Epilogue

The Precipice of Hope: A Conversation with Hahrie Han

David Bateman: I'd like us to start the conversation by asking you to connect your work to the questions of popular sovereignty that we've been wrestling with in this volume. Do you find the concept of popular sovereignty useful in the work you do or for the types of questions in which you are interested?

Hahrie Han: I recognize that it might be synonymous to some people, but I probably use the term self-governance more than popular sovereignty.

A large part of what I've tried to do in my work is think about this question: If we really want to have a self-governing polity, what are the capacities that people need? How do they develop those? And then, what does self-governance mean beyond just elections?

Thomas Bartscherer: In the book, there is a lot of discussion about people-hood, how it is defined, and how "peoples" are formed. There are discussions about tensions between popular majorities and individual or group rights; or between liberalism and democracy; and then there are discussions about inter-personal dynamics, how power is developed on a small scale within small-sized groups or organizations. For instance, the group dynamic in a classroom, or in a civic conversation as in Adam Davis's work with Oregon Humanities.

One thing that's missing is a discussion of how large-scale social and political movements build and exercise power, which is central to your work. How is that done? Is it scalable? What would it mean to scale it up to the level of a nation state?

Hahrie Han: I think there are a couple of ways to think about the answer to your question.

In much of my research, I work with students and colleagues to partner with grassroots organizations, mostly in the US (but not exclusively) to try to understand how we can put research and learning around what they do, to essentially make them more effective in doing what they're trying to do: to build political power at scale.

320

If I was having this conversation with a group of practitioners, I think the way that I would start to tackle your question is to say, "Well, here's what we've learned about what works." Of course, there is not any kind of formula; there is no formulaic way to build a movement. But there are certain kinds of capacities that movements should be building.

Another way to tackle your question is to think about what is the thing we are trying to scale? I often start by thinking about some of Danielle Allen's work. She asks what this idea of self-governance by a free, equal people actually means.[1] One of the things that she says, which I really love, is that the most fundamental way in which we are all equal is that we all move through our days trying to make a better tomorrow, even though we might disagree about what that means. The challenge in self-governance is essentially how this group of individuals, who each need their own sphere of influence to build their own vision of a better tomorrow, comes together to create a broader polity.

When I think about the work that we're doing around movements, I start by taking seriously this idea that everyone should be able to be an architect of their own future: What does it mean to equip people to become architects of their own future within the context of a movement? And then, how does that movement scale people's ability to be architects of their own futures to whatever the domain is relevant – local, state, national politics?

A structure that I've come to over time is this notion of a fractal. I think a lot of the concepts that we think about with respect to popular sovereignty have to do with things at some broad, macro level. But I don't think you can think at that scale without thinking about how it patterns all the way down. Part of what I like about a fractal, as I understand it, is that the same pattern that we might see in something like a fern, for example, would be repeated to ever smaller and tinier scales if I was to put it under microscope.

The most effective movements I've seen create a pattern like a fractal. In starts at the individual level, where people all bring their individual capacities, interests, desires, blind spots, and contradictions right to the table. And the movement creates some sphere, within which each of those people really are putting their hands on the levers of change, in which they really are architects of their own future. And then that gets patterned to a slightly bigger scale, and a little bit bigger, and a little bit bigger. So, it can start at the level of an individual, then a team, and then it can grow to the level of some political arena, like a local municipality. To get to the national level, we have to have structural mechanisms through which those fractals are repeated in different ways.[2]

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[1] Allen, *Our Declaration.*

[2] One way to think about the federated structure identified by Theda Skocpol and others to early US social movements is that not only does it replicate the structure of power within the United States, but it repeats a pattern of social movements' exercising power from the local to national level. See, for example, Skocpol, *Diminished Democracy*; Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers*; Skocpol, Liazos, and Ganz, *What a Mighty Power We Can Be*; and Skocpol, Ganz, and Munson, "A Nation of Organizers."

And so to answer your question: self-governing movements have to somehow extend that pattern of a free and equal people learning how to exercise power from the micro level up to the macro level. I work with movements who have thought a lot about this question at a very micro level. What does it mean for me to draw someone off the sidelines, to equip them for public action, and then to help them realize their own agency in public life? If you've ever been part of a movement where you've seen that happen, it's an amazing thing. As teachers, we see that in our students sometimes. It's this incredible experience, when you see it. In the conversations that we're having with organizers, we try to point out that there's a structural component to this work that goes beyond just the individual or the relationship. The structure matters, because that's how we begin to think about questions of scale.

Ewa Atanassow: I very much like the fractal metaphor and would like you to elaborate on it.

It seems to me that the fractal is a metaphor for thinking about how we can reconcile individual or group autonomy with popular sovereignty, about the actual structure that would allow this reconciliation. Yet, the fractal analogy also hints that this structure, whatever it may be, might have to be analogous across different scales; that each component has to have the same pattern; and in that sense, though different in scale, all parts need to be homologous or uniform.

In other words, the fractal suggests a limitation on how much diversity in structure and orientation such a system can accommodate. It would seem that certain basic patterns or commitments need to be in place across society for something like the fractal structure to be possible.

Hahrie Han: I think the central question that we're facing as a society right now (at least in the US) is the question of whether multiracial democracy can work. Part of that big question is your question: What are the boundaries of diversity that we can accommodate? And how do we define these boundaries? Of course I can't fully answer these questions, but there are a couple of things that I can say in terms of how I think about the question you're asking.

If I want to start as an organizer, I have to start small. I can't go to scale from the beginning. I start by organizing the people around me, and then those people organize other people and then it begins to grow. As I'm doing that, I don't know at time-one (T1) what kind of challenges we're going to face at time-two (T2). Those challenges might be political challenges from the outside. They could also be challenges within the group. I don't know at T1 how some of the differences amongst us might create fissures and limit our ability to create a coherent movement.

One of the questions we – my collaborators and I, and the people I'm in conversation with – think a lot about is uncertainty. If we take seriously this idea of uncertainty – that there's no formulaic way of building popular sovereignty – then what are the choices that I can make at time-one (right now), that make it more likely that at time-two (in the future) we'll be equipped to deal

with whatever challenges might come our way? One of those challenges might be challenges of diversity within the group.

A lot of our research focuses on the idea that there are a set of capacities movements can invest in at T1 that help them negotiate these uncertain futures in T2. Some of those capacities can help equip people and movements to negotiate boundaries of "peoplehood," to use a term invoked in the volume, within the movement itself. The question of who's in and who's out is not just one that gets enacted at the polity, or at the level of the nation. It arises at the level of every movement that I've seen. Movements constantly ask: What is the community of belonging that we're really constructing? What is the extent to which belonging comes before belief?

These are questions that every movement that I've seen has to grapple with. And, there are a certain set of capacities regarding the nature of the relationships that are constructed amongst constituents that make movements more or less likely that they can navigate these questions. For instance, what is the extent to which they have systems of learning built into their work? What is the nature of the commitments that they create with each other? All of these things are *ex ante* decisions that movement leaders can make that don't necessarily ensure that they're going to be able to negotiate the differences that come up, but that create the conditions that make it possible or more likely.

Let me add two more things. First, in the kind of work I do, we think a lot about how people negotiate their interests with each other. I don't mean diplomats, but ordinary people in everyday lives. What does it look like for us to be negotiating our overlapping and distinct interests and negotiating boundaries of belonging, to be negotiating disagreement? Those are fundamental skills of negotiation. Yet, I wish we had more research on it. That's a place where sometimes, when I'm talking to organizers, I feel like I come up against the limits of what I know about how to negotiate those differences, based on the research that I've seen.

The second thing is this: In thinking about negotiating our relationships, and thinking about relationships as the building block of power or sovereignty or self-governance we have to think about how power gets negotiated in those relationships. Here, I borrow from Marshall Ganz's work, who says power is an exchange of interest and resources.[3] This is not a full definition of power, but it is an aspect of it: I have power over you if I have resources that act on your interests, and you have power over me if you have resources that act on my interest. We agree to share power if we mutually agree to use our resources to act on each other's interests. And that mutuality is ultimately what a movement needs to be able to do.

But to create that kind of mutuality (or solidarity), we have to be able to say, "I'm different from you. We have a different set of resources and different set of interests. But we have realized that we're stronger together than if we act

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[3] Ganz, "Leading Change," 531; Blau, *Exchange and Power in Social Life*.

alone, and so we have to figure out how to use each other's resources to act on each other's interests." That's the kind of negotiation that has to happen to figure out the boundaries of difference that we can accommodate or not. Obviously, as we scale that to bigger levels, the structures through which that happens become more and more formal. If I'm doing this with my neighbors, it's basically a torturous homeowners' association meeting. And then maybe in the city council, it's kind of the same thing. But by the time you get to the state, or the nation, it becomes a much more formalized system.

So I think there's a constant interaction between the individual and collective capacities that people have as they come to the table, and then the structures that we create to shape the table itself.

Thomas Bartscherer: I want to underscore two things in what you just said. The first is the distinction between belonging and belief, and the question of which comes first. It's a really eloquent way of articulating a central tension for us.

The second goes back to your invocation of Danielle Allen's work, and the futurity question. In the volume, we haven't talked much about the temporal axis in different conceptions of peoplehood.[4] There is a lot of drawing on the past in conceiving peoplehood. But this is different: You are directing the idea of peoplehood toward the future.

We all know that we want a better future; that at least holds us together. But who is this "we" that you're conceiving? That's one way to think about the question of scalability. Can the "we" entail something as large as a nation?

Hahrie Han: So maybe I'll ask a question in return: It seems very obvious to me that "we" includes everybody. Why would it not? Why would everyone not want a better future, even knowing that we may all disagree about what this means, and that what a better future means for each person can be different?

Thomas Bartscherer: There are two ways, I think, that one can imagine this. One can say that the "we" includes everyone in the nation, and so therefore necessarily excludes other nations. Or one can ask whether a given nation, say the United States, holds together as a "we." Our differences are so great, that some would argue that California should secede, or that "red states" should secede. So, how do we think about the "we" in the particular example of this nation.

Hahrie Han: I was thinking about the question in a different way. I didn't mean it as a definition of the nation, of a boundary. Instead, I understood it as a universal. It's part of the human condition. As Allen once put it, we all go through our days thinking about how we can make tomorrow better than today. That's just a human thing, not a question of boundaries.

The reason it is important is that this question of self-governance, or popular sovereignty, begins with the idea of figuring out how we equip people to exercise their own agency in public life. That, to me, is the value of the temporal dimension, and of wanting to think about a better tomorrow. In a way, I start in the same way economists start with the assumption that all people are

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[4] See also Espejo, *The Time of Popular Sovereignty*.

rational. I start with the assumption that all people want to exercise agency. That's the way in which I meant it.

Then, if everyone wants to exercise their agency, how do we think about the boundaries of our commitments to each other – that we either have or should have – and what is the basis on which that commitment is built? When do we exit and when do we exercise voice? I struggle with these questions. I grew up in Texas. Texans talk about seceding all the time. But almost every movement that I've seen that has gotten to any kind of scale has struggled with that question of who's in and who's out – especially movements that are fighting for rights for people who have been traditionally excluded. What is the extent to which we are willing to accommodate people who are ignorant of or actively challenge the dignity of our people? Who will we bring into our movement to help us get to scale? Put another way, how do we think about the boundaries of how far we're willing to go to create that community of belonging?

I would love to see some kind of framework for that. I don't know that there's ever going to be a clear line. Instead, for me the question is how do we create the processes, the spaces, and the capacities for people to constantly negotiate those blurry boundaries. Engaging in that negotiation, and doing the work, is an end in and of itself.

One of the big projects that I've been working on recently examines a movement of people who are fighting for racial justice within evangelical megachurches in America. As you might know, in the United States, there's a big battle going on within evangelicalism right now about who gets to define the faith. A big portion of it is defined by people who have an image of faith grounded in a white Christian nationalist worldview. But there are people who are fighting for racial justice within that context. This is not a domain that I myself come out of. It's different from a lot of other movements I've studied. But I've learned so much about how they think about negotiating these questions.

This phrase, "belonging comes before belief," actually comes from this big megachurch I have been studying in Ohio. They say explicitly, as one of their mottos, "belonging comes before belief": we are all about trying to bring Jesus and the Kingdom of God to earth, but you can come to our church whether or not you believe in God, whether or not you believe in our God, etcetera. You are still a part of our community. They have this ethos of radical hospitality, of bringing people who may disagree with fundamental tenets of the church into that community. That is something I've learned a lot from. I don't see it as explicitly stated in other movements, but I think there are ways in which lots of other movements that I've studied have a similar ethos of creating belonging, and not assuming that only people who agree are the ones that are drawn in.

David Bateman: Something I find very useful in this discussion is that what "building belonging" means is different when you start from the bottom up, where there's not necessarily a reason to circumscribe it right away. I think a lot of us who think about democracy or popular sovereignty start from the premise that there is already a state, there is already a nation, or that this is

what is being explained. The questions then become: What common thing binds everyone within this state together, or how can we justify these boundaries rather than something else? Starting from the bottom up, not as a post-hoc rationalization but as an *ex ante* practice, means we don't need to start from that premise. We can start by asking, how do I relate to the specific persons next to me, and how do they relate to the next, and how do we negotiate the differences between us.

Earlier you suggested that you were interested in participation and self-governance beyond just elections. Could you say a bit more about this? One thing about your work that is so inspiring is that it is oriented around belief that participation is good, and that we want more of it. But what are the limits to that? Polarization can drive participation, but this might not be worth the cost. The increase in participation of people might not be worth the cost of fraying civic bonds.

Hahrie Han: Sometimes I think that when I die, if there's one thing that I hope I convinced my colleagues of, it will be the idea that not all forms of participation are the same. In my world of empirical American politics, the tendency is to just count participation. It's like 30 thousand votes is equal to 30 thousand people showing up at a meeting, to 30 thousand people coming to a protest, or something like that. As an empiricist, I understand why we do things like that. But by reducing participation to numbers of participants or numbers of actions, we have lost sight of the extent to which participation can have prodemocratic effects or not.

Let me reframe the question: What are the conditions under which participation is a carrier of democracy versus a carrier of authoritarianism? From historical and cross-national studies, we know that there are lots of cases where a really thick civil society produces really authoritarian outcomes. It's clear that civil society can be a carrier of either. So what are the conditions under which it actually promotes democracy?

In a recent paper with Andrea Campbell and Elizabeth McKenna, we develop this notion of what we call civic feedbacks.[5] How do you differentiate between forms of participation that enrich the ability of vehicles of collective action to translate the actions of people into popular sovereignty versus those that impoverish it? We draw on the policy feedbacks literature to say that in the same way that policy design can have feedback effects that shape mass publics, so too can the ways in which we construct participation have differential downstream consequences.[6]

We start from the premise that any model of popular sovereignty has to take seriously collective action. It has to take seriously the ways in which people come together, and the vehicles or scaffolding through which they're able to

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[5] Hahrie, Campbell, and McKenna, "Civic Feedbacks."
[6] For a discussion of how policy design can shape the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, see Erler's chapter in this volume.

channel their participation into some kind of voice or power over the outcomes they care about. Certain kinds of participation are going to have feedback effects that enrich the ability for that collective action to happen, and certain kinds will not. That helps us get at something that I've always struggled with: A lot of times when people think about the difference between things like thick versus thin participation, it ultimately comes down to a measure of time. But I can put a lot of time into something and still get very little out of it. Conversely, with the right organizer, and with the right context around it, a relatively time-limited kind of action can actually be quite meaningful. The concept of civic feedbacks tries to provide us with a conceptual tool to examine not just the act of participating, but also the downstream consequences of each action.

So is participation always good? First, I would differentiate between participation as an outcome and the forces that drive participation. I absolutely think that there are forces that drive participation that are "bad." White nationalist politics is antidemocratic and unjust and yet it drives participation. But does this mean that participation itself is "bad"?

I know this is disputed, but I generally start with this idea that we want more people to feel like they have their hands on the levers of change. We want more people to feel they have voice. When we see people participating and it leads to more authoritarian or polarized outcomes, the question I ask is whether it's a problem with the actual act of someone participating or a problem with the kind of participatory opportunity they were offered, or the thinness of the participation that is so common nowadays. One of the really destructive things about neoliberalism, or whatever the term is that you want to use to define that regime, is that it's reduced us to thinking about participation in individualistic, market-based terms. This ignores civic feedbacks and other aspects of any participatory act that turn any individual act into something that can be richer and more collective.

David Bateman: So what would be an example of participation that generates positive feedback versus participations that do not?

Hahrie Han: In the paper, we develop a case study around a fifteen-year campaign for universal preschool in Cincinnati.[7] There were two phases to the campaign. In phase one, they were essentially trying to get lots of petition signatures to show the breadth of public support for preschool. Organizers tabled outside grocery stores, they went to community marches and festivals, and so on. And they got something like twice the number of signatures that they thought that they were going to get. When they brought those signatures in, the city council said, "Great you showed us some breadth of public support, just like we asked you to, but you know what, we have no money. Sorry we can't do it." What could they do then? Unfortunately, they hadn't generated those signatures in a way that built any kind of relationships or a sense of commitment among those people. All they had were names on a piece of paper.

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[7] See note 5 above.

They couldn't go back to those people and say, "Hey, the city council just pushed back on the thing that you said you support. What's our next move?" They were assuming that the petition would be enough to bring the city council around. But it didn't unfold the way they were expecting, and they didn't have the tools to be able to respond.

And then, in the second phase of the campaign, a grassroots organization comes along and builds a real constituency by engaging people in house parties and other actions that help develop people's consciousness around preschool, racial justice, and economic justice issues. They reach the constituencies in Cincinnati who are likely to benefit most from a universal preschool program. So then later, when they have a similar moment of being challenged, their response is very different. Instead of having to walk away, they say, "All right. If you are going to challenge us, we're going to take this back to the people, and see how the people are going to respond." And the people are already equipped and ready for action in a way that enables them to hold people in positions of power to account. So, those choices they made earlier in the second phase about how to cultivate that constituency created feedback effects that enabled a thicker form of accountability, which I think is another dimension that we could talk about here. To be clear, the feedbacks did not come from the fact that a house party takes more time than signing a petition. Instead, it's more about the kind of capacities that were built, the sort of relationships that were built, and how these had downstream consequences that were able to feed into the campaign.

My hope is that our paper can agitate a conversation around this idea of the downstream consequences. What are the conditions under which you could imagine civic feedbacks that feed into authoritarian versus prodemocratic outcomes? This gets us to questions that the volume also engages with – questions about negotiating across difference and thinking about how we construct peoplehood. You can imagine that there are ways to address those questions that have positive downstream consequences, and ways that actually shut down future prodemocratic outcomes that you might want.[8]

David Bateman: I think there is a notion that going to a city council meeting and yelling at each other is the essence of participation. And what you are saying is: no, showing up, and even speaking, is not the same thing as building relationships.

Hahrie Han: I hear all the time from organizers that we don't have models of representation or co-governance. So when government doesn't do something that we want, people say, "All right, we're going to go sit in on Nancy Pelosi's office!" or something like that. And you know, there are times when that is exactly the right thing to do, but movements need to have repertoires

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[8] Consider, e.g., work by Maya Tudor and Dan Slater on the importance of inclusive narratives in social movement organizing for democratic outcomes. Tudor and Slater, "The Content of Democracy."

of action that go beyond that. And one of the things that we, as a community of scholars, can do is help articulate models of representation that go beyond just voting, or just using bodies as a cudgel. I think there's a lot of work to be done there to expand that repertoire and deepen our understanding of how that relationship of accountability can work.

Ewa Atanassow: I'd like to connect this to the discussion about the conditions that make participation produce desirable effects. Obviously, "desirable" needs to be defined, and distinguishing between democratic versus authoritarian outcomes is one way to do so. But just as there hardly is anybody who doesn't want to improve their tomorrow, I wonder if there are many people today who don't want democracy. One of Tocqueville's original insights I've been mulling over is that we live in a world where democracy is the only game in town, it is seen as the only legitimate basis for political power. The question then is not whether to have a democracy, but what kind of democracy, and how do we put content into that concept. So the radical hospitality model, which seems very attractive, sooner or later is going to hit against the question that you say is central to any movement: Who is in and who is out? Unless we have some kind of shared understanding, however broad and negotiable, about the meaning of democracy and the criteria of belonging, common action would be difficult to mobilize. This at least is what I imagine constituency means: shared understanding of and commitment to what we're after.

Hahrie Han: So, a couple of reactions. I agree with everything you said, except for one point: Does everyone want democracy? There's increasing data showing that people's commitment to democracy is lower than we might think. This is true in the US, it's true among young people, and comparatively. That, of course, then raises the question of what people are thinking about when they think about democracy. I don't know the answer to that question. But whether people want democracy is, in my mind, a question.

Part of what makes democracy unique as a form of government is that it asks people to accept uncertainty over outcomes in order to have certainty over process. I first heard this from Valerie Bunce.[9] Lots of other forms of government will give you certainty over outcomes, but uncertainty over process. I think this is such a clear encapsulation of one of the problems that we're confronting right now: Namely, what are the conditions under which people are willing to accept uncertainty over outcomes?

Well, if the possible set of outcomes that you're asking me to accept is too broad, then yes, I am much less willing to accept that. I am much less supportive of democracy, as a result. If you're asking me to accept an outcome where I may not be able to feed my family, where my children may be impoverished,

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[9] "To put it simply," writes Valerie Bunce, "liberal democracy features *certain* political procedures, but *uncertain* political results. State socialism, by contrast, reverses this combination by featuring *uncertain* political procedures but *certain* political results." Bunce, "The Struggle for Liberal Democracy," 400.

where they may not have a sustainable world to live, etc., I become a lot less supportive of the democratic processes that could lead to those outcomes.

That's why I worry when our conversation about threats to democracy and inequality does not include this question of voice and power. To me, a key question we must ask is, "Will people be more willing to accept the uncertainty democracy demands if they feel that they have legitimate voice in the process?" My hypothesis (though I don't have the data) is yes. If I feel that I'm going to be able to have some say over the range of outcomes I'm being asked to accept, and that they're within bounds of what I view to be acceptable, then will I be more willing to accept that process, overall? I think part of where we're at right now is that the range of outcomes we're asking people to accept is broader than what many people find acceptable, so people are undermining the system itself.[10]

Ewa Atanassow: What you just said touches on the issue of legitimacy. If I participate in the democratic process, it is likelier that I'll recognize its outcome as legitimate. And yet, while having a voice is a source of legitimacy, it's not the only one. For instance, if in my opinion, the other party is the enemy and authoritarianism incarnate, even or especially if I have participated and was actively engaged in the process, I could still view the outcome as illegitimate, as happened after the 2020 US elections.

Hahrie Han: I agree, but my one caveat is that I didn't say that mere participation will lead people to view the outcome with legitimacy. It's whether I experienced voice, which to me is different from participation. I can vote and not experience a feeling of voice. The hypothesis I have is that if I experienced an authentic feeling that I was able to help shape the process, I might view the outcome as more legitimate, or be more willing to accept it.

One other thing: accepting the outcome as legitimate is an *ex post* evaluation. I look at the outcome, and I think retroactively about whether it was legitimate or not. I was trying to ask: is there an *ex ante* evaluation that I might make? I hypothesize that people would be more willing to *ex ante* engage in a process without knowing what the outcome is, to accept the uncertainty, if they feel like they have authentic voice in it.

Thomas Bartscherer: That's very useful, to identify the link between civic participation, accountability, and legitimacy. We've been thinking about the connection between legitimacy and accountability. But to make clear the connection between thick participation, building relationships rather than merely voting, and feeling that your voice is heard, that you have a voice in the process – to put those three together is very helpful.

And to return to the idea that uncertainty about outcome is characteristic of democracy, one might say that in a functioning democracy at least one outcome is certain: self-governance. In other words, there may be a distinction between

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[10] Peter Levine has been grappling with many of these questions, developing a theory of civic life that integrates questions of deliberation and voice. Levine, *What Should We Do?*

outcome in terms of particular policy choices, and outcome understood as the practice self-governance, and that seems worth thinking about.

David Bateman: We started this volume with the crises of liberal democracy. We would like to hear your take on this: Is there a crisis and what is it?

Hahrie Han: I talk to a lot of people, both scholars and practitioners, who seem to have very worked out analyses of the crisis of liberal democracy. It's as if they can say, "This is the crisis. These are the dimensions of it. And these are the things that we need to do to fix it. It's just a matter of building public will for it."

My analysis, by contrast, is still somewhat inchoate. Obviously, there's a lot of truth in many of the common explanations people provide: the changing information sphere, the rise of disinformation, the increase in affective polarization, and the ways in which that diminishes our ability to build the sense of peoplehood that you're talking about.[11] I don't disagree with any of that. But it always strikes me as being somewhat incomplete. I'm not quite sure that I have an alternative answer. Part of what I found useful about the work you all are doing is putting this into historical context and giving us a broader way of thinking about the contemporary "crisis" as being a part of the democratic process itself, and part of democracy-building itself.

Whether or not we think "crisis of liberal democracy" is the right term, I do think that we are in a moment of tremendous upheaval. The structure of the economy is changing; the structure of nation state and the relationships between nation states are changing; there's increasing diversity in populations across the world; there are all these ways in which the social, political, economic trends are creating a lot of uncertainty. And so, regardless of whether or not we think about it as a crisis, I do think we're at a choice point, as a country, as a people, however we define that.

Sometimes when I'm in conversations about this "crisis" or this moment, the choices for how to act are being defined at the level of institutions or individuals. At the level of institutions, people ask how we fix our institutions to allow for better decision-making processes, from election reform to congressional procedures. These are all very important. Alternately, it's very much at the level of individuals: Why are human brains wired to dislike other people, to be so parochial, etc.

But I worry that we're not thinking about how to strengthen the scaffolding at the meso-level. How do we create the scaffolding that gives people the opportunity to overcome those parochial instincts, or to take advantage of the institutions that are created at the macro level? But that's not all. That scaffolding should also give people the opportunity to actually experience those fractals, to experience effective collective action – which, in turn can then strengthen the ability of either the institutions or the individual capacities.

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[11] For a recent set of analyses, see Lieberman, Mettler, and Roberts, *Democratic Resilience*.

Thomas Bartscherer: A starting point for the conversations that generated our volume was Edmund Morgan's book *Inventing the People*, especially his notion that "the success of government requires the acceptance of fictions." His idea of fiction has been central to a lot of our discussions.

With regard to popular sovereignty, the idea that there is a people in a substantive sense, and that the people can and should govern itself, is an example of what Morgan means by a fiction. And Morgan argues that when the gap between fact and fiction grows too great, the efficacy of that fiction can collapse. Can we think of self-governance, as you put it, or popular sovereignty, as a constructive fiction? And what is its status in contemporary liberal democracies?

Hahrie Han: This question about fiction is essentially tied to the question about hope. Part of the reason why we need this fiction of self-governance, or this fiction of a "people," is because we need hope that we can reach that goal which we haven't yet. I think that matters at a macro and a micro level.

In the movement work that I do, one of the questions we ask is about how you motivate people to take action. One thing I always tell organizers is that people are not dumb. People know when you're asking them to do something useless, and people know when you're asking them to do something meaningful. If you really want to draw people into action and do so in a way that is going to help build a movement, then draw them into actions that are tied to this sense of hope. In the context of a movement, hope is often tied to some kind of strategy, or a story about how those actions are going to add to the kind of influence or change that people might care about. I think the same is true for this fight that we're having about democracy as well. We need the fiction in order to generate the hope.

There's a quote that I use a lot from the Jewish theologian Maimonides who says, "Hope is belief in the plausibility of the possible as opposed to the necessity of the probable." In *Prisms of the People*, part of what we're trying to do is to think about how we make the possible more plausible.[12] Doing research this way sort of flies in the face of the intellectual infrastructure of quantitative social science, which is built on probability theory. If X, then what is the most likely outcome Y? But we know that most movements fail. Yet we're nonetheless doing all this work, and trying to think about how we strengthen the ability of people to exercise their self-governing capabilities; we're trying to think about how we make more plausible this fiction of self-governance, of popular sovereignty.

I didn't become an academic because I wanted to be better at predicting all the negative outcomes out in the world. For sure, it's really important to understand how the world works. But I got into this work because I want to try to strengthen our ability to reach for these hopeful fictions that we have. I remember in grad school my advisor used to say, "The difference between you

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[12] Han, McKenna, and Oyakawa, *Prisms of the People*.

and me, Hahrie, is that I just want to understand how the world works and you want to make the world work better." And I was like, "Why wouldn't you want to make the world better?" It always just seemed so self-evident to me that this is what we should want.

But there is one thing about the word "fiction" that I would maybe nuance, which gets me to the second part of your question. I think there's a difference between the stories that we tell ourselves and the experience that people have of those stories. One of the fights that we're having right now in America is who gets to tell those stories. And part of what's been happening is that for so long, the stories that we've told ourselves about America have been told by a certain group and many people felt left out of that story. And so now, you see all these other voices coming and saying, "Hey, here's the story properly reinterpreted and understood."

And so, when I think about fiction, I think it's important to see it as a useful framework in tying us to the kind of hope and ideals that we're reaching toward. But it's not just the stories that we tell ourselves, but also the experiences that we construct for people. Part of why I'm so focused on this meso-level infrastructure is because that's where these experiences are constructed for and by people. They are sometimes constructed for people in places like the family, which reformers don't have any influence over. But we do have influence over how we construct our political system and civil society, and can create experiences in those places that make real – or don't make real – the stories that we're trying to tell.

Ewa Atanassow: I'd like to tie this notion of fiction and hope to the discussion about crisis and process. It seems to me that the pandemic we are witnessing is not only of Coronavirus but also of loss of meaning. There seems to be a loss or at least some kind of deficit of the stories that make political systems effective and credible and legitimate. It is interesting to try to understand where this deficit is coming from. But what you are putting on the table is that for self-government to work, we need the kind of stories that sustain hope on all levels of political life. This calls to mind Rogers Smith's chapter in this volume, and his claim that, while populism is problematic on many levels, it often succeeds in cultivating the capacity to produce such stories. These might not be the most attractive or inclusive or admirable stories, but they work in some ways and we should learn from them how to tell better ones.

Hahrie Han: Part of the reason why I think the fractal metaphor is important is because, as with movement organizing, there's no shortcut to justice or inclusion. I've learned a lot from my work with social movements and evangelical megachurches that have grappled with questions about multiracial solidarity. Justice and inclusion have to emanate from the ways in which we interact with each other, up to the movements that we create, up to the thing that we're trying to agitate for.

Impoverished notions of participation try to create shortcuts. The logic goes something like this: "Well, if we only got this outcome, if only we got this

institutional reform, if only we got this anti-poverty policy in place, then, everything else will take care of itself." Yet part of what we've learned throughout history is that it does not take care of itself. Yes, there are things to do from the top down and from the bottom up. But why I like that image of the fractal is that it creates a structure through which people have the experience of grappling with these thorny questions all the way through, even if there aren't clear answers that we come to at the end.

Ewa Atanassow: I'm still thinking about your teacher, who said that what he strove for was to understand while you wanted to improve things. This calls to mind Marx's eleventh thesis on Feuerbach which declares that, while the philosophers only interpret the world, the point is to change it. Coming from the Eastern European experience, I'm a bit skeptical of the changes Marx's interpretations managed to bring about. But I'm wondering if one way to sustain salutary hope is to stay on that edge between understanding and improvement and beware of separating them.

Hahrie Han: I love the idea of sitting on that edge and it just reminds me: I was talking to a colleague yesterday, who said something like: "I feel like I'm on the precipice of hope." And my response was: I don't think you can ask for more than that right now.