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Creativity or Institutionalization? Beyond the Dualism in Democratic Innovation

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Abstract

Democratic innovation and institutionalization processes both seem to aspire to achieve the same goals: to ensure that democracy can evolve and thrive over time and to generate and embed new modes of functioning that can include more people and respond to emerging needs. However, both conceptually and in practice, the two approaches tend to be depicted as apart, as some scholars of democratic innovation take a critical stance toward institutionalization, while those researching modes of institutionalization struggle to account for the messiness of emerging practices that evolve in unexpected ways. This article aims to reflect on how a strong dualism in debates about democratic innovation and institutionalization risks that certain forms of change go unnoticed and therefore under-theorized. By drawing on the concept of political creativity, this article introduces an anti-dualist perspective and advances new critical reflections within existing democratic innovation literature. Interestingly, the scholarship on political creativity has so far not entered the democratic innovation debates, despite some interesting points of contact and shared concerns with recent publications in this field. Drawing on practical cases, this article advances three main suggestions for re-thinking institutionalization beyond the dualism in democratic innovation, which all directly emanate from the political creativity scholarship and concern the importance of taking into account the dimension of time, the concept of relationality, and a novel understanding of order as assemblages.

Keywords

critical institutionalism; democratic innovation; institutionalization; political creativity

1. Introduction

In the context of this thematic issue, this article aims to contribute to the questions of which *types and degrees* of institutionalization are desirable and how institutionalization can develop processes of democratic innovation and continuous experimentation. I argue that many discourses on the institutionalization of democratic innovation perpetuate an unspoken assumption that depicts the two processes as distinct, risking fueling a dualist way of thinking about the institutionalization of democratic innovation. Then, the concept of political creativity, as a way to build an alternative beyond this dualism, will be applied. I will begin by briefly introducing the field of institutionalization and then draw on more recent and critical approaches that have started to appreciate the more informal, evolving, and dynamic parts of its nature. Scholars of democratic innovation describe, use, critique, or discard the term *institutionalization*, hinting at the need to rethink this concept to maintain its strong analytical function. Therefore, I introduce the concept of political creativity—which has so far not entered the democratic innovation debates—hoping it could guide future research and practical experimentations, building on recent studies about dynamic and informal ways of framing institutionalization (Bussu et al., 2022) and on the relationship between rules, practices, and narratives for institutionalization processes (Blanco et al., 2022).

The process of institutionalization is central in discourses about democratic innovation. Debates about the need and value of institutionalization cover a range of diverse opinions on the matter, and this brief introduction cannot do justice to the variety of the literature. In an attempt to simplify, I trace the field through its two main camps: The first camp consists of those, including practitioners, who believe that institutionalization is the preferred outcome of a democratic innovation. This group includes those who consider the success of democratic innovation to entail the shift from one-off events to permanent and established features of the political sphere. In these views, democratic innovations are depicted as being born as an alternative to respond to the perceived limitations and failures of representative institutions (Elstub & Escobar, 2017). Therefore, through this process of being formalized and introduced into public bodies, these innovations appear to increase the democratic value of the institutions themselves. On the other hand, some argue that institutionalization can potentially endanger the radical and creative disposition of democratic innovation (Blaug, 2002), diluting their potential and co-opting their original intentions by taming the spirit of those who initiated them. Both camps seem to share an understanding of the two processes as distinct (when not in tension or opposition) on at least three dimensions: (a) temporally, with democratic innovation taking place before the process of institutionalization; (b) practically, with distinct actors and places for each process; and (c) conceptually, as demonstrated by the diverse scholarly positions previously presented.

Interestingly, Bussu et al. (2022) have recently introduced the concept of *embeddedness*—to shift the attention from institutional design and toward embedding dynamics—as inherently different and more flexible in comparison to institutionalization. According to these authors, this concept can illustrate instances where (a) democratic innovations are embedded outside institutional spaces, such as, for example, civil society; (b) innovations become a habit that displays iterations; and (c) instances where the "informal practices of embedding" are given greater emphasis than system-level formalization (Bussu et al., 2022, p. 139). This article significantly builds on this recent literature and contributes to it by introducing the new lens of political creativity to confirm and further advance these works.

Scholars have been interested in the question of how institutionalization and innovation relate to each other. Reflecting on the analysis of the Irish Citizens' Assembly, Courant (2018) provided some typologies of institutionalization and identified key elements of institutionalized democratic innovation. These elements include: (a) repetition, which describes the length of time that a democratic innovation is repeated in a place or across different places, and (b) systematicity (which Courant also refers to as stability), which indicates the extent to which the democratic innovation stays the same over time and operates according to fixed rules. With these elements, Courant (2018, p. 13) concludes that: "In order to become an institution, a democratic innovation must therefore exist for a long period of time and keep a similar shape; in a way, it must become *predictable*." Courant (2022) later developed a more nuanced systematization of typologies of institutionalization, which introduced three ways for thinking about it: in terms of temporality, of legitimacy and support, and of power and role within a system. In this article, I will focus on Courant's 2018 talk, in which this author well captured what often seems implied in many definitions of institutionalization: that predictability and stability are key features of institutionalized processes and, perhaps, central features of institutions themselves. In that talk, Courant (2018) also reflected on the fact that democratic innovations—despite their success and popularity—risk remaining in an in-between state, neither proper institutions nor novel experiments. In this article, I explore the option that this in-between state is more than a stage in a process toward a certain and predetermined outcome, being perhaps a key feature of institutionalized innovations that deserves renewed attention. I do that by drawing on different approaches to institutionalization and introducing the concept of political creativity.

Since the 1980s, new approaches to understanding institutions have emerged (so-called new institutionalism), which shifted the focus from stability and order to studying how institutions function as well as how they change. Within these accounts, institutions emerge as more complex actors that are dynamically shaped by creative actions. Building on from them, I aim to explore (a) how we could understand institutionalization as more creative, while still ensuring the continuation and mainstreaming of innovation within an institutional framing, (b) whether and how democratic innovation can be institutionalized without losing its generative character.

In the next sections, I briefly map the neo/critical institutionalism and political creativity approaches, highlight the frictions between them, and outline the potential benefits of possible collaboration. In Section 3, I present practical cases and advance three main suggestions for re-thinking institutionalization beyond the dualism in democratic innovation, which all directly emanate from the political creativity scholarship and relate to the importance of taking into account the dimension of temporality, the concept of relationality, and a novel understanding of order as assemblages.

2. Creativity or Institutionalization: Clarifying the Terms

Scholars within the field of political creativity (Berk & Galvan, 2009, 2013) suggest that creative action in the political realm functions according to three main characteristics:

1. It uses existing habits as its main raw material.
2. It transforms these habits through deliberative recombination, by intentionally breaking old habits into parts and transforming them through the recombination of old parts into new habits.

3. It works through narratives as processes of sharing with others how creative action—as a social process—involves those maintaining order as well as those bringing change.

The importance of narratives within institutions in giving legitimacy to change is also reflected in recent and critical approaches to institutionalization (Blanco et al., 2022). As Douglas (1987, as cited in Cleaver & de Koning, 2015, p. 5) reminds us, through processes of narrative building—including appeals to tradition, the development of symbols, and discourses that aim to foster certain views of what institutions are and how they behave—institutions are "naturalised" (i.e., made to appear self-evident). These narratives seem to be central in constructing specific versions of institutions, either as being based on order and traditions or on change and improvisation, and their analysis and the mapping of their evolution can be useful in tracing the early stages of processes of institutionalization (Blanco et al., 2022).

The concept of political creativity is not uncontroversial, with authors such as Smith (2018) arguing that creativity could not possibly be applied to the political sphere. If we frame creativity as an individual and embodied function, based on the principle of intentionality, then thinking of creativity politically (and collectively) is not easy to achieve. In Smith's (2018, p. 384) words: "Treating political creativity as just a kind of gigantic, collective form of Beethoven's creativity ought not to be taken seriously."

Those who argue for the impossibility of a form of political creativity draw on a certain understanding of creativity as originally developed by Boden (2004), which assumes intentionality—usually understood as an individual characteristic—as a central component of creativity that produces novelty as a result. However, as I have argued elsewhere (Pierri, 2020), when we deal with political creativity, we are dealing with a different form of creativity that exists sui generis, rather than being simply understood as a sum of individual forms of creativity resulting from different intentional acts. Based on my previous work and adding to Berk et al.'s (2013) definition, I argue that political creativity: (a) involves a certain extent of loss of individual creativity and control over it—in the attempt to achieve shared control among a collective, each individual must give up some of the control they had; and (b) assumes and generates a collective (metaphorically speaking) body and identity. This claim draws on the vast literature on social movements and frames political creativity as consisting of joint, future-directed intention (Tollefsen, 2014, p. 27) that creates connectedness (Diani & Bison, 2004, p. 284), which in turn generates "relationships of trust" (Della Porta & Diani, 2006, p. 94), provided certain conditions are present. In this framing, the actors of political creativity are not the individuals but the collectives that, through these processes, are formed anew, reinforced, or broken apart and recombined differently through shifting roles.

Starting from the concept of democratic innovation, I reflect on the role of political creativity. Although the two terms might seem adjacent, it is important to clarify that I do not contend that they should be used interchangeably, since not all forms of political creativity entail democratic innovation, i.e., I understand political creativity to be different from democratic innovation in at least two ways: First, political creativity is a constant feature of all political processes, encompassing both change and continuation, whereas democratic innovation always implies something new and results in change. Second, political creativity is less value-laden and normative compared to the idea of democratic innovation, which already contains democracy in its name and understands the point of innovation as always being about advancing democracy. Political creativity, instead, aims to describe all instances of creativity toward outcomes and practices that might be distant—or even hostile—to democracy and its values, as "autocracies are same products of political

creativity as democracies" (Minakov, 2023, p. 68). This is an important point that would need further elaboration, especially in consideration of classic democratic theories that depict democracy as both an outcome of and a precondition for creativity itself (e.g., Arendt, 1958; Dewey, 1988), although these reflections are beyond the scope of this article.

The concept of political creativity draws on the idea that creativity is used and is necessary for both the achievement of change and the maintenance of the institutional order (Berk et al., 2013). In other words, a political creativity lens recognizes that change and order are not two separate and irreducible concepts, which, in my view, highlights the added value of this new lens; rather, change and creativity are already present within apparent conditions of order and institutionalization. For this reason, I believe that looking at the concept of the institutionalization of democratic innovation through the lens of political creativity might be a fruitful choice.

2.1. Far Apart or Maybe Closer Than Anticipated

Theories of institutionalization seem to have moved away from more traditional understandings of institutions as key guardians of order, predictability, and stability. New institutionalism was initially defined as a collection of ideas (March & Olsen, 1984) that, although still based on earlier versions and studies of institutions, aimed to depart from those approaches in several ways. For instance, it shaped a more autonomous role for political institutions, which are seen not as simple representations of social forces, but as complex actors whose internal processes have become of renewed interest for study. New institutionalism, for example, challenged the view of outcome-focused decision-making, foregrounding the importance of political processes rather than just political outcomes (March & Olsen, 1984, p. 742).

In its more recent evolution, new institutionalism has moved even closer to discourse and theories of political creativity. In its different articulations (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; Orren & Skowronek, 2004; Streeck & Thelen, 2005), it comprises approaches like discursive institutionalism (Schmidt, 2010), which appreciate structural ambiguity, change, and agency as central concepts for a novel understanding of institutions; or "critical institutionalism" that embraces complexity to explain both continuity and change in evolving institutions (Cleaver & de Koning, 2015). As Cleaver and de Koning (2015, p. 4) explain:

> Critical institutionalists question the underlying rational choice assumptions of much institutional thinking. Instead they emphasize the multi-scalar complexity of institutions entwined in everyday social life; their historic formation dynamically shaped by creative human actions; and the interplay between the traditional and the modern, formal and informal arrangements.

Their definition of institutional bricolage shares several elements with the definition of political creativity presented in Section 2: "Institutional bricolage is a process through which people, consciously and non-consciously, assemble or reshape institutional arrangements, drawing on whatever materials and resources are available, regardless of their original purpose" (Cleaver & de Koning, 2015, p. 4).

Similar to political creativity, critical institutionalism sees change happening through the transformation and recombination of existing materials and arrangements within institutions. In framing these changes as instances of bricolage, critical institutionalism attempts to capture the fact that people who contribute to

change do so both consciously and non-consciously, by assembling institutional arrangements from the social and cultural resources available to them (Whaley, 2018). By doing so, "people modify old arrangements and invent new ones" (Cleaver, 2017, as cited in Whaley, 2018, p. 139).

This seems to be in line with recent research in democratic innovation literature, which analyzed the trajectories of change and continuity in Barcelona's participatory governance since 2002. Blanco et al. (2022, p. 218) interestingly reflect on:

> How rules, practices and narratives can combine to produce stability but also diverge to create conditions for change. The complex and non-linear coevolution of rules, practices and narratives serves to explain the changing landscape of participatory governance in Barcelona, whilst also providing conceptual tools for research in other concrete cases.

This brief overview of the main concepts highlights the risk that a strong dualism in debates about democratic innovation and institutionalization, often seen as temporally or conceptually distinct, can lead to certain forms of change being unnoticed and under-theorized. Addressing this risk through the lens of political creativity could introduce a clear anti-dualist perspective and promote critical reflections in the ongoing debates about the concept and process of institutionalization.

Based on this conceptual overview, I try to present a different focus for research and analysis of democratic innovation and institutionalization from within, including studies that explore institutionalization temporally and as an ongoing creative process (as it is further illustrated in Section 3). Furthermore, I also aim to highlight different actors or shed new light on familiar ones through a more nuanced approach informed by the concept of political creativity. Through the lens of political creativity, institutions and institutional actors are not always conservative; rather, they play a central role in introducing, maintaining, and regenerating democratic innovation within and beyond institutional settings. This aligns with a broader understanding of what counts as democratic innovation, also beyond formal institutions (Asenbaum, 2021; Crouzel, 2014; Elstub & Escobar, 2017). The next section examines some practical examples of these instances to explore what can be learned from them and what gaps remain.

3. Identifying Practical Examples

It might be challenging to identify examples in democratic practice of where institutionalization and political creativity occur jointly, due to at least three main reasons:

1. The two approaches have long been depicted in contrast (including within purposefully constructed narratives of institutionalization as order and stability). Therefore, most case studies that present instances of institutionalization of democratic innovation tend to fall into the either–or narratives.
2. Framing political creativity within processes of institutionalization requires a detailed perspective from within institutions—the only vantage point that seems capable of noticing and capturing the long-term, slow, and complex dynamics that shape processes of institutionalization as bricolage. With some exceptions (Cooper & Smith, 2012; Escobar, 2022; Velghe et al., 2025), this internal view is rarely the object of research on issues of institutionalization of democratic innovation.

3. Finally, appreciating the different ways in which political creativity and new forms of institutionalization have developed in combination requires a specific temporal sensibility. These acts of bricolage, in fact, demand an attention to mundane details and small-scale changes that might—over time—accumulate and generate significant innovation. This type of innovation, though, can only be appreciated retrospectively. The duration and slowness of these kinds of innovations make them difficult to capture and narrate.

Some of the most interesting cases appear in literature that examines activism within institutions (Neaera Abers, 2019; Olsson & Hysing, 2012; Pettinicchio, 2012). Institutional activism was the subject of several studies from the late 1990s and has gone through phases of variable attention and redefinition. Although the terms used in this literature are different (e.g., insider activism, institutional activism, and others), they generally describe "what people are doing when they take jobs in government bureaucracies with the purpose of advancing the political agendas or projects proposed by social movements" (Neaera Abers & Tatagiba, 2014, p. 2).

Pettinicchio (2012) provides a useful historical overview of how social movement studies and political process approaches have addressed the question of insider and outsider activism over time, as sociological studies have moved away from viewing social movements solely as outsiders. If we follow from Pettinicchio and start moving away from a stark insider–outsider dichotomy, we can appreciate how institutions might not always (and only) demobilize protests (see Katzenstein, 1998, as cited in Pettinicchio, 2012, p. 507). They can, in fact, act as allies in solidarity with specific issues and groups (Duplan, 2023) or as "movement institutions" (Bereni & Revillard, 2018), developing institutional settings that are embedded with a protest dimension, as a form of new repertoire of protest actions as "insider tactics" (Bereni & Revillard, 2018, p. 425). In Section 3.1, I briefly introduce three examples that help illustrate the main points of the argument. I draw on instances of bureaucratic activism and radical municipalism, and introduce a case from the field that reflects on a long-established democratic innovation. I argue that although none of these cases fully exemplify the relationship between political creativity and institutionalization, each one, in its own way, contributes to lessening the (apparent) opposition between the two concepts.

3.1. Bureaucratic Activists, Radical Municipalism, and Less Permanent Innovation

The first case study draws on Neaera Abers' (2019) research of Brazilian bureaucratic activists, where she describes the role of public servants in advancing the environmentalist cause within the Ministry of the Environment to ensure that the principles and innovations introduced by social movement actors in 2011 could continue within the institution, even when this required challenging the priorities of their superiors.

Neaera Abers (2019) presents the key episodes during the time of the Workers' Party administration in Brazil. During the Lula government (2003–2010), a number of active environmentalists took temporary positions within the Ministry of Environment. As this author illustrates, these collaborations with social movement actors were not an exception within the Lula government, as activists entered the institutions to push for their political agenda. By the time of the Dilma Rousseff administration (2011–2016), many had left the government, and the Ministry of Environment started operating with permanent employees who were neither connected to nor members of social movements. Neaera Abers (2019, p. 22) argues that through their attitudes and choices, the public employees operated in unexpected ways: "Neither rule followers,

apolitical technocrats, nor selfish individualists, these actors pursued environmentalist agendas. They were activists." These bureaucratic activists moved strategically within public administration to influence and reform government policies and actions toward certain values of justice and environmental protection (Neaera Abers, 2019).

Drawing on various examples and literature—including the work of Banaszak (2010) on women's movement—I question whether social movement literature's assumption that institutionalization leads to moderation and demobilization is always accurate. This aligns with arguments presented in Pierri (2023), where I articulated how social movements can play a key role even when they act as collaborators with institutions to advance democratic innovation. Moreover, as Corry and Reiner (2021) argue in their research, this dynamic is particularly evident in recent climate movements, which have shown interest in piecemeal institutional policy measures while maintaining their more radical edge. Environmental policies have already been identified as particularly conducive to forms of bureaucratic (or insider) activism, as demonstrated by Olsson and Hysing (2012) in their study of local environmental governance in Sweden. According to these authors, several factors made environmental policy more favorable for inside activism, including: (a) the dynamism of the policy area, which was still evolving; (b) the need for diverse forms of knowledge to support experimentation and creative problem-solving in the environmental field; and (c) the large number of organizations and a strong tradition of civic engagement on the issue (at least in Sweden). These features warrant further exploration to advance a better understanding of the conditions under which democratic innovation and institutionalization can develop in dialogue.

The second case study comes from the work of Flesher Fominaya (2022), who explored the role of social movements in democratic innovation, referring to the case study of Spain's 15-M movement. Following the 15-M mobilizations, many activists decided to engage with political institutions to drive change from within. Either by supporting the rise of the party Podemos or by directly entering municipal governments and coalitions in several cities in 2015. The 15-M *Indignados* movement significantly contributed to the emergence of radical municipalism:

> The democratic innovation introduced by 15-M activists into the institutional arena in Spain's major cities through Barcelona en Com. (Barcelona) and Ahora Madrid coalitions is well documented, and includes participatory budgets and experimentation with citizens' assemblies based on random selection that is designed to put forward proposals and to intervene in designing public policies. (Flesher Fominaya, 2022, p. 88)

Radical municipalism aims to open up a shared public sphere between social movements and institutions of local government, where traditional institutions, social movements, and citizens all experience a democratic transformation (Mota Consejero & Herranz, 2023). In these instances, social movements succeeded in moving into institutions and radicalizing participatory governance and democratic innovation from within. I therefore suggest that, given its ambition, values-based approach, and inside–outside dynamics, radical municipalism could be considered a counterpart to bureaucratic activism.

Social movement actors are traditionally seen as removed from political institutions because (a) the latter are designed to resist change furthered by the former and (b) institutions' role is to maintain stability and be self-perpetuating (Flesher Fominaya, 2022). However, recent research (Bua & Bussu, 2021; Wagenaar, 2023)

has introduced new modes of governance—namely, democracy-driven-governance—that identify the creativity of social movements as a driver of institutional change. A close examination of emerging case studies illustrating how democracy-driven-governance has developed may, in the future, prove beneficial for mapping new instances of political creativity embedded within processes of institutionalization.

Finally, the third case study exemplifies a multifaceted relationship between the process of institutionalization and democratic innovation by reflecting on the Ostbelgien Model (Velghe et al., 2025), which describes the Permanent Citizens' Dialogue that was introduced in 2019 in the German-speaking community of Belgium. What started as an experiment with deliberative mini-publics was iterated and institutionalized as a well-known precursor of the deliberative wave and the object of much attention and research. This case is particularly relevant for this article because it provides one of the few internal views on processes of institutionalization of democratic innovation. Moreover, it reflects on a process more than five years old, thereby providing the temporal perspective that, as argued before, is needed to appreciate practices of democratic innovation and institutionalization beyond either–or narratives. In fact, while the tensions between stability and creativity seem to be higher for newly institutionalized democratic innovations, citizens as well as bureaucrats (within and outside institutions) seem to come to terms with the blurred boundaries between institutionalization and creative experiments after the process has become older. This phenomenon, and the distinct ways in which political creativity and stability interact during the life of a process of institutionalization, would be an interesting subject for further reflection and research, as once shuold not assume that the interplay will remain constant over time.

Reflecting on more than five years since the institutionalization of the Permanent Citizens' Dialogue, the authors state clearly: "To start with, don't let the term 'permanent' deceive you into thinking this is a static process; in fact, it is very dynamic" (Velghe et al., 2025). The field reflections and the practitioner accounts regarding the process of institutionalization of the citizens' dialogue reveal a nuanced picture of continuous change and emerging surprises, providing a more accurate description of institutionalization as it happened in Ostbelgien. As the authors themselves note, the word *evolving* may be more appropriate than *permanent* "to capture (and cherish) the changing and dynamic nature of the OBM" (Velghe et al., 2025). These insightful reflections from a relatively long-standing institutionalization aptly describe how political creativity continues to operate within institutionalized democratic practices. The main takeaway is that accounts from established democratic innovations may depict a reality where the interplay between political creativity and institutionalization becomes more evident over time. This is clearly illustrated in the words of the authors:

> The five first years have shown that institutionalized forms of citizen deliberation remain in their infancy and that more attention should be paid to their experimental and evolving nature. There is always a drive to formalise these processes, especially when embedded in formal institutions. This, however, can have a negative impact on the agency of the citizens, who believe that they have to strictly stay within certain predetermined boundaries. A big takeaway from five years of institutionalization in *Ostbelgien* is to always allow enough space and time for flexibility, learning, and adaptation. This not only benefits the citizens but also the politicians who have to find their way of dealing with changing norms in a changing society and democracy. (Velghe et al., 2025)

4. Beyond the Dualism in Democratic Innovation

Although the examples explored in the previous section are the closest to exploring the potential interplay between creativity and institutionalization within public institutions, they still display a fundamental dualism that assumes change and order to be two distinct and contradictory moments (although this is less the case for the Ostbelgien Model). Actors—such as bureaucratic activists or social movements within municipalities—need to identify a breach in ongoing stability and use it to depart from established order and recombine existing factors to create something new. The analysis of these cases needs to identify the conditions, the profiles, the skills, and other variables that can influence the extent to which an actor can use such breaches in the structure to bring about innovation in democracy.

Scholars of political creativity build on well-established anti-dualist perspectives, including the work of Mustafa Emirbayer (Berk et al., 2013, p. 283), that focus on the interplay and dynamics between political actors, institutions, procedures, and rules. In their approach, Berk et al. (2013, p. 5) state that "order is not so orderly, and change not so intermittent." In both traditions of institutional bricolage and political creativity, we can frame creative processes of institutionalization as a patchwork (Cleaver & de Koning, 2015), where old institutional arrangements coexist with new institutional arrangements in ways that are not always planned or fully intended. In a similar direction, Escobar (2022, p. 157), drawing on a 10-year-long study in Scotland on democratic innovation and participatory governance, showed how these practices should not be considered an "accomplishment, but as a contested, fragile, and evolving assemblage that takes constant political work; and that there can be more scope for manoeuvre than it is often assumed." This finding appears to be consistent with the reflections on the Ostbelgien Model presented in the previous section.

In their definition of political creativity, Berk et al. (2013) identify three threads that characterize a research agenda on institutions and institutional change based on the concept of political creativity: (a) the idea of agency as relationality; (b) the framing of order as assemblages; and (c) the concept of change as the politics of time. In introducing a non-dualist view in democratic innovation—a middle way between, on the one hand, classic ideas of institutionalization (understood as replication, stability, and duration) and, on the other, the volatility of innovative practices that never stabilize—this section draws on and elaborates further the second characteristic: (b) order as assemblages. This choice is in line with more recent debates that are bringing assemblage theory and democratic theory into dialogue (Asenbaum & Bussu, 2025). Before I delve into this point, I briefly reflect on the role of relationality.

The idea of agency as relationality is central in what Berk and Galvan (2009, 2013) call creative syncretism, in which creativity is conceptualized as a chain structure, where novel creative tinkering draws upon an indeterminate number of resources, concepts, and materials that were themselves the result of previous creative tinkering, forming an ongoing, iterative, and dynamic process. The framing of political processes as relational assumes that the involved actors, their identities, institutions, and rules merely derive meaning from the changing roles they assume in response to each other's creative actions.

Within creative syncretism, one can see creative tinkering occurring at all levels, not only from the bottom up. Institutions and those in power, just as actors from social movements, can also tinker like bricoleurs and they may equally be involved in purposefully engineering and designing the change they want to see. This approach does not ignore or erase power differences; instead, power is explored as experiential (rather than

structural), and attention is paid to how actors perceive and live institutional rules, as well as their power to change them: "By role, right education, or circumstances, some believe they have the privilege to tinker with rules or prior practices. Others perceive messing with the rules or past practice as audacious" (Berk & Galvan, 2013, p. 29). According to creative syncretism, therefore, actors (from the top and from the bottom) act relationally and unexpectedly in response to each other's actions. Attention to these continuous processes of re-adjusting and re-aligning shows how, at different times, the same actors might have a different perception of their power to tinker (or not), as well as a different purpose for their tinkering.

4.1. Order as Assemblages

A recent special issue invites scholars to employ assemblage theory to "rethink democracy in terms of fluidity, transformability, and becoming and extends democratic inquiries to more-than-human realms" (Asenbaum & Bussu, 2025, p. 1). In this section, I briefly take the special issue's debates into account (which are too recent to be fully analyzed), mostly reflecting on the potential of using assemblage theory to study the dynamism and complexity of democratic innovations: "Assemblage theory can help us to develop conceptualizations of embedded democratic innovations, beyond just institutional characteristics and arrangements, as plural, experimental and multifaceted, highlighting interactions between different practices, contexts, and actors" (Bussu et al., 2025, p. 10).

According to Berk et al. (2013), thinking about institutions and institutional changes in terms of assemblages and processes of assembly foregrounds three specific modes of political creativity. First, *making order* through a lens of assemblages becomes a creative act of ordering among the different raw materials from which political action is made. These materials are considered to be decomposable and their nature allows them to be easily taken apart to fashion new solutions. Second, *shoring it up* describes the process of maintenance as one that also requires creativity, as actors produce new configurations to ensure continuity and stability, when following the rules proves not successful. Fung and Wright (2003) illustrate several examples in the case studies they present, showing that maintenance of institutions only succeeds as a result of tinkering from below when performed by empowered actors. Lastly, Berk et al. (2013) describe the creative work of *smoothing over*, which aims at uncovering the messiness of assemblages and hiding it from view so that a perception of order can be ensured, as well as its legitimacy. As Berk et al. (2013, p. 9) note: "Hiding creative assemblage is work—ironically, a work of creative assemblages."

The main point of this shift to assemblage for the purpose of political creativity is to emphasize that order requires creativity to create, maintain, and keep it relevant. Although assemblage theory can be (and has been) criticized (see Buchanan, 2015; Kinkaid, 2019; Lemke, 2021) for its lack of normativity, explanatory potential, and for the vagueness and indeterminacy of what constitutes an assemblage and what this affords, it still seems to offer a relatively novel perspective for framing political processes as relational, contextual, and creative. According to Bussu et al. (2025, p. 15):

> A participatory assemblage thus encourages a move from top-down design toward co-design with participants; from emphasis on a given model and process to openness to participation as an ecology, embedded in the local political and social context; from democratic innovations as institutional arrangements attached to political arenas to deepening participatory democracy in everyday life.

Further research is needed to explore the full potential of adopting an understanding of democratic innovation and institutionalization as assemblages and to trace whether and how assemblages for innovation differ from or resemble assemblages for institutionalization.

5. Conclusions

This thematic issue (in which this article is inserted) reflects on the role and value of institutionalization of democratic innovation in challenging times. In this context, I contribute with a novel approach based on the concept of political creativity that transcends debates about institutionalization as being in contradiction to, or fundamentally different in nature from, democratic innovation itself.

This article has begun by providing a critical outlook on traditional forms of institutionalism, which shape an understanding of institutions as rational political actors primarily concerned with stability and order. Drawing on critiques from within institutionalism itself—namely, neo-institutionalism and critical institutionalism—as well as scholarship on political creativity, I explored whether and how democratic innovation can be institutionalized without losing its generative character, and whether and how institutionalization can become more creative while still ensuring the continuation and mainstreaming of innovation within an institutional framework.

I argued that the apparent paradox between democratic innovation and creativity, on the one hand, and institutionalization, on the other, rests on a dualist understanding of institutions and change, which refers to traditional institutionalism and resonates with a long tradition of social and political studies on agency and structure. This understanding sees institutions as formal organizations that shape the behavior of other political actors according to given norms, with an ambition toward stability and predictability. Seen through the lens of political creativity, however, this apparent paradox disappears: Institutions are understood as being in motion and as the result of a complex and creative process of bricolage carried out by both external and internal actors.

Therefore, I present three main suggestions for rethinking institutionalization beyond the dualism in democratic innovation. None of these suggestions is completely new—as they resonate with and confirm pre-existing findings—but they all directly emanate from the three dimensions of political creativity illustrated in the literature: (a) the dimension of time, (b) the concept of relationality, and (c) a novel understanding of order as assemblages. The suggestions are the following:

1. To favor new research on accounts of institutionalization of democratic innovation from *within*, including studies that explore institutionalization temporally, not as a "static object" (as also suggested by Courant, 2018) but as an ongoing, dialectical, and creative process.
2. To reconsider the actors of democratic innovation and institutionalization in relational ways, for instance, by blurring distinctions between *inside* and *outside* actors, and by recognizing the potential shifting of roles among actors. This will address the risk that certain forms of agency and change go unnoticed and therefore under-theorized.
3. To further explore the possible implications of assemblage theory through the lens of political creativity, exploring how institutionalization of democratic innovation emerges, interacts, and changes, in context-specific ways.

In analyzing the relationship and trade-off between creativity and institutionalization, I have focused only on instances of democratic innovation. However, the question arises of whether and how a political creativity lens might be insightful when applied to more traditional representative democratic institutions, including how this relationship and its trade-off might play out differently—or not—within the two, and whether democratic innovation might address these tensions more effectively in practice. These are interesting questions that would require further research to be fully explored.

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