" of icebreaker techniques (111). Overall, participatory events manage change, but don't produce it.

Against that background, there is certainly plenty of support for claims about "enlightenment as mass deception." But depending on your reference point, it can all be read another way, and Lee never quite lets us forget that. If we always had robust social movements and ideal democratic contention, maybe we would not need the public engagement industry. But what if we don't?

So I would like to see the book expand on the alternate theoretical reading implicit in the way *Do-It-Yourself Democracy* sustains paradox.

Suppose social movements and a robust democratic process are *not* the implicit alternative. For many of the examples Lee offers, they are not. The more realistic alternative is top-down decision -making that never considers its audience, and regular people who are entirely disengaged from decision-making. Against *this* comparison, we start to see that the ritualistic dimension– "authentic political experience, '"civic festivals of inclusion, equality, democracy," "empowering short-term engagement," "co-creation and non-instrumental engagement," "occasions for the rebirth of civic faith" –really could have important consequences for democratic solidarity.

I sometimes think political sociology (narrowly considered) is too naive and not cynical enough, because it often assumes that people naturally care about issues, and if they do not, that is the result of cynical manipulation. But if we start with the alternative, more pessimistic null hypothesis of complete *disengagement–* not virtuous contention– I think we can see beyond the straight sociological formula running from romantic claim through debunking to critique, and theorize better how these participatory rituals really matter. This is implicit throughout the careful analysis of manipulated participation in *Do-It-Yourself Democracy.* Lee is careful never to let the paradox resolve itself entirely. But a deeper theorization might lead more explicitly to a direct incorporation of Durkheim's views of the necessity and fragility of modern solidarity.

Endnotes

1. A better critical theory connection would be the later and more nuanced Adorno essay, "Cultural Criticism and Society" (1982[1967]).

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Comments on *Do-it-Yourself Democracy*

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Two years ago, one of the odder recent collisions of politics and pop culture occurred when the conservative anti-tax crusader Grover Norquist went to Burning Man. The annual festival in the Nevada desert has become a mainstream Silicon Valley ritual, emptying out the Bay Area of nearly every tech mogul and full-stack web developer each Labor Day weekend, yet the idea of the right-wing policy wonk getting dusty and funky along with them seemed like a bridge too far. Yet Norquist loved what he saw. "The story of Burning Man is one of radical self-reliance," he reflected. "A community that comes together with a minimum of "rules" demands self-reliance – that everyone clean up after themselves and help thy neighbor. Some day, I want to live 52 weeks a year in a state or city that acts like this. I want to attend a national political convention that advocates the wisdom of Burning Man."[1]

The convention halls, earnest facilitators, and graphics-filled whiteboards of the public engagement industry Caroline Lee examines in *Do-It-Yourself Democracy* initially seem to have little in common with either anti-tax conservatism or techno-libertarian campouts like Burning Man. Contrasted with the incrementalist and starkly partisan era of modern Washington politics and change-the-world technophilia of Silicon Valley, the cresting wave of deliberative democracy seems almost charmingly retro. DC and the Valley are where people ask for forgiveness rather than for permission; D&D is where they play nice.

Yet as Lee shows in this careful, incisive, and important study, all are part and parcel of the same trends. And in showing this connective tissue, Lee raises broader questions about the purpose and path forward for American democratic and communitarian processes of all sorts—questions with which historians of U.S politics and of the technology industry should grapple as we try to make sense of the recent past and fractious present.

One important contribution of Lee's book is showing that the public engagement movement (or "dialogue and deliberation" aka D&D) is not radically new nor is it the bespoke product that its practitioners promise, but something with roots in the strong politics of self-realization and individual empowerment of the 1960s and 1970s. Here we find those fabled "community organizers" turned entrepreneurs and evangelists, subbing work in the neighborhood for facilitated convenings on neutral, purportedly apolitical ground.

This periodization could go back even further. Public engagement proponents and participants remind me of Progressive Era reformers, earnest in their faith in process, opening up smoke-filled rooms to the air and light of public deliberation. One important contrast, however: the age of reform occurred in an era of very little central government, when the biggest federal agency was the Post Office and the Pennsylvania Railroad had many times more employees than the U.S. Army. A major thrust that bound together various "progressivisms" was the push to make

government do *more*, not less, and to augment and supplant voluntarism and localism with centralized, professionalized power. D&D occurs against a backdrop of austerity, where public officials channel scant resources into the new "platforms" and "tools" of deliberation and dialogue. In an era when traditional political institutions have been delegitimized by five-plus decades of sustained antigovernment rhetoric from both left and right, and when a steadily growing bloc of Americans have fragile and periodic associations and loyalties to organized political parties, the alternative, "disruptive" processes of D&D step in. Yet the uncomfortable truth that seeps through Lee's narrative is that deliberation and engagement is not policy. A great meeting cannot sub for policy implementation. Big government may be over, but what is in its place?

A second contribution here is one of politics—both in showing the politics of D&D itself, as well as the broader ripples and consequences of partisan reinvention and retrenchment since the 1990s. While expressly nonpartisan, D&D clearly struggles—to the point of overcorrection—against too much alliance with or reliance on the words and tactics of its liberal antecedents (to the degree that none other than Grover Norquist warns at one convening to avoid language that might be "off-putting" to conservatives [p. 79]). As Lee's analysis shows, even nonpartisanship has a politics, and it isn't always progressive. "Public engagement professionals' work legitimizes market and state authority by regularizing and routinizing performances of political equality, while social inequalities go unchallenged" (p. 103).

Despite the left-ish communitarian leanings and social-justice desires of so many of the D&D actors and processes Lee examines, it is also clear from her analysis that the structure and institutions of the public engagement industry gain strength and steam from the pullback of public institutions that that they seek to rectify.

Part of the basic proposition of D&D, as Lee shows, is that things are temporary: citizen-participation is essential as a means to get back to the norm of institutions that work as they should. But as it encourages this participation, it can undermine the case for building those institutions back up. As Lee reminds us,

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deliberation can either inspire citizens to act or convince them that bureaucrats cannot. "That both of these outcomes inspire increased toleration of self-sacrifice or increasing willingness to assume small-scale responsibilities of self-governance helps to explain why deliberation can be so appealing to antigovernment, antitax prophets" (p. 202). Public engagement defuses actual activism, channeling grassroots energy into more predictable and less threatening forms.

Do-It-Yourself Democracy also adds important insights and contributions to political history as this field moves into the study of the 1990s,

including the reinvention of the Democratic Party, the political discourses of empowerment and entrepreneurship, and "politically neutral devices" like participatory budgeting. In their mainstream, post-1990 incarnations, both Democrats and Republicans embraced the centrality and wisdom of non-governmental entities (private, philanthropic) in getting things done. A devotion to the principles of free enterprise and minimalist taxing-and-spending is one of the few principles that bind the various and fractious constituencies of the modern GOP. Meanwhile, "New" Democrats of the Clinton era and beyond have encouraged public-private partnerships and deregulated financial systems as a "third way" between expansive New Deal liberalism and neoliberal austerity. Deepening partisan rifts and divided control of government meant policy incrementalism won out over sweeping reform.

This is an American story, but also an international one, where the era of Reagan and Thatcher gave way to the era of Clinton and Blair, and liberal politicians transmuted these kinds of ideas over the globe in the wake of a breakdown in traditional party loyalties and new regimes of governmental austerity and privatization. Wrapped up in it, as well, was the new emphasis on performance standards and benchmarking, an accountability movement that also threads strongly throughout the public engagement industry Lee profiles in her book. Is it any surprise that D&D gathers steam at a moment when the Democratic mainstream is pulling back from liberalism and embracing "third way" incrementalism, and the GOP is moving from being the party of loyal opposition to becoming the party of "no"?

At the same time, on the other coast and other planet of Silicon Valley, the Internet-era technology industry spent the past four decades building what veteran venture capitalist John Doerr once called "the largest, legal creation of wealth in the history of the planet."[2] This is another contribution to the history of our recent

history that Caroline Lee is making in this book. For the public engagement industry is, as I see it, part and parcel of the same trends and ideologies that drive Silicon Valley and that shape the landscape of techie political interventions that don't neatly hew left or right, Democratic or Republican. It also gives a bigger canvas on which to consider the basic contradiction of the high-tech industry, which embraces the pursuit of wealth while still trumpeting its "make the world a better place" mantra. Same goes for D&D; as Lee puts it: "public engagement is a market, but it's a market for a sacred thing, the way yoga and organic foods are" (p. 129).

Although loyalties among tech's donor class have shifted from majority-Republican to majority-Democrat between the 1980s and today, the prevailing ethos of the tech industry was and is apolitical or, to be more precise, anti-institutional. This is an industry established by young men with iconoclastic politics that spanned both parties. From the start, Valley companies embraced flat hierarchies, spurned unionization, and built loyalty through stock options and an amorphous but powerful emphasis on "company culture." Establishment parties and old-style bureaucracies continue to have little appeal to web-era tech. Government is either something to avoid entirely, or to disrupt and revise beyond recognition. Yet anarchy was not and is not Silicon Valley's game: these folks are engineers, and they are believers in precise systems to get things done. Perhaps the breakneck pace that technological tools and platforms have created in modern life helps explain public engagement's appeal. As Lee observes, "the processes of engagement is a method for managing and slowing the breakneck pace of social change in our organizational lives" (p. 229).

Like the public engagement industry Lee explores in this book, both politicians and techies have built identities around the rejection

of bureaucratic institutions and the embrace of more communitarian values. Yet the inability of our modern age to do much about persistent social inequities (instead, in the places the tech industry concentrates, it has exacerbated them), raises a big question: when the era of big corporate hierarchies—or big government—is over, what effective policy mechanism comes in its place? Who benefits from disruption? And, most ominously, has process trumped substance?

Many times, I was infuriated by the people Lee depicts in her book. We read of summits on childhood obesity sponsored by food companies, and budget-cutting exercises for the truly beleaguered and cash-starved city of Philadelphia. We see smart people making tough choices instead of actually funding government adequately so that these choices don't have to be made (pp. 166-170).

Yet for all her critique, Lee displays empathy, sympathy, even as she carefully points out the shortcomings. As one graduate student quoted by Lee puts it ruefully, "failure is actually the system itself and not entirely our actions within the system" (p. 193).

True democracy, through any means, can be tremendously difficult to pull off. Yet the people and processes that Lee profiles in this study—while symptomatic of and possibly contributing to a broader stasis and crisis of leadership—are still in many ways portraits of hope in that they are trying to make the difficult possible, to work, deliberatively and gradually and inclusively, toward a more perfect union.

Endnotes

1. Grover Norquist, "My First Burning Man: Confessions of a Conservative from Washington," The Guardian, September 2, 2014, http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/sep/02/my-first-burning-man-grover-norquist, accessed November 14, 2015.

2. John Doerr, quoted in Udayan Gupta, *Done Deals: Venture Capitalists Tell Their Stories*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Business Press, 2000).

The Public Engagement Industry and the Future of Democratic Praxis

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Reading *Do-It-Yourself Democracy* this summer harkened the experience I had while viewing Lena Dunham's first film, *Tiny Furniture*. Dunham is the film director who has become a pop culture icon due to her depiction of millennial twenty-somethings on the hit show *Girls*. I know this is an awkward comparison, so let me explain what I mean. My immediate reflection upon the conclusion of Dunham's *Tiny Furniture* was that she had masterfully depicted a fascinating social world that was hitherto alien to me—the world of the rich Manhattan debutante ensnared in post-collegiate malaise. As a director, Dunham's success rested in her intimate familiarity with that world—with her capacity to animate its fine cultural contours and highlight its internal contradictions. Her challenge as a director, however, was that the world she represented made many people cringe. This was because Dunham depicted the real existential problems that people living in a fantasy world (i.e. the world of the "one percent") faced: anguish due to being rich, liberated from work, and devoid of structure, meaning, and life purpose. This is what makes the film interesting: the problems that Dunham's characters face seem debilitating in the context of the movie but absurd when placed in the broader social-political milieu, where millions of people lack access to basic material security and face myriad forms of political repression.

The same tension between appearance and reality undergirds Caroline Lee's brilliant *Do-It-Yourself Democracy*. Lee's book depicts the *real problems* that those peddling a *fake* or at best *distorted* form of democracy face. A number of government institutions, non-profit organizations, and private-sector corporations,

as she explains, have sought to devolve administrative decision-making processes over the past 20 years. "Engagement professionals" work with these "clients" to involve constituents and employees in institutional governance. The rub is that clients rarely if ever afford participants any real power to influence outcomes. Instead, they restrict participation to choosing among officially approved options, which almost always benefit clients at the

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public's expense. This leaves Lee's "democracy practitioners" in a pickle: they must generate enthusiasm for "democratic" practices that impose extreme parameters on the nature of participation and that leave most participants feeling disempowered when "deliberation and dialogue" processes conclude.

Before I finished Lee's book, my impulse was to dismiss engagement professionals as phonies and their "dialogue and deliberation" practices as a sham. Much like I cringed at the ostensibly tortured existence of the trust fund youth in Dunham's *Tiny Furniture*, I cringed at the contradiction between democracy practitioners' rhetoric—their pretensions of providing citizens with "transformative" experiences of "authentic public engagement" and promoting "real public participation"—and the practical realities of their work, which oftentimes did little more than infuse administrative decrees with a veneer of public approval. What I really like about *Do-It-Yourself Democracy*, however, is that Lee doesn't let readers off the hook that easy. She dispelled my reactionary stereotypes, taking pains to show that engagement professionals are sincere people who genuinely

believe in the power of engagement, and who, despite the limits they face, approach their work with considerable gravitas.

More importantly, Lee makes sense of engagement professionals' trade by firmly situating their practices in the political and economic contradictions of our time. Her analysis reveals how the engagement industry's existence evolved out of the convergence of two opposed forces: concerns about diminishing citizen participation and eroding social capital that sparked calls for organized engagement initiatives on the one hand, and the intensification of neoliberal political-economic policies on the other, which prescribed privatization and markets as default solutions to social problems and transformed personal authenticity into a civic virtue. Much of Lee's book analyzes the tensions that have ensued from attempting to enact democracy on this ontological fault line. She explores, for example, the peculiarities of a political project that attempts to spur a public good (i.e. social capital, civic capacity, and public participation) by relying on private sector professionals (similar to the project of educating the public via for-profit universities); that works to mobilize publics to generate private profits (similar to the old convict-leasing system and corporate subsidies); and that attempts to mobilize citizens who are eager to participate in civic affairs but cynical about participatory initiatives, and who care about social justice at the same time they are preoccupied with projects of individual self-realization.

Apart from explaining public engagement's contradictions, Lee explores the industry's implications. This is an important and timely task. Engagement professionals have begun to transform the very nature of democracy—the bedrock of historical efforts oriented toward political emancipation and social justice—by professionalizing and commodifying processes that have historically taken the popular and the

public as their starting points. Worse, they have sold "democracy" to corporate actors and state technocrats who use them to further social control, expand profits, and cultivate the illusion of popular sovereignty rather than to facilitate self-governance. Indeed, the industry's products and services usually don't help people collectively decide how to live their lives; they present the public with prefabricated "choices" about how they would like to absorb budget cuts, perform more work for less compensation (phrased as "giving back" or "contributing" to the "greater good"), and relinquish their rights and privileges as citizens. These processes, as Lee discusses in the final chapter, ultimately mollify aggrieved citizens, contain resistance, and discourage mobilization.

Lee's work suggests that commercialized public engagement has begun to reshape the very nature of "publics" as well. Given the industry's peculiar character as both neoliberal and social justice-oriented, the engagement practices it promotes are designed to moderate public desire and engender a collective will predicated upon the principles of Randian Objectivism. The industry, as she explains, has embraced a philosophy of "selfing," which encourages the public to "see all others as on an equally compelling mutual journey to personal authenticity and heart-based self-fulfillment"—including the boss who is downsizing the firm to increase dividends and the public official reducing welfare benefits to fund tax cuts (p.107). Its engagement practices, as such, encourage exploited groups to empathize with those who exert power over them.

They also mold a public that is paradoxically held together by a common belief in the virtues of individualism. In the eyes of engagement professionals, the meaning of "public" does not necessarily involve sharing resources, interests, or visions; it means sharing a commitment to an individual journey of self-realization. Despite

their attempts to be "ruthlessly self-critical" (p.225), engagement professionals refused to reflect on their homogenous social composition (they were largely white and middle-class) and dismissed dialogue about race, class, and gender inequalities as regressive "identity politics." At the many engagement conferences that Lee attended, considerations of social and economic justice, minority rights, and collective action were rare. Platitudes from the positive psychology movements, New Age pontifications about the "the nature of infinity," and team-building exercises involving "conversation cafes," "peace tiles," and "journey walls," on the other hand, reigned supreme. In this "feel good" version of democracy –wherein "we're all human, man"—social justice and collective solidarity took a backseat to the mutual pursuit of personal authenticity.

Lee's insights into the type of democracy that engagement professionals promote left me with several questions—most concerning where subsequent scholarship might take the study of political participation and public engagement. The first deals with the interesting tension of how engagement can feel "authentically real" and "transformative" to participants while economically and politically disempowering them. In further exploring this tension, engagement with two literatures might be useful. The first is Gramsci's writing on hegemony, which analyze how skillful leadership that is sensitive to the collective anxieties and culture of subordinate groups can generate consent. Although she does not draw from him, Lee's analysis, one might argue, construes engagement professionals as hegemonic leaders in the neoliberal era of cutbacks and "labor-for-work" (Standing 2011:120). They make workers and community members feel satisfied and engaged while diminishing their capacity to affect institutional change and discouraging them from protesting or pursuing litigation to achieve their interests.

They also tend to convince members of the public, to use Burawoy's (1979: xi) terms, to participate in the "intensification of [their] own exploitation," that is to say, do more work for less compensation or pay more taxes for fewer benefits. This is essentially the definition of hegemonic consent.

I also wonder if Meyer and Rowan's (1977) neo-institutional theory might shed further light on the social dynamics of the engagement industry. Much of Lee's analysis describes how process and purpose/outcome have become *decoupled* among democracy practitioners. Public engagement firms like AmericaSpeaks appear to adopt specific practices and processes to secure legitimacy among clients and participants while knowing that those practices and processes fail to further democratic decision-making. To what extent does this phenomenon parallel the permanently failing organizations that neo-institutionalists have long analyzed, e.g. universities that successfully secure funding and high student satisfaction rates while failing to achieve their core mission—learning?

The second question pertains to two words that permeate Lee's book: "authenticity" and "real." Engagement professionals continuously distinguish between "real engagement" and "fake engagement," and they seem infatuated with the idea of "authenticity." Why is this the case? Does the discourse have something to do with the way their industry has commercialized something that is supposed to be not-for-profit—even sacred? The rhetoric of Lee's participants reminded me of 90s-era musicians who defended the integrity of their music after signing contracts with major record labels. Their discourses, like engagement professionals', emphasized how the commodification of their products would not undermine their aesthetic value nor impinge upon their ability to creatively control them. What's interesting is that in recent years discourses of authenticity have largely faded from music and art scenes.

Will this happen with public engagement as well? In other words, does the prominence of authenticity discourses reflect resistance to the commercialization of democracy? Will they infuse engagement processes with greater integrity, or will they evanesce as people acclimate to the idea of democracy as just another commodity (as has happened in the music and art worlds)? When examining this issue, we must also question whether such a thing as "authentic engagement" actually exists. In the sociology of culture, scholars treat authenticity as a social construction—a claim that others legitimate or deny. Looking at engagement processes from this angle, why do professionals define some processes and meetings as authentic but others as fake? What is the common thread? And perhaps most importantly, how can we study public engagement in a way that both avoids reifying democracy as an ontologically real set of processes while remaining critical of what Lee calls "facipulation?"

Answering some of these questions, I hope, will help us think through what the rise of the public engagement industry means for democratic praxis in the 21st Century. At the end of her book, Lee wavers a bit on this question. She offers a trenchant critique of the public engagement industry in her final chapter, but also seems reluctant to dismiss the industry wholesale. Whether she views commercialized public engagement as a corruption of democracy, a promising development, or as something toward which we should feel ambivalent remains somewhat unclear. This, I think, highlights the need for further inquiry and debate. We should commend Lee for making such an insightful intervention into this important debate and such an outstanding contribution to the literature on political participation.

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Comments on *Do-It-Yourself Democracy*

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Caroline Lee's wonderfully rich study of participation professionals, *Do-It-Yourself Democracy*, takes us on an enlightening tour inside the public engagement industry. Lee grapples with important questions about the meaning of democracy, and her multi-method study both offers fresh insight about the complex meanings of participation and maps the contours of a future research agenda on the contradictions of public engagement.

As I read *Do-It-Yourself Democracy*, I was reminded of Wini Breines's (1989) classic, if underappreciated, study of the New Left, which challenged us to think anew about the possibilities of prefigurative politics and the limits of traditionally bureaucratic organizational forms. Lee wades into the debate about the possibilities and limits of participation at a much different historical moment, and her focus is on a recently professionalized form of activism. But like Breines, Lee challenges us to reconsider widespread assumptions about the significance of participation in public life. If Breines left me optimistic about the future, Lee's work paints a far less sanguine picture. Still, Lee's clear-eyed analysis of common deliberation practices is a valuable contribution precisely because it

interrogates basic assumptions about the benefits of professionally managed public engagement.

As she examines the work of public engagement professionals, Lee recognizes its foundation in an earnest commitment to public participation. Indeed, there is much to admire in the democratic faith and enduring optimism that is shared widely within the network of consultants dedicated to developing and disseminating tools for enhancing public deliberation. Lee gives readers a view of the tactics and techniques these professionals use to facilitate participation, highlighting the importance of process, the value of listening, and the possibility of empowerment.

There is, however, much more to the story, and Lee's careful sociological analysis peels away the layers of public engagement to reveal the limits and unintended consequences of P2 ("public participation") work. For starters, Lee shows how the professionalization of participation is connected to broader rationalizing logics of contemporary institutions; this kind of bureaucratization of participation can severely constrain the possibilities of public engagement. Lee's discussion of how increasingly rationalized forms of "participatory budgeting" – typically through the development of a "best practices" approach – has a tendency to marginalize the very social justice commitments that inspired participatory budgeting in the first place is a powerful case in point.

In addition, professionalization produces forms of participation that mobilize individual rather than collective action, often emphasizing public engagement as a form of self-actualization. At the same time, a focus on individual participation, perhaps surprisingly, mobilizes and strengthens pathways to public life that position people as *consumers* rather than the *citizens* – and participation itself becomes an increasingly commodified experience. How

public engagement practices elevate consumer over citizen identities echoes throughout *Do-It-Yourself Democracy*, and I suspect there is much more rich terrain to be explored in future research.

While Lee describes a public engagement industry full of positive-thinking idealists, she also shows us how deliberation practices act as an often-powerful form of social control. Following routinized best practices can squeeze out more combative forms of discourse, produce normative commitments to narrow definitions of civility, and marginalize dissent. In this context, it is not hard to see how a commitment to deliberation and participation can serve to delegitimize political engagement that is organized around mobilization and contention. Social movements often demand public participation, but activist forms of participation may conflict quite dramatically with institutional forms of public deliberation. When she connects the dots, showing the historical links between the public engagement industry and experts' efforts to develop more effective workplace control strategies, Lee pushes us to reckon with how bureaucratized forms of public participation might, counter-intuitively, actually limit rather than enhance democratic processes.

All of this suggests that it is useful to understand professional public engagement practices as part of the processes of constructing consent in formally democratic societies. In a clear and careful analysis, Lee shows how professional public engagement processes ultimately serve to legitimize decisions at the same time they build public empathy for decision makers, while simultaneously defining the common good in relation to economic efficiency, fiscal responsibility, and a supportive business climate. When public participation is framed within such narrow bounds, especially when citizens accept the legitimacy of such a limited

perspective, we can see how public engagement practices work to promote top-down, market-oriented definitions of why people should get involved in the first place. It may not be much of a stretch to suggest that the public

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engagement industry promotes a distinctively *neo-liberal* form of participation in public life. In the contemporary political climate, subjecting these neoliberal participatory practices to critical scrutiny is becoming an increasingly urgent task.

Lee's critique of the public engagement industry is rich and nuanced, and it is most compelling when she explores the deep contradictions imbedded in the practice. For example, efforts intended to empower publics produce "disempowering outcomes" (p. 219) and a commitment to enlarging the democratic imagination yields approaches "more likely to contain unrest than to challenge inequalities" (p. 221). The final section of the book, "The Spirit of Deliberative Capitalism," offers a sophisticated interpretation of both the appeal of public deliberation and its limits as a social change strategy.

When I finished reading *Do-It-Yourself Democracy* ... I read it again. And I found it even more persuasive on a second read. Lee is a clear and eloquent writer, who knows how to tell a story, analyze data, and work through complex concepts. And, as with the scholarship I find most valuable, *Do-It-Yourself Democracy* left me with many new questions. How can we envision new approaches that would make public participation efforts more mobilizing? What would it mean (and what would it take) to disentangle a commitment to fiscal discipline from ideas about the value of public participation? How does a relentless enthusiasm and emphasis on maintaining an individual sense of hope limit public engagement efforts, and what are the alternatives? What makes public participation so attractive to so many activists, reformers, and others dedicated to social change? And, ultimately, what are the civic benefits of public participation, and how can we match practices of participation to social contexts likely to yield these benefits?

For all its genuine commitment to building democratic practices that are participatory and deliberative, Lee reveals how professional public engagement is ultimately demobilizing. This may be a somewhat disheartening conclusion. After all, critical sociology is, in many respects, bound up with a commitment to enhancing democratic public life. Nevertheless, Lee never loses sight of the big picture, and sociologists in a range of subfields – including social movements, culture, and organizations – will encounter deep thinking in *Do-It-Yourself Democracy*. I hope this masterful work will help open new inquiries about the complex relationships among democracy, deliberation, public participation, and forms of mobilization and collective action.

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Is Deliberative Democracy Stuck in a Moment?

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> *"In state-of-the-field surveys of historical sociology and of historical social science at large, the study of the public sphere is missing. The rise of historical social science has not led to an established tradition of comparative historical research on the public sphere."*
>
> -Andreas Koller, 2010, "The Public Sphere and Comparative Historical Research"

I wrote this book because I found that, despite the expansive deliberative democracy literature in the 1990s and 2000s, there was minimal comparative historical analysis of why deliberative public engagement had become a popular solution to the ills of the public sphere. As such, I am thrilled that Matt Baltz organized this symposium on *Do-It-Yourself Democracy: The Rise of the Public Engagement Industry*, and so grateful to the critics from Author Meets Critics sessions at the Social Science History Association and American Sociological Association annual meetings for adapting their comments for *Trajectories*.

I am frequently asked by readers like Philip to better specify my personal perspective on the social changes described in the book: Is the rise of the industry corrupting, promising, or something in between? As some of the comments here note, I don't think these normative questions—which are extensively engaged by critics and proponents of deliberation on the ground—are the key responsibility of scholars of democracy. My larger agenda is to make the case that the understanding of enthusiasm for a certain kind of public engagement in the last three decades must be attentive to the conditions for its possibility and the contexts in which this form

of "deep" democracy is deployed. Without relating the political voice and civic action that engagement can empower to social and economic inequalities, we really can't get a full picture of the health of contemporary democracy. As Lyn and Philip note, *DIY Democracy* only begins to sketch that task, and I appreciate the opportunity to provide a bit more context on public engagement in the current moment and to outline key areas where I believe more comparative historical research is needed.

As an attempt to understand the world of public engagement practitioners, *DIY Democracy* is very much an artifact of the late Bush II and early Obama years in which it was researched. The field was born more than a decade before, at a moment of anxiety about everyday people's political apathy and expert and interest group dominance in public life. It was forged in the late 2000s and early 2010s by financial crisis and austerity policies, which made the empathy that public engagement reliably produces attractive to managers from all sectors. But even as I was finishing the book, the landscape in which public engagement consultants offered a uniquely valuable alternative to ordinary politics was changing.

By the time I was completing final edits on the manuscript, the field was maturing and changing, increasingly fighting for its continued relevance as political consultants and public relations firms began to offer their own versions of dialogue-focused public engagement. While "join the conversation!" had become a standard invitation in online ads for all kinds of products and campaigns, AmericaSpeaks, a pioneering organization in the field and developer of the trademarked "21st Century Town Meeting" process, folded in January 2014. The same year, a special issue of the *Journal of Public Deliberation* on "The State of Our Field" found industry leaders increasingly concerned about dialogue and

deliberation's "branding problem" (McCoy 2014) and "harmful identity crisis" (Leighninger 2014), especially the need to go beyond the "temporary public consultations" that still are its bread and butter (Scully 2014).

While recent years have seen introspection among facilitators on the difficulties of institutionalizing deep democracy, new international research on the industry's various challenges now can tell us much more about Lyn's questions on business dimensions and

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variance in sponsors, topics, and goals, in addition to the global diffusion of public engagement facilitation methods and practices. See, for example, Baiocchi and Ganuza's work on the tumultuous career of participatory budgeting as it has traveled from Brazil around the world (2014). Canadian and French scholars organized a daylong symposium at the 2014 International Political Science Association Annual Congress on the global professionalization of public participation, resulting in a forthcoming edited volume (Bherer, Gauthier, and Simard 2017). From my own standpoint, such research is especially welcome as it expands our sense of the appeal of deliberative public engagement beyond the neoliberal austerity focused on in *DIY Democracy* to its embrace in settings as diverse as urban China and the World Social Forum.

Still, there is much more research to be done on how, exactly, we got to authentic engagement as a political strategy, and why it matters for the problems we might diagnose in the public

sphere today. There are multiple areas of research that are important to crafting this understanding.

The first locates the cultural threads blended in professionalized public engagement—from New Age spirituality to sports fandom to slam poetry to accountability discourses—in Margaret's wonderful historicization of these "odd settings of modern capitalism." Scholars have had a tendency in studying public deliberative events to focus on the political pageantry as a unique civic experience, rather than an assemblage of morally-inflected, largely unremarkable group styles (Lichterman and Eliasoph 2014)—awkward icebreakers, storytelling in the round, flipchart action planning—familiar from corporate retreats, team sports, diversity trainings, Greek life, volunteer groups, and 12-step meetings. The odd thing about the Rockwellian nostalgia blended with multiculturalism and anti-institutionalism in public deliberative events today is just how normal it all seems for veterans of small group life in America. Strange bedfellows may not mind sharing a bed made of comfortably bland discourses about self-realization and bureaucratic incompetence. If there is potential for rebuilding a fragile democratic solidarity, as Lyn asks, it is not, as Philip says, in "sharing resources [or] interests" but in the power of sharing from the heart—in rituals that celebrate individuals taking time to connect with themselves. The work here for researchers, I believe, is in unpacking the resentments and assumptions that make more substantive connections seem out of reach.

But the fraught cultural context is not the whole story. We simply can't understand why dialogue and deliberation seems "charmingly retro" without understanding the other industries and fields that have struggled with producing public culture at the same time that private interests, political voice, and civic action can be blurred for strategic reasons.

Hoynes's *Public Television for Sale* and Spillman's *Solidarity in Strategy* are key for me in understanding organizational perspectives on these historical changes from the public and private side, respectively. Why are sectoral distinctions still so central, when they seem less and less meaningful for organizing experience? We have to explore public engagement in terms of institutional fields, in which policing these boundaries or serving as intermediaries—see Medvetz (2012) on why think tanks became central to public debate—can provide powerful force to these models of behavior. There is some very exciting research documenting just how complex and dynamic the organizational contexts of political, economic, and civic activity are (Eliasoph 2014; Krause 2014; Pacewicz 2016; Polletta 2015). Edward Walker's research on grassroots lobbying in the sharing economy (2015), for example, describes exactly what is new and old in the way new media and new institutions have reshaped urban politics, and particularly conceptions of authentic activism, today. As Margaret says, "Even nonpartisanship has a politics and it isn't always progressive."

Finally, thinking about the politics of civicness today gets us to thinking about the future and the optimism that Bill and Margaret see, even as Philip and Lyn point to stark deficits and manipulation. I worry about my own ivory tower version of Philip's fantasyland—the "impasse" of progressive critique described by Lashaw (2013)—in scrutinizing the organizational interests and odd tics of reasoned, nonpartisan dialogue in a post-Trump moment. Maybe deliberative democracy is an overdue balm in a world of 140-character outrage—and indeed, public engagement practitioners' listservs in November 2016 discussed how their work was "needed now more than ever." My own new project explores top-down civic initiatives in higher ed—exploring how institutions in crisis (and their professional associations and foundations)

have devoted substantial resources to educate students for thoughtful civic engagement in both distant and not-so-distant suffering. These courses, programs, institutes, and centers are often led by progressive social science faculty,

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highly critical of the neoliberal university and confronting the difficulties of sustained, collective, and transformative engagement firsthand. That the uncomfortable lessons that often result are ones the next generation of leaders will take into the divided and unequal world they inherit makes it that much more important, I think, to respect and understand the necessary imperfections of well-meaning, carefully-designed civic projects.

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