

Problem-Solving at the Community Scale: A Deweyan Approach to the Democratic Practices of Minoritized Groups within the United States, South Africa, and Australia

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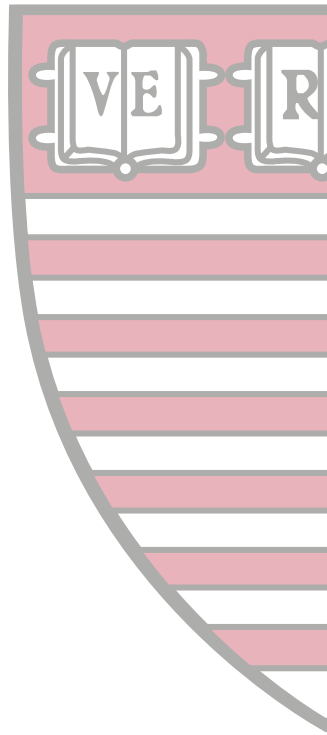
December 2024



HARVARD Kennedy School

ASH CENTER

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and Innovation



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November 2024¹

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A PUBLICATION OF THE

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Abstract

The democratic “recession” across the globe is emerging as a political hallmark of the 21st century. This is evidenced by the incremental breakdown of formal, political democratic practices and institutions among many nations, including in the North Atlantic states, as well as by the fear or anticipation of democratic erosion. This paper uses a pragmatist approach to demonstrate how, in the face of democratic breakdowns, resilient democratic practices are taking form in remarkably varied ways in the common structural context of settler-colonial nation-states that are nominally in stages of advanced democratic consolidation. Pragmatist democratic theory allows us to transcend a mere institutional understanding of democracy, and emphasizes the relevance of everyday life practices and experiences for democracy’s survival. We rely on John Dewey’s understanding of democracy as a way of life and his approach to theory and practice.

Democracy’s decline in most Western states have led democratic theorists to question core assumptions of liberal democratic theory. Rather than equating formal institutions with democracy, we follow Jacques Rancière’s conception of the political and practices of “doing” democracy. As Rancière’s approach lacks an understanding that goes beyond spontaneous outbreaks of democracy, we introduce pragmatist democratic theory as a substantive version of such radical democracy. John Dewey has not only offered a democratic theory that is centered around the notion of everyday life experiences but also provided an understanding of means and ends, and as such a transformational conception of democracy that is seldom present in democratic theory. His conception of ends-in-view allows us to understand the various practices applied in dispossessed and marginalized communities in the postcolonial contexts of the United States, South Africa, and Australia.

Using these three case studies from postcolonial and postconflict societies, we argue that in communities where traditional democratic paradigms and practices failed long ago—to the extent they ever held popular legitimacy in certain community settings at all—everyday democratic practices are witnessing varied forms of resurgence. This resurgence is defined through reference to three strategies of collective problem-solving, themselves underpinned by a process of inquiry by which communities arrive at different solutions. These democratic activities within community institutions include broadening, repurposing, and adaptation. While both the substantive details and normative inflections of these small-d democratic interventions differ considerably across contexts, when taken collectively, these resident activities reveal a sophisticated strategic playbook of making local places reflect residents’ needs and activities. The tactics underlying these resurgent community practices hold insights for democratic theorists and those seeking to foster democracy in “hard places.”

Keywords

Pragmatism, John Dewey, problem-solving, democracy, South Africa, Australia, tribal government, United States

Contents

Prologue.....	1
1. Introduction: Resilience Amid Recession.....	1
2. Scoping Democratic Activities of Collective Problem-Solving.....	4
3. Dewey’s Pragmatic Theory as a Response to Democratic Decline.....	5
4. Research Design.....	8
5. Broadening Jurisdictional Power: Native American Police Cross-Deputization Agreements.....	9
6. Democratic Activities within Community Institutions: Repurposing in Postapartheid South Africa.....	12
7. Adaptive Practices within Indigenous Australian Native Title Corporations.....	15
8. Discussion.....	17
9. Conclusion.....	21
Endnotes.....	24
Literature/Bibliography.....	26

Prologue

The pursuit began like countless others, with a drunk driver swerving recklessly down a dark highway. As the red and blue lights of a police cruiser flashed in the driver's rear-view mirror, the intoxicated individual made a split-second decision to flee, accelerating down the road and toward the invisible boundary that separated the tribal jurisdiction from the neighboring state lands.

For the pursuing officer, the chase was over almost before it began. As the suspect's taillights disappeared across the border, the officer was forced to slam on the brakes, his authority to continue the pursuit suddenly vanishing. It was a scene that played out all too often in areas where the patchwork of state and tribal jurisdictions created by the federal government led to a complex web of legal boundaries. The drunk driver, now on the other side of the line, was free to continue endangering lives, while the officer was left with limited choices, unclear on the jurisdictional situation and his authority to pursue; he abandoned the chase and radioed his counterparts across the border in the hope that they could pick up where he left off. This failure of democratic institutions designed to protect the community eroded public safety, leaving both tribal and nontribal residents vulnerable to the actions of those who would exploit a decades-long problem created by the US government.

This paper describes how marginalized communities across the world have come together to solve problems like this one through collective problem-solving and experimentation.

1. Introduction: Resilience Amid Recession

“The end of democracy is a radical end. For it is an end that has not been adequately realized in any country at any time. It is radical because it requires great change in existing social institutions, economic, legal and cultural.” (Dewey 1987d, 298; emphasis in original)

Problems like the above-mentioned drunk driver often create a diminished experience of democracy in peoples' everyday lives, especially among marginalized groups. They may lead to insecurity for people to take a walk outside at night, distrust in local government due to lack of accountability, and reduced support for democracy in general. By examining how minoritized communities take up these problems by themselves and find experimental solutions “from below,” they offer us a different and meaningful way of looking at democratic practices. John Dewey's theory of democracy helps to understand attempts of collective problem-solving as everyday life practices of democracy. With that, we want to contribute to the debate about possible pathways for democratic transformation by highlighting some recurring acts of inquiry among minoritized groups.

This paper uses a pragmatist approach to demonstrate that the widely discussed breakdown of Western democracy is not occurring homogeneously across communities

within those nominally democratic states. Pragmatist democratic theory allows us to transcend a mere institutional understanding of democracy, and emphasizes the relevance of everyday life practices and individual as well as collective experiences for democracy's survival. We rely on John Dewey's understanding of *democracy as a way of life* and his approach to theory and practice. We highlight that democracy may be found in varying circumstances, and advance that scholars can collectively learn a great deal from historically marginalized communities that may have never fully experienced democratic ideals, even within formally "democratic" polities: Indigenous and formerly colonized people in the United States, postapartheid South Africa, and Australia.

Recent democratic theory is torn between diagnoses of doom and just as many approaches to salvation. Rescue proposals mostly refer to democratic innovations such as mini publics, social movements, or global governance institutional arrangements to achieve deep democratic consolidation. What is striking is that while all these proposals acknowledge growing social inequality, they seldom involve material redistribution in their solutions, are rarely oriented toward precarious living conditions, and too rarely focus on communities that have long been engaged in struggles for democracy and their own emancipation (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Mounk 2019; Gastil and Wright 2019; Smith 2009). For the most part, the focus of dominant political science remains on increased attention to public deliberation or better opportunities for participation, while the decline of basic material conditions of democracy—as well as everyday life possibilities of self-government—are not addressed. Notable examples include long unaddressed popular-democratic demands for land reform, racial reparation, or radical redistribution by respective communities. Consequently, we challenge not only the notion of democratic erosion but also the prominence given to the field of democratic innovations. The *deliberative wave* (OECD 2020) and a vast interest in deliberative, as well as radical, democracy theory over the past 30 years have led many scholars to put hope into a great number of procedures beyond elections. Such innovations, most prominently mini publics, are understood to be a means to overcome democratic deficits of Western societies and have emerged as an extensive field of both research and practice. While those experiments certainly contribute to new understandings of democracy, they also conceal latent democratic moves and practices by marginalized groups and communities.² As such, this paper sheds light on counterstrategies in communities that have been fighting for democratic self-governance long before mainstream political science took up erosion and innovation as its major concerns.³

John Dewey closely focused on the experience of democracy itself and saw ordinary experiences as necessary preconditions for thriving institutions. Democratic resistance may be found in small, less obvious, and rather unpretentious moves of everyday life survival in marginalized groups. His conception of ends-in-view allows us to understand the various practices applied in dispossessed/marginalized communities in the postcolonial contexts of the United States, South Africa, and Australia. We focus

on these countries because they are all, institutionally, Western liberal democracies yet they all include historically marginalized communities.

Dewey's approach of collective problem-solving is appealing in this context because he was precisely concerned about such a problem: how nominally democratic publics can find ways to integrate perspectives that have too long been overlooked.⁴ Accordingly, this paper considers the small-d democratic practices of marginalized dynamics within liberal democracies. Though some institutional arrangements may already be democratic in the United States, South Africa, and Australia, many others are not. We follow John Medearis's interpretation of John Dewey in his treatment of "democracy as struggling from inception against aspects of a social world that have already taken shape and that frequently resist popular management. It views democracy neither as a distant ideal nor as a completed reality, but as a continual, active process of becoming" (Medearis 2015, 3). We thus provide insight into such *activities of becoming* instead of retreating into a dichotomy of erosion or innovation and broaden the understanding of democratic practices. Similar claims were made by influential democratic theorists such as Iris Marion Young: "Democracy is not an all-or nothing affair, but a matter of degree; societies can vary in both the extent and the intensity of their commitment to democratic practice" (Young 2000, 5). Therefore, we also seek to provide a rather practice-oriented approach of theorizing democracy in the 21st century.

Drawing on insights from three case studies, each from postcolonial and postconflict societies that are nominally liberal democracies, we ask, How do minoritized communities *enact* democratic practice when formal institutions and actors fail to do so? Additionally, what can scholars of democracy learn from these everyday, informal practices? We argue that in communities where traditional democratic paradigms and practices hold little legitimacy, everyday democratic practices are nonetheless widespread. The widespread presence of such practices is productively explored through reference to three strategies of *collective problem-solving*, themselves underpinned by a process of inquiry by which communities arrive at different solutions. These democratic activities within community institutions include adaptation, repurposing, and institutional broadening, and they reveal a sophisticated strategic playbook of making local places reflect residents' needs and activities. While locally differentiated and wide-ranging, the tactics and strategies underlying these resurgent community practices hold insights for democratic theorists and those seeking to foster democracy beyond a traditional liberal understanding.

With this overall argument in mind, the rest of the paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 briefly clarifies our area of empirical focus and advances the potential pathways or mechanisms by which community-scale democratic practice might inform broader democratic institutions. Section 3 introduces our theoretical framework as inspired by John Dewey's pragmatism. Here, we likewise clarify Dewey's five-step process of social inquiry by which communities democratically define "problems" and make them

public and by which they pilot experimental strategies in response. Section 4 introduces our case-selection process and research design. Sections 5, 6, and 7 discuss the case-study democratic activities of broadening, repurposing, and adaptation in the United States, South Africa, and Australia, respectively. Section 8 offers a discussion in which we expound on potential pathways and mechanisms by which informal community problem-solving percolates upward to shape or influence other democratic institutions. Section 9 concludes.

2. Scoping Democratic Activities of Collective Problem-Solving

This paper’s opening vignette, and the three cases that follow, involve public problem-solving and experimentation by and for minoritized communities, building power through informal, everyday channels. In contrast to democratic channels with a state-sanctioned formal political mandate that is statutory, juridical, or executive in nature—like legislation or reforms to electoral rule-making—the channels discussed in this paper are sanctioned by informal and everyday institutions, such as customary norms, relational safeguards, or hyperlocal public opinion. Accordingly, the cases of collective problem-solving described fall in only one realm of public problem-solving (see Figure 1). However, we advance that scholars of democratic theory and practice have too often overlooked this space, both in prognosticating democratic decline and in seeking democratic innovations or solutions. Moreover, in this paper’s discussion (Section 8), we consider the potential arenas by which informal democratic problem-solving within minoritized communities has both inspired and reshaped democratic practice for hegemonic groups and formal political institutions as well.

Figure 1. Actors and Modes of Democratic Problem-Solving⁵

Mode/Arena of Democratic Action	Community Composition	
	Nonminoritized communities	Minoritized communities
Formal	Legislature, judiciary, executive	Advisory councils, peak bodies/ umbrella consortia, aligned interest groups, nonprofit organizations
Informal	Public debates, op-ed articles, community organizations	Everyday (policy) experiments, spontaneously formed issue publics Subject of this paper

There are a variety of democratic experiments that might operate through various processes of social or political change. For example, informal everyday efforts at democratic problem-solving might tackle harmful cultural narratives that stereotype minoritized communities and operate through theater or the arts. Our analysis, however, is

limited to a specific process of social and political change: *policy* experiments. We limit the scope conditions to policy changes as these perhaps best illustrate the extent to which informal and everyday democratic practice can inform more formal political institutions. Accordingly, in each of the three cases, distinctive informal groups of actors successfully change public policies at varying scales.⁶

3. Dewey's Pragmatic Theory as a Response to Democratic Decline

John Dewey was one of the most influential American philosophers of the 20th century. His work addresses various fields ranging from education to religion, the formation of knowledge to the experience of art. Dewey was a highly engaged philosopher but also an activist: he founded the Laboratory School at the University of Chicago, tried to establish a third political party (Dewey 1985; Finnegan 2003), and put his theoretical ideas into practice with the People's Lobby (Lee 2015). He dedicated his theoretical and practical work to fostering democracy *as a way of life*.

Dewey was deeply motivated by the need to enhance democratic everyday life experience for the mass of the people. He envisioned democratic societies as communities of problem-solvers, trying to overcome public problems in processes of collective inquiry. He does so in *The Public and Its Problems* (Dewey 2016), analyzing why the United States is not yet a "Great Community" but only a "Great Society" (Dewey 2016, 171) and why democracy is not yet fully consolidated and the United States continues to be a rather capitalistic oligarchy. In *Individualism Old and New and Liberalism and Social Action* (Dewey 1984, 1987a), he draws a critique of the liberalism of the 19th century and develops a new one for the 20th century. Facing challenges of industrialization, such as poverty and repetitive, monotonous work, he argues in favor of a broader conception of liberty. Against an individualistic approach to freedom and any absolute or fixed idea of the individual, he argues for a relational conception of liberty.

Additionally, for Dewey, liberty implies the opportunity of individual growth and enrichment of experience (Dewey 2001). Based on the idea of egalitarian growth for all, in *Liberty and Social Control* he defines freedom as "effective power to do specific things" (Dewey 1987b, 360). Such conception is relational rather than atomistic: "There is no such thing as the liberty or effective power of an individual, group, or class, except in relation to the liberties, the effective powers, of other individuals, groups, and classes" (361). Within this conception of liberalism, Dewey has no fixed idea of the state. As he describes in *The Public and Its Problems* (Dewey 2016), the state functions as means to achieve an egalitarian society and to ensure such growth for everyone. As such, Dewey defines it as an ever-changing and experimental set of institutions. The state's primary function is to address the unintended consequences of political action. All those problems are of public relevance, which impact not only the immediately

affected but also the unintentionally affected. Whenever necessary, the state must act upon conditions hindering the growth of the people.

Dewey envisions democratic communities as a collective of problem-solvers and defines a five-step process of social inquiry (Dewey 1986a), where the initial definition of a problematic situation crucially depends on those who participate in the very definition of the problem. At the beginning is the (1) the unknown situation—a difficulty or problem, yet to be defined. The very definition of a problem is the second step (2). Here, it is crucial to understand that this definition depends on the number of people or groups involved, and Dewey considers it to be relevant to include as many different perspectives as possible. The way a problem is defined already points to specific solutions. If marginalized groups are left out, it is likely that the proposed solutions will not suit them or they will lack support. The third step (3) is finding a solution for the problem by dividing the problem into various parts. In the case of the drunk driver, one might address the consumption allowance for driving. Another angle is obviously the lack of legal authority to continue a chase, and one could also reflect on education about addictive substances and behavior. Ideas for each of the problems' parts are being developed. In the fourth step, such ideas are tested, evaluated, and, if needed, adopted or altered (4). The last step (5) is the final closing of the situation. This can—and most often does—also imply that another inquiry process will start to address another perspective of the given problem (Dewey 1986a, 109–22). While this may appear to be a rather formal procedure, it is key to understand that Dewey deemed this method relevant to structure people's individual thinking, and envisioned it as the procedure for collective problem-solving and experimentation.

As we will see in our examples, democratic moves by marginalized communities cannot simply be understood as a pragmatic response to failures of the state to respond to public problems. Because the state fails, those communities take up the need for problem-solving themselves and develop experimental strategies of (democratic) survival—they must take part in the definition of the problem or, when their demands are not heard, try to find means to solve a problem by themselves. While these strategies take form in both formal and informal ways, this paper focuses on informal strategies of democratic problem-solving that communities enact to fill the void left by governing polities. Accordingly, those communities most affected by these problems experience and *enact* their own democratic solutions. Why is that so? Human experience is the basic pillar of Deweyan philosophy, as experience gives the individual the most immediate access to the world. The way individuals process their experiences and can actively shape their environment influences their personal experience and self-development. Dewey connects people's everyday experiences with the way people can or cannot relate to democracy. He is concerned with whether or not people can freely decide—or at least have a share in the decisions underlying—how and in what conditions they work, live their private lives, and more. As such, the everyday structure

of social life has a relevant impact on the formation of a person's democratic habits (Dewey 1946). To achieve democracy as a way of life, people must have a considerable say in the conditions surrounding them. Dewey argues that it is not only relevant whether people have a fair share in what they produce but also that their way of producing impacts the individual's ability to situate themselves within society. His pragmatist approach emphasizes that democracy can only sustain itself when understood as both political democracy and a broad social system balancing society's power structures, namely economic and other externally imposed structures.

What is significant about the pragmatist approach is both its orientation toward concrete problems and its immediate call to action. Therefore, Dewey has always proposed ideas on how to accomplish political change. He defines politics as a "struggle for possession and use of power to settle specific issues that grow out of the country's needs and problems" (Dewey 1986b, 68). Dewey strongly argued in favor of not only deliberative measures, such as local assemblies and neighborhood interaction, but also radical action such as strikes, forming new political parties, or nationalizing banks, industry, and large-scale infrastructure. To achieve radical democratic ends, Dewey argues for radical means. More specifically, he contends for the experimental method, combined with such a call for radical action, and makes a strong case for political action beyond mere deliberation. Whenever necessary, "it follows . . . that there is no opposition in principle between liberalism as social philosophy and radicalism in action, if by radicalism is signified the adoption of policies that bring about drastic, instead of piece-meal, social change" (Dewey 1987c, 293).

As Dewey (1973) outlines in his *Lectures in China*, when confronted with social demands by an oppressed group, the strategy of a hegemonic group is to diminish such needs as individualistic and irrelevant. Underrepresented groups will therefore only be capable of achieving their goals when such goals are deployed as a strong and collective bargain, presented with a unified voice. Such issues of bargaining and voice point to our case studies, which reveal that communities that had to, or still must—under conditions of capitalist exploitation and nondemocratic everyday life experiences—experiment with moves and practices of self-governance to create experiences of growth and collective self-determination. These practices tend to be less obtrusive and more contextually grounded than democratic innovations heralded by many scholars studying democratic innovations and experimentations.⁷ Nonetheless, they are important symbols of the formation of democratic habits beyond textbook definitions and show the relevance of a pragmatist approach to democracy. Only if we look at ordinary people's practices and understandings of democracy and self-determination can we find sustainable answers to the various crises of democracy.

4. Research Design

This paper explores three case studies of community-scale democratic practice used by marginalized communities in the United States, South Africa, and Australia. Because dominant scholarly literature on democratic erosion and innovation too often focuses on the Global North, and often exclusively focuses on the democratic society's dominant groups, we sought cases with different geographies, institutional forms, and community actors. We look intentionally *across* Global North and Global South experiences of democratic life and also examine the experiences of democracy from the perspective of groups without hegemonic power. This variance is intentional, as our aim is not to provide a unified theory of subaltern democratic practices but rather to illustrate the plurality of ways marginalized groups are pragmatically solving present problems across diverse contexts. In Deweyan terms, marginalized positions allow us to see where hegemonic institutions are ineffective or not suitable for subaltern contexts, and studying marginalized groups' responses allows us to witness how these responses fill the vacuum of ineffectual institutional design.

A second through line across the three cases is a structural backdrop of settler colonialism. We view settler colonialism as a structure, not an event (Wolfe 2006, 390). As Lahti (2017) writes, "settler colonialism is both an object of study and a particular way of looking at history" (8). This way of looking at history foregrounds "invasion" and "acquisition" of Indigenous territory (Limerick 2017, 90) and places local accounts within an interconnected, international framework of study. Settler-colonial approaches foreground questions of land, property, and possession. Moreover, writes Limerick, "the fact that many of the scholars in *settler colonialism* are themselves beneficiaries of *settler colonialism* positions them to speak to their fellow citizens not as detached outsiders speaking from a distant high ground—but as people struggling with their own difficult ethical inheritance" (2017, 94). Foregrounding settler-colonial power is indeed relevant to theories of democracy, notes Adam Dahl, as both liberal "democratic thought and identity arose out of the distinct pattern by which English settlers colonized the new world" and as "colonial dispossession" (of land and alternative epistemologies and ontologies) led to the very dynamics of marginalization that communities today resist (2018, 1–20).

As researchers, we recognize that our white-identifying backgrounds influence our perspective on these issues. Coming from Germany, Australia, and the United States, we acknowledge that we have benefited from structures and systems shaped by settler colonialism. This acknowledgment is not an assertion of inherent bias or an invitation to dismiss our work. Rather, it is a recognition that our lived experiences and the historical contexts of our countries inform our understandings of these complex, globally interconnected issues of democratic practice and its shortcomings. That ontological difference toward the enduring structures of settler colonialism informs how we study, and

understand, community-scale democratic problem-solving: we are not members of the communities actively filling the void but personally and collectively benefit from understanding such problem-solving efforts, as they benefit both specific marginalized communities and their societies' democratic institutional arrangements more broadly. The selection of these cases and their country contexts bring us as authors into a shared structural framework with the communities fighting to *enact* democracy, though our positions within this framework differ significantly. We invite readers to engage critically with our analysis, considering how our perspectives contribute to, rather than detract from, the ongoing discourse around democracy in these marginalized communities.

Finally, each case deliberately expresses democratic practice through very heterogeneous institutional arrangements and experiments. The cases are not representative, exclusive, or exhaustive of democratic problem-solving in these countries or case contexts. Rather, they are a set of very deliberately differentiated democratic activities—repertoires—featuring three distinct institutional arrangements and three wholly different combinations of actors and problem solvers. The first case, exploring a practice and democratic tactic of “broadening” among tribes in the United States, is advanced by negotiation within different agencies and departments of the local state, alongside community advocates. The final case foregrounds strategic “adaptation” within Australia’s Indigenous native title corporations. In this case, the Indigenous polities operating these corporations adapt the imposed governance model to advance aims that range from landed property ownership to public service delivery. Our aim is precisely to show how resilient democratic practices take form in remarkably different ways, in the common structural context of settler-colonial nation-states that are nominally in stages of advanced democratic consolidation.⁸

5. Broadening Jurisdictional Power: Native American Police Cross-Deputization Agreements

Dewey’s pragmatist approach to democracy emphasizes the importance of collaborative problem-solving through collective experimentation and shared responsibility to addressing complex social issues. Our first case study of such problem-solving is of cross-deputization agreements between Native American tribes, state, and local governments to expand jurisdiction and improve the enforcement of criminal law in Indian Country.⁹ These agreements result in democratic “broadening”: they have the dual effect of both strengthening tribal institutional governance and enhancing safety outcomes for communities.

In the United States, federally recognized American Indian and Alaska Native tribal nations hold a unique legal and politically sovereign status. The US Supreme Court has described their relationship with the United States as those of “domestic dependent nations” (*Cherokee Nation v. Georgia*, 30 U.S. (5 Pet.) 1 (1831)). The resulting legal

status is that Congress has exclusive plenary power over tribes. However, tribes retain all the powers of a foreign nation except those withdrawn by Congress, ceded by treaty, or incompatible with their dependent status.

The past two centuries have seen significant reductions and withdrawals to the sovereign powers of tribal nations in the United States, resulting in a complex patchwork of jurisdictions. One particularly impactful policy aimed at reducing the powers of tribes was the Dawes Act of 1887 (also known as the General Allotment Act). This allotment policy of 1887–1934 divided communal tribal lands and placed them in individual ownership, with surplus lots to go to new non-Indian settlers. This policy resulted in the loss of more than 90 million acres across tribal reservations by 1934 and in “checkerboarded” land bases with a patchwork of jurisdictions (Wilkins and Stark 2018, 155). These checkerboarded gaps became non-Indian owned lands *within* tribal reservations, reducing the total area under tribal sovereign powers. This issue of reduced tribal powers was exacerbated by the *Oliphant* decision of the US Supreme Court in 1978, which ruled that tribal police and courts do not have jurisdiction over non-Indians—even on tribal land (*Oliphant v. Suquamish Indian Tribe*, 435 U.S. 191 (1978)). Despite these attacks on tribal sovereignty, since the arrival of self-determination legislation in the mid-1970s, tribal nations have increasingly explored practices to broaden their decision-making and jurisdictional powers, both through the law and outside of it.

The impacts of reduced jurisdictions are evident across different scenarios. One example at the routine level is drunk drivers being able to evade arrest by rapidly crossing state and tribal borders into areas where the pursuing officers lack legal authority to continue the chase, discussed in this paper’s prologue section (Kleinfeld 2016, 1686). Cases like this, known as a “fresh pursuit” case, represent an additionally complicated field of Indian law, as they “involve interpretations of federal and state statutes, peace officer status, and state and tribal sovereignty” (Morrow 2019, 79). Kleinfeld (2016, 1701) reports testimony before the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs that tells a similar story:

One of our officers pulled over a driver, on the reservation, for DUI. The driver was a non-Indian. The State Patrol was unable to respond. The County Sheriff’s Office was then requested. They refused to come out. Their watch commander then ordered us to let the suspect for—on the reservation. I took a breath sample in the field prior to the person being released. He blew a .133 BAC. He also had two children in the car with him. Instead of having him drive off as we were ordered to do by the Country, one of our officers took the keys from him and gave him a ride so that he wouldn’t kill himself, the kids or someone else.

Another more serious example is the challenge faced by law enforcement in investigating and prosecuting major violent crimes that span multiple jurisdictions when cross-deputization and cooperation is absent, including, but not limited to, violence

against Native women and girls. The consequences of these gaps are stark: Native women “are ten times as likely to be murder[ed] than other Americans,” and Indian reservations experience violent crimes at over 2.5 times the US national average (Kern, Gleditsch, and Cordel 2024, 138). Morrow (2019) argues that “cross-deputization agreements authorize one entity’s law enforcement officers to issue citations, make custodial arrests, and otherwise act as enforcement officers in the territory of another entity. Without such agreement, states generally lack jurisdiction to investigate crimes committed in Indian Country against Indian victims, while tribes may not exercise criminal jurisdiction over non-Indian citizens of the United States” (67).

With the exception of domestic violence, congressional action to restore tribal criminal jurisdiction across the entirety of reservations remains absent. In response to this conspicuous lack of a formal political response, Native nations have taken a pragmatist problem-solving approach to addressing gaps in criminal jurisdiction through cross-deputization agreements. Most commonly, these agreements are one-way in nature, empowering tribal police officers with federal, state, or county powers over both Indians and non-Indians. However, some tribes have entered into two-way agreements that allow external police agencies with powers to enforce tribal law (Kleinfeld 2016, 1695). Principal Chief of the Cherokee Nation, Chuck Hoskin Jr., writes that “cross-deputization helps solve the great challenge of multiple law enforcement agencies exercising their respective authority over the same geographic area. Without cross-deputization, our shared goal of public safety takes a back seat to potential confusion or competition over law enforcement activities, including critical work where time can mean the difference between life and death” (Hoskin 2024).

For decades, tribal communities have faced the erosion of their powers and jurisdictions by the US government. In the self-determination era of the last 50 years, calls for Congress to halt the practices that erode tribal democracies have fallen on deaf ears. A small number of states have enacted statutes to try address these issues, but most do not address the need for fresh pursuit authority (Kleinfeld 2016, 1699). In contrast, the response by tribes has been one of action. In other words, they fill the vacuum—an emerging form of Deweyan democratic practice. Such actions have involved localized democratic problem-solving to broaden powers that were lost. In the case of tribal criminal jurisdiction, the negotiation of cross-deputization agreements between individual tribes and their neighboring state or county has been fundamental to community safety and well-being. This jurisdictional broadening is a democratic practice by tribal governments that has engaged pragmatic inquiry, democratic participation, open communication and deliberations, and collective experimentation (Dewey 1986a). Demonstrating this, a report from the Department of Justice stated that “in 2017, about 70 percent of tribally operated law enforcement agencies had at least one officer who was authorized by their state to enforce state laws” (Perry and Field 2024, 9). The report went on to say

that in 2018, “tribally operated law enforcement agencies had cross-deputization agreements with federal (37%), local (32%), state (19%), and other tribally operated (11%) law enforcement agencies” (Perry and Field 2024, 9).

The emergence and subsequent expansion of tribal police cross-deputization agreements underscores the active efforts of tribal governments to address issues of crime enforcement through the broadening of jurisdictional powers. Despite the historical reduction of tribal criminal jurisdiction and the unwillingness of Congress to address the maze of legal inconsistencies facing tribal police and their people, these Native nations have pursued ad hoc agreements and statutes to bring safety to their communities.

6. Democratic Activities within Community Institutions: Repurposing in Postapartheid South Africa

In line with Dewey’s conception of politics as a “struggle for possession and use of power to settle specific issues that grow out of the country’s needs and problems” (Dewey 1986b, 68), historically marginalized residents of postapartheid South African cities employ *repurposing* of buildings, and of neighborhood local-government planning processes, to assert agency and advance an implicit ideal of participatory democracy in which residents have the power to shape the production of space. In particular, the way Black South African residents repurpose buildings and infrastructures of apartheid white-minority rule speaks to a pragmatic reappropriation of spaces originally constructed for deeply undemocratic purposes. This points to the Deweyan notion of overcoming old and bad practices as an ongoing theme of democratic societies: “All genuinely democratic activities . . . derive much of their significance from the fact that they challenge alienated social forms” (Medearis 2015, 5).

During the apartheid era, from 1948 to 1994, South Africa’s state forcibly dispossessed approximately 3.5 million Black South Africans of their land, relocating well over 1 million people to “Bantustans,” or “de facto independent countries,” typically governed by indirect-rule local elites hand-picked by Pretoria (Christopher 2001, 5). South African “Bantustans” were sham nation-state constructions, islands of draconian authoritarianism, reserve armies of unemployed labor, and spaces of broad-based social discontent. Apartheid South African state planners had complete control over the master-planning of the “Bantustans,” a policy laid out in Regulation No. R293 of 1962 (“R293”). The regulation stated that “until the State President is satisfied that the Bantu inhabitants have attained such degree of development as to warrant the introduction of [a local authority of government], interim regulations should be promulgated for the control of the said townships” (R293 1962, 373). Such “control” included the ability to acquire and sell land and to establish residential deeds registries. Notably, it also included a rigid control over urban design and development guidelines, aesthetics, and land-use designations.

South African residents—during apartheid and continuing in today’s nominally democratic era—repurposed these built spaces for more workable, democratic ends. At times, repurposing works within the legally sanctioned bounds of building codes and design guidelines, and at other times, it transcends them, encouraging members of the local state to update legal guidelines to reflect residents’ actions. We define “repurposing” as community members or groups intentionally reappropriating built structures once intended for unjust, undemocratic purposes for different and more democratic purposes, even if the normative intent underlying residents’ activities is ambiguous. Robinson (2006) writes, “[residents’] imaginative reclamation and reuse of city spaces is an important component of the transformation of social, political and economic life” (256). Residents’ repurposing also both enhances and further concretizes group recognition. Even if this repurposing is not in all cases intentionally democratic, it at least serves to give more visibility to these marginalized communities and create built landscapes and infrastructures that *work* to meet their basic needs. We consider such activities a phenomenological shift in the status quo and therefore also a struggle for recognition (Dewey 1973).

Black South Africans repurpose in various ways and at different spatial scales. Cirolia et al. (2021) discuss residents’ repurposing of a formerly segregated Cape Town hospital building as a site of collective care and dwelling. Pharaon et al. (2015) examine South Africa’s Constitutional Court—a spatial site that was once a notorious Johannesburg municipal jail—as today a “site of conscience” and quite literally a site of state justice. And Simone (2022) looks at residents’ salvage networks in Johannesburg’s Central Business District and beyond as being connected to transnational networks of commerce, cultural exchange, and meaning-making, all “from below.”

In one South African secondary city that was a receiving site of widespread forced relocation—Mahikeng—residents have responded to forced relocation and top-down city-building with an array of multi-actor amalgams, creative assemblages, and heterogeneous (and socioeconomically diverging) spatial forms. Such arrangements and local differentiation are instances of actual grassroots popular-democratic negotiation within the realm of urban planning. For example, residents circumvent the city’s land-use scheme with their own interventions, and city officials then update the scheme to follow residents’ actions (Chavez-Norgaard 2024). Here, the experience of Mahikeng residents’ repurposing encourages a view of the state as a social relation, in line with Dewey’s conceptualization of the state as being dynamic rather than fixed (Dewey 2016). We can see a problem-driven approach to the need to reorganize a state’s traditional functions. One spatial site—an apartheid-era football stadium designed to host political rallies—was briefly transformed in December 2022 for a full-scale pop-up event activation and daylong concert featuring hip-hop artist Cassper Nyovest.¹⁰ Here, the local state begrudgingly partnered with residents to run the concert, at residents’ initiative. In Deweyan terms,

Mahikeng's local state was not adequately serving residents and their interests, and in response residents themselves took initiative to launch and oversee the concert.

While repurposing at times irks local-state officials tasked with minimizing nuisances and ensuring alignment with legal mandates, it leads to a posture in which local-state actors negotiate with historically marginalized residents as engaged equals. Repurposing in Mahikeng is intimately tied to apartheid-era contestation where residents would voice dissatisfaction by reworking or destroying local spaces that did not serve them (Von Holdt et al. 2011; Claiborne 1988; Jones 2000). Specific repertoires and tactics from earlier eras—large-scale service-delivery protests, looting, arson, creative affective and symbolic interventions, and ephemeral or pop-up activations—remain ready at hand in the contemporary era. Repurposing is a culturally and contextually grounded practice where residents collectively assert models of urban development in negotiation with a nominally democratic local state. This collective engagement in repurposing reflects the principles described in Ostrom's (2000) research on common-pool resources, which supports the idea that local, contextually grounded practices and norms can lead to effective collective action and negotiation with authorities.

Such complex motivations and responses by residents to professional planners mean that residents use an extensive toolkit of repertoires of action, stockpiles of democratic knowledge, and habits of mind. Indeed, in informal settlements, Ngwane (2021) argues that South Africa's political system has completely failed the Black poor, especially when informal settlements have limited access to public services such as electricity, water, refuse collection, or sewage. *Amakomitis*,¹¹ Ngwane argues, fill the void, providing public goods and services. South African historian Noor Nieftagodien (2010, 50–53) argues that “grounded local struggles are where some of South Africa's most vibrant democratic energy can be located,” pointing to residents' contestations and reappropriations of built spaces planned during apartheid.

Residents' repurposing is not merely reactionary. While residents' responses are highly varying, shared values emerge related to creating functional built environments that can sustain care and livelihoods. While repurposing may be piecemeal in scale, it points to a radical approach to the production of space where marginalized residents are active participants.

In an interview with urban planning scholar Edgar Pieterse, former coordinator of the Urban Resources Centre and Slum/Shack Dwellers International, leader Joel Bolnick explained these tactics: “Don't confront authority head on. Instead of storming the citadel, infiltrate it. . . . Play judo with the state—use its own weight to roll it over” (2008, 116). Mahikeng residents' repurposing is part of an extended “game” existing over multiple institutional moments that is ever-changing, nimble, and at times normatively ambiguous. In the words of Dewey, it is a longstanding struggle for state recognition that has, on those terms at least, been remarkably successful (Dewey 1973). Critically,

repurposing precipitates a phenomenological shift not just in marginalized community residents' view of their city but also in majority groups' view of South African urban life and possibilities of democratic action.¹² It reveals complex continuities and disjunctures between authoritarian apartheid “before” and liberal democratic “after.” What has emerged across South Africa are wholly transformed spatial landscapes, brought about by residents themselves. Yet these landscapes exist alongside enduring political-economic arrangements of exploitation and precarity, against which residents continue to struggle.

7. Adaptive Practices within Indigenous Australian Native Title Corporations

The strategies aimed at addressing the erosion of localized democratic practices within marginalized communities are not always intended to restore preexisting institutions to their former function and status. Among colonized and disempowered groups, sometimes the pragmatic response to these erosions is achieved through problem-solving *adaptations* to existing dysfunctional or undemocratic processes. Meaning that even if the conditions are not at all alterable on a broader scale, one can at least try to “change them to meet our wants and demands” with minor changes (Dewey 1938, 16).

Unlike tribal governments of the United States, Australian Indigenous peoples do not have overt political sovereignty or formally recognized polities (Langton and Palmer 2004, 79). In Australia, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples were not recognized as the first occupants of the land until the *Mabo* decision of the Australian High Court overturned the doctrine of terra nullius in 1992 (*Mabo v. Queensland (No 2)* [1992] HCA 23; (1992) 175 CLR 1).¹³ To resolve questions of property ownership, the Australian government legislated the Native Title Act of 1993—which would act as the nation’s primary Indigenous land tenure system. Under this legislated Australian native title system, Indigenous property rights and interests are compulsorily held and managed in corporate vehicles known as “native title corporations.”¹⁴ These native title corporations are a significant source of criticism within Australia’s Indigenous policy debates, with a primary concern centering around their structure of separating matters of the Indigenous polity from the legally recognized property rights placed in an Indigenous corporation. Martin (2003, 10) highlights the risks of this enforced corporate model as those where

the more that attempts are made to reflect the complexities and subtleties of the values and practices of Indigenous people in formal corporate structures and processes—for example, regarding such matters as authority and decision-making, or the various forms of the typically labile Indigenous groupings and sub-groupings—the more there is the risk that over time the formal corporate structures and processes will supplant the informal Indigenous ones—a process of the “juridification” of social relations. While . . . the engagement of

Indigenous and non-Indigenous people can best be understood in intercultural terms, “juridification” takes this a step further, raising the problem of the underlying social relations being distorted or dominated by the legally enforceable expression of the same relations.

Despite their highly restrictive nature and lack of cultural fit, in the absence of formal government recognition of Indigenous self-governing polities, native title corporations have been increasingly used by Indigenous groups as a key tool of institutional governance.

The past 30 years of Australian native title have increasingly seen Indigenous peoples transform and adapt the Western corporate model forced upon them into a catalyst of economic and institutional development. These efforts of adaptation have been in an effort to take a native title corporation that was not fit for purpose and to hone it into a tool that could be used to drive success and capacity in their communities.

By law, Indigenous Australian native title corporations must comply with a range of Western statutory requirements enforced by the government’s corporate regulator, the Office of the Registrar of Indigenous Corporations (ORIC). One of the fundamental requirements that heavily influences the governance of these bodies is the provision of dispute resolution mechanisms.

As it stands, the government regulator provides a standardized Western corporation template for dealing with disputes within the corporation. These Western-styled templates have historically underperformed among Indigenous governance systems largely due to their lack of cultural fit and legitimacy in the community (Cornell and Kalt 2007, 25). In response—and as an act of adaptive problem-solving—instead of employing government boilerplate structures and templates, an increasing number of Indigenous corporations are creating their own tailored cultural bodies (i.e., Councils of Elders) to fill specific governance functions such as acting as a conciliator or arbitrator for internal disputes and specific cultural issues, or as advisors.

For example, the Magani Lagaugal (Torres Strait Islanders) Corporation has reported the success of its Dispute Resolution Council to resolve complex discussions around the traditional ownership of parcels of land for a government social housing project (David, Pabai, and Lang 2018). In this case, the Western-imposed mediation rules were unsuccessful. However, the corporation was eventually successful by leveraging its Dispute Resolution Council. This success relied on processes of formally identifying and selecting elders empowered to resolve disputes and separate from the corporate directors (David, Pabai, and Lang 2018). This example demonstrates that some Indigenous native title corporations in Australia are engaging in collective problem-solving as a form of nation building, by advancing strategies of adaptation in order for their corporate structure to better reflect their own cultural and social institutions.

A detailed review of all native title corporate constitutions reports that 37 percent of all corporations had adapted their constitution to make provisions for a distinct and separate cultural body (Lucas 2024). The adaptation to include a cultural governance body in an Indigenous corporate charter is especially significant as it is not a templated suggestion of the corporate regulator (ORIC) and because it provides a form of cultural governance that has a greater level of cultural match than standard corporate structures. Additionally, the review found that 36 percent of Australian native title corporations had changed their dispute resolution mechanisms to incorporate more socially and culturally appropriate mechanisms, including referring disputes to the cultural body and incorporating non-adversarial dispute resolution practices such as peacemaking or by consensus methods.

The creation of separate cultural bodies and dispute resolution processes among Australia native title corporations are just two examples of where, despite an imposed unfit Western corporate structure, the community has collectively adapted the institutionally imposed structures to better suit their own governance forms. In theoretical terms, this speaks to Dewey's approaches of collective problem-solving and the principle of continuity as Indigenous groups apply to culturally informed governance and decision-making to the Western-styled arrangements of title corporations. Similarly, in the South African context, residents' repurposing likely reflect a form of "cultural match," as they naturally employ culturally and contextually grounded tactics and norms in their efforts to transform urban spaces and engage with local authorities. For example, residents repurposed one university campus green as a commons space for cattle grazing, as well as student socializing, in line with Xhosa cultural values of the commons.

Strengthening democratic processes does not always require new innovations and complete alternatives to the status quo. In marginalized and underrepresented communities, very rarely is the political capital available to ensure the full replacement of such erosive systems. Instead, these communities tend to enact incremental changes that pragmatically address the key problems present at various scales. We call such actions "adaptation." In the case of Australian native title corporations, despite being burdened with an imposed Western corporate form and no political recognition, the affected groups are increasingly engaging in collective problem-solving by adapting their corporate constitutions to enhance their cultural fit and institutional effectiveness.

8. Discussion

In the three cases discussed above—broadening the jurisdictional bounds of state police powers through cross-deputization, repurposing buildings and neighborhood land uses by local residents, and adapting the institutional rules of Indigenous corporate vehicles—there is tremendous variation in the tactics used to promote democratic practice, the actors and institutional arrangements employed, and the resultant

policy or programmatic outcomes. Yet in all of them, a common through line emerges: a *problem* is made public by a group of directly affected local stakeholders seeking a common response that meets their interests and basic needs. Ordinarily, in a democratic polity there would be an institutionally legitimated route through which these stakeholders could make statutory, executive, or judicial reform. However, in each of the three cases—in the United States, South Africa, and Australia—such a route has been foreclosed. In each of these three nominally democratic polities, communities must generate alternative pathways and processes to solve what they each articulate as public problems. For Dewey, when inequality between social groups becomes too broad or is institutionally blocked, societal communication is hindered. Those severe levels of inequality inform what Pottle, relying on Dewey, describes as “the epistemic costs” (Pottle 2022, 1523) of social hierarchies. Only by “pooling the epistemic resources of multiple subjects toward solving problems that affect them jointly” (Pottle 2022, 1520), and as such integrating marginalized experiences and positions in the very definition of a problematic situation, can communities overcome such gaps. To learn from others’ social perspectives, it helps to see a problem from multiple angles. As such, Dewey’s approach also bridges the gap between theory and practice.

As the small-d democratic practitioners from each of these three contexts undertake public problem-solving, they use a range of different tactics. Here, we highlight three non-exclusive and non-exhaustive tactics that occur in the three country contexts: broadening policy mandates, repurposing the built environment, and adapting corporate vehicles as structures of governance and service provision. These tactics vary in their normative inflections and intent, and even in the extent to which their underpinnings are explicitly strategic or democratic. Yet in all three cases, in the words of Dewey, communities attempt “democratic experiments” (Dewey 1986a). The experiments seek to solve public problems in adaptive, creative ways that do not foreclose the process of inquiry and eschew predetermined ideologies or social structures. As we have shown, forms of “alienation (are) a chronic condition of social life” (Medearis 2015, 11), especially for marginalized communities. We intend to show that democratic theorists would do well to pay closer attention to those chronic problems of marginalized communities within nominally democratic states.

We contend that scholars of democracy can learn a great deal from these everyday, informal (and sometimes formal) practices of democratic problem-solving employed by marginalized communities because they have the potential to “percolate” upward and outward and inform *broader* democratic consolidation. Such “democratic percolation,” from the bottom-right cell of the matrix in Figure 1 to the other cells, does not always or even often occur. Indeed, admirable public problem-solving within minoritized communities often remains confined to those local spaces.¹⁵ At times, however, both policy outcomes and the processes by which communities arrive at experimental solutions

inspire action elsewhere, particularly in formal, political spaces of nonminoritized community life (the top-left cell of Figure 1).

Four “modes of interaction”—self-help, schools of democracy, free spaces, and inspiration—speak to mechanisms or pathways through which informal, everyday problem-solving in minoritized communities might percolate outward to other societal spaces, most notably formal and political institutions (see Figure 2).¹⁶

Figure 2. Mechanisms of Democratic Learning Processes

Modes of interaction	Description
Self-help	Communities employ <i>defiance</i> or ambivalence toward social change in formal spaces and for nonminoritized communities. Here, a “parallel play” logic emerges in which problem-solving may advance autonomously and without coordination in different geographies or sectors of the polity.
Schools of democracy	Informal, everyday innovations by minoritized communities are <i>prefigurative</i> of larger changes in the formal polity and its institutional setup. ¹⁷ They are, in a sense, laboratories of the possible. ¹⁸
Free spaces	Minoritized communities employ a sharper normative frame of <i>resistance</i> and deliberately situate their informal democratic practices as pockets or enclaves of democracy set against increasingly authoritarian creep in formal, political spaces.
Inspiration	Everyday, informal strategies of democratic problem-solving could inform <i>formal</i> political change but not through a unidirectional model of replication. Rather, informal experiments might inspire formal political innovations through <i>virtuous cycles</i> and diffusion, as minoritized community actors galvanize and educate political actors and policymakers about the nature, scope, and solution space of public problems. ¹⁹

In this paper’s three cases, we find evidence of all four modes of interaction outlined above. Efforts at “broadening” police powers through cross-deputization agreements, for example, have *inspired* other, broader, jurisdictional innovations such as conservation co-management as an approach to landback issues, for example, between the Oglala Sioux Tribe and the National Parks Service in Minnesota (Taylor and Jorgensen 2022, 4–5). Repurposing in South Africa is at times *prefigurative* of a larger democratic paradigm—residents’ rights to participate in the production of urban space—that has in turn informed national legislation, such as the Spatial Planning and Land Use Management Act of 2013. At times, however, repurposing also invokes residents’ autonomous efforts at *self-help*, eschewing the realm of formal politics and the local state altogether. And adapting rules and norms of corporate vehicles as structures of governance and service provision makes a critical move toward *free spaces* for Indigenous Australians—namely political sovereignty in a country context where that has heretofore been denied.

Yet at times, solutions in the bottom-right quadrant of Figure 1 fail to percolate outward. Specific blockages—scale, unevenness, and representation—may explain why. Practices of everyday democratic vibrancy are no panacea or replacement for robust

institutional and political democracy, and indeed in many cases they are *second best* alternatives, on their own, to problems that formal institutions and actors either neglect or themselves cause.²⁰ Scale is a concern in that the cases we have identified typically involve specific communities or residents confronting local problems. It is challenging to expand the arena of democratic practice when communities must engineer solutions that are more abstract, when trade-offs occur across different groups *within* a given community, or when policy outcomes must extend beyond local contexts and groups of actors. Yet small-scale democratic activities offer the benefit of context sensitivity and a nimbleness that complements the often blunter tools of wider-reaching democratic problem-solving.

A second concern is unevenness. At times, alternative democratic responses might foreground actors or interests that are relatively more empowered or better resourced *within* marginalized communities. If there are concerns about the popular-democratic veracity of bottom-up claims, it may be harder for them to serve as paradigmatic cases of inspiration or as schools of democracy. Here, we seek in the future to consider axes of class, gender, and other forms of differences as they intersect with other experiences of political and democratic marginalization (Young 2000). Yet, ad hoc uneven complexity may simply be the hallmark of popular-democratic activity. One-size-fits-all approaches are typically the purview of hegemonic states and governments that govern from the top-down. Ordinary people and community residents, asserting democratic practice from the bottom-up, typically neither aspire, nor have the capacity, to craft uniform and scaled democratic solutions.

Finally, bottom-up democratic practices raise important procedural questions about representation and voice. In each of these contexts, communities and residents find themselves *doing democracy* and not always reflecting on the theoretical ideals underpinning such processes. Yet the urgency and exigence of the problems they face requires a response that is practically fit for purpose and not a theoretical ideal. Many residents or communities groups would assuredly prefer a fully representative, consolidated democratic system, one that also holds social and cultural legitimacy. In the absence of such a system, they turn to smaller-scale practices of democratic action. Yet such a blockage might limit the potentiality of bottom-up democratic practices in key ways.

Beyond the extent to which bottom-up democratic practices shape or inform democratic innovations more broadly, critics in line with Frankfurt School theorist and philosopher Max Horkheimer might raise an argument that a pragmatist approach to bottom-up practices of community problem-solving lacks normative vision and as such should not be considered emancipatory at all (Horkheimer 1947). We disagree: while the philosophical or normative inflections of the actions underlying each of our case studies may not be expressly articulated in terms of democratic theory *as such*, they

each implicitly point to situations of public problem-solving in service of radical ends. In the case of jurisdictional broadening, tribal communities and their governments seek public protection and sovereignty through enforcement. In the case of built-environment repurposing, residents seek to participate in the production of urban space amid a context of past white-minority rule and de jure racial segregation. And through Native title corporations, tribal leaders and residents seek the robust provision of public goods and services as well as sovereignty in terms of land and property. Furthermore, the Deweyan version of pragmatism can hardly be understood as instrumental, as his normative vision is a democracy as *way of life*. As we have shown, Dewey's relational approach to freedom, as well as his notion of experience, center around achieving self-government for both individuals and communities and therefore qualify as a critical theory of democracy. Throughout his work and life, Dewey does not stop to question alienated forms of political, economic, or social conditions. His collective inquiry must be understood as a context-sensitive means of navigating power hierarchies in order to achieve better community outcomes for all, marginalized or not.

The examples discussed in this paper raise a related critical question: why do some communities, like those in Mahikeng and US tribal policing cases, actively engage in problem-solving alongside broader institution-building, while others do not? The answer likely involves a complex interplay of factors, including local community culture, the nature of hegemonic power, historical experiences, available resources, and the specific challenges faced. This variation in community action across different contexts presents a valuable avenue for future research. Developing testable theories to explain these differences in community response could involve comparative case studies, analysis of historical patterns, and examination of the relationship between state power and community initiative. Such research could significantly enhance our understanding of the conditions fostering grassroots democratic action and inform more effective approaches to supporting community-led initiatives across diverse settings.

While the specific tactics and institutional approaches differ, the case studies point to an implicitly shared ideal: the need to *think differently* about democratic practice, from within democratic contexts.

9. Conclusion

Drawing on cases from the United States, South Africa, and Australia, in this paper we examine instances of minoritized communities solving public, democratic problems when formal institutions and actors are unable, or deliberately unwilling, to solve them. We also develop a set of possible modes of interaction by which such community-level solutions interact with formal political institutions, with insights that should be of interest to scholars of democracy globally.

Contemporary scholars of democracy currently warn that it is in crisis—an all-too-familiar phrase in contemporary Western societies.²¹ Indeed, the democratic “recession” across the globe is emerging as a political hallmark of the 21st century. This is evidenced by the incremental breakdown of formal, institutional democratic practices among many nations, including in the North Atlantic states. It is therefore unsurprising that the breakdown of democratic practices described in many Western liberal democracies has been plaguing marginalized and underrepresented communities living in these polities for many decades, if not centuries.

There is indeed a case to be made for democratic “breakdown” in each of the three case-study contexts discussed in this paper. In the United States, former president Donald J. Trump, who is the Republican nominee for the presidential election in November 2024, is facing multiple legal challenges for both his business and political activities (*New York Times* 2024) and yet has a significant base of supporters. On May 30, he was found guilty of falsifying business records to conceal a scandal that could have negatively impacted his 2016 campaign and as such is “America’s First Felon President” (Protess et al. 2024). Additionally, the winner of the election’s popular vote may not become the next president: the very design of the Electoral College undermines a basic idea of democracy, and therefore the outcome of the election hinges on very few swing states (Keyssar 2020). In South Africa, postapartheid racial inequalities remain stubbornly high, unemployment hovers around 32 percent—arguably among the highest in the world—and the state struggles to provide basic goods and services like water and electricity, with rolling blackouts often lasting 8–10 hours per day (Associated Press 2024). Widespread allegations of state capture—in which public officials use state coffers as their personal piggy banks—permeate South African subnational governments, and former president Jacob Zuma was recently banned from running for office by the Constitutional Court for this reason (Chipkin et al. 2018; Msimang 2024). Perhaps most concerning, apathy is on the rise, with an increasing number of poor, Black South Africans opting out of the political process altogether (Pillay 2010).

In Australia, one of the few countries with mandatory voting requirements, this democratic deterioration is shown in the gradual decline in voter turnout. Despite the presence of a fine as an administrative penalty, the turnout rate dropped from 96.20 percent in 1996 to 90.47 percent in 2022 (Australian Electoral Commission 2023). Another example of this democratic recession in Australia is manifested in the highly concentrated media ownership, which risks disinformation and corruption and sows distrust. An Australian Senate inquiry into media diversity found some evidence “that the concentrated Australian media sector was tantamount to a monopoly” (Australian Senate 2021, 81). Former Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd submitted that monopolies such as this present “a real danger of encouraging, over time, corruption” as political institutions are not scrutinized sufficiently (Rudd 2021, 2). These examples

of democratic breakdowns across these liberal democracies evidence the presence of substantial problems in the predominantly formal nonminoritized sectors of democracy.

While it is indeed important to look at historical and contemporary examples of collapse and learn from them, there is also much to learn from minoritized peoples' experiences of democratic power-building and successful democratic practice. If we foreground the perspectives of minoritized communities, *democracy is constantly in crisis*²² and has long been so. Scholars and practitioners of democracy who seek to sustain democracy, or further deepen it, must understand the arena of informal democratic practice advanced by minoritized communities. This arena contains democratic experiments and solutions, at least some of which have the potential to inspire greater democratic innovation at the formal institutional level. As Dewey knew, the very foundation of democracy is education and the cultivation of democratic habits (Dewey 1966).

The very nature and meaning of *demos* and *kratos* would lead one to imagine that those groups with the least power are likely to be disenfranchised first, and repeatedly. Indeed, even many scholars who promote democratic innovations do so foregrounding an envisioned cast of citizens who reflect the actors of the hegemonic, majoritarian politics of the nation. Affected and minoritized communities have pursued—often with great success—protections and minority-rights guarantees within these formal procedurally democratic settings. Yet these have often proven woefully insufficient and are themselves subject to erosion. Instead, the three case studies discussed here point to an entirely alternative democratic playbook that engages various institutional arrangements and actors well beyond the formal state.

To the extent that scholars and practitioners anticipate more future democratic crises, we should likewise expect an increase in bottom-up problem-solving as well. Indeed, in an era of late liberal inequality and authoritarian creep, our collective democratic futures may well be marked by an increase in “residual governance” arrangements in which community assemblages take on activities formerly the purview of the public state (Hecht 2023). In such scenarios, there is much longstanding wisdom present in the playbook of democratic tactics and activities from these three case studies and in many others globally. Scholars of democracy should attend to these small-scale, democratic actions. With humility and a desire to learn, we may find novel solutions to democratic crises. In line with Frega's proposal for democratic experimentalist institutions, we therefore urge both scholars and practitioners to “institutionalize the exercise of doubt” in their respective work, aiming for decentralized, context-sensitive, and inclusive ideas that value “the epistemic resources of local actors, boosting active rather than passive involvement” (Frega 2019, 292). After all, as we learn from Dewey, democracy is best experienced as a way of life.

Endnotes

1. We are grateful to our colleagues and friends at the Harvard Kennedy School’s Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation’s Reimagining Democracy program for their engagement and support of this paper. We especially want to thank those who attended a generative paper workshop on May 15, 2024. We also thank all colleagues who provided comments and reviews of earlier drafts, including, but not limited to, Nick Chedli Carter, Archon Fung, Dan Harsha, Joseph Kalt, and Quinton Mayne.
2. Practices of deliberation have a long tradition outside hegemonic groups in the West, as explored by Curato et al. (2022), He, Fishkin, and Breen (2022), and Reedy et al. (2020). Yet scholars like Banerjee (2022, 283) argue that “deliberative democracy does not travel well outside Western sites and its key assumptions begin to unravel” for marginalized communities in settler-colonial contexts.
3. Our approach is inspired by Deweyan scholars such as Frega (2019), Serrano-Zamora (2017), and Medearis (2015) but also by scholars of comparative political behavior, such as Mayne and Geißel (2016).
4. With regard to the conceptual label of democratic problem-solving, and the case-based approach to analysis, we are also inspired by Briggs’s (2008) globally expansive examination of problem-solving and civic capacity.
5. This figure is meant to serve as a clarifying heuristic that presents modes and arenas of democratic action in spheres that are alternatively formal and informal, and foreground actions of hegemonic social groups versus minoritized social groups. In practice, the typology blurs and categories are not mutually exclusive. The figure is also intended to show the reader our area of empirical focus and provide select illustrative examples. Critically, we advance that the bottom-right quadrant, the paper’s theoretical and empirical focus, is too often overlooked by scholars of democracy. Section 8 explores the assumption that sustainable democratic transformation can be contingent on dynamic engagements among stakeholders in at least two of these arenas.
6. In the case of “broadening” in the United States, cross-deputization agreements have been codified as policies with law enforcement agencies. In the case of “repurposing” in South Africa, South African cities have revised and updated local land-use schemes to reflect resident-initiated policies of spatial production. And in the case of “adaptation” in Australia, native title corporations have formally revised corporate charter policies to include governance activities.
7. Here, we refer to proposals that are part of a burgeoning literature on democratic innovations, such as work by Guerrero (2014) and Van Reybrouck (2016), who argue that a lottocracy is necessary to solve democracy’s contemporary problems. Certainly, there are less demanding ideas, for example, those presented in Landemore’s *Open Democracy* (2020). Still, democratic innovations tend to overlook marginalized positions independent of their scale, as argued by Young (2000) and Fraser (1990).
8. By “advanced democratic consolidation,” we refer to strongly mature democracies with institutions and norms that make them theoretically unlikely to revert to authoritarianism. See, for example, Przeworski (1992).
9. Indian Country is a legal term of art defined in 18 U.S. Code § 1151. In general terms, it means all land within the limits of any Indian reservation under the jurisdiction of the US government, including rights of way and all dependent communities.

10. This activation also highlights the relationships between culture and democracy, as noted by Dewey in *Freedom and Culture* (1986c) and *Art as Experience* (1934).
11. The author argues that *amakomitis* are endogenously formed and self-organized community and neighborhood committees. Sometimes they are legitimized and recognized by the South African state, while other times they are ignored or denigrated.
12. Affluent residents also living in Mahikeng are both well aware of residents' tactics of repurposing and have used similar tactics themselves in their own hyperlocal built environments (Chavez-Norgaard 2024, 171–72).
13. Terra nullius is a Latin term meaning “land belonging to no one.” It is a legal principle in Australian law used to justify British settlement.
14. Although their status of political sovereignty and governing powers differ, Australian native title corporations have several similarities to Alaska Native regional corporations and village corporations under the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act of 1971.
15. Another example of democracy outward is the Muscogee (Creek) Nation's post-incarceration reintegration program. The result of this success has been the sharing of jurisdictional authority with the corrections department within the US state of Oklahoma (Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development, 2008).
16. These modes of interaction might act as “good enough” mechanisms of incremental social change for affected communities, absent opportunities for more fundamental action to reform institutions.
17. One such example is the spread of various forms of family courts and court-appointed special advocate (CASA) systems into mainstream use. These practices have deep origins in the practices of certain US tribes.
18. The phrase schools of democracy traces back to Alexis de Tocqueville and his famous work *Democracy in America*. Civic associations, trade unions, and any other voluntary community organization serve as a necessary means to practice democracy in everyday life and are needed to sustain a healthy democratic culture, an assertion that is also very Deweyan (Tocqueville 2002).
19. Inspiration can also be internal, leading to a cycle of capacity building within minoritized communities' institutional effectiveness and problem-solving practices. It can also be understood as the ideal of Deweyan inquiry and intelligent experimentation: communities learn from previous problem-solving and adopt the new learnings for future inquiry.
20. An example of a second-best alternative can be seen in US tribal takeovers of federal functions despite severe underfunding, particularly in administrative and overhead costs. Tribes were often forced to choose between not taking over programs or underperforming due to insufficient funding. Interestingly, this example of a second-best alternative was remedied in June 2024 in the US Supreme Court case of *Becerra v. San Carlos Apache Tribe*, 602 U.S. (2024), which ruled that the US federal government must fully pay these contract support costs as promised under the Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act, even in years when Congress has not allocated sufficient funds. Here, community responses may at times have sufficient resources to perform in ways superior to federal functions.
21. Two notable examples include Fung, Moss, and Westad (2024) and Diamond (2015).
22. We agree with Dewey that democracy is in constant crisis, though recent events over the past years suggest that Western democracies live through an era of intensified crisis.

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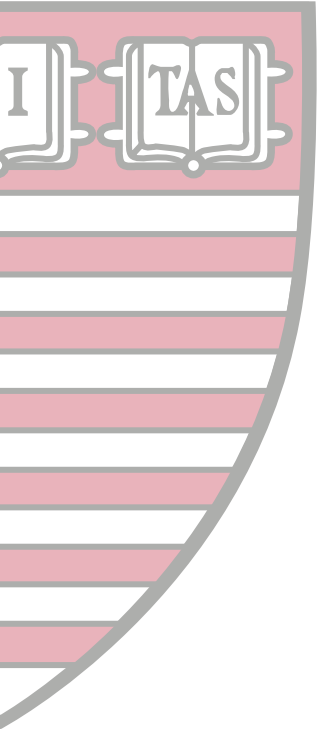
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