

The Critique of Co-Creation: Democratic Dialogue or Displaced Politics?

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It is difficult to place all the co-terminologies that have recently emerged in various debates about science, innovation and social change. Co-design and co-production are among the most prominent and most highly discussed examples. Both terms are, for example, used in the field of transdisciplinary sustainability studies to describe the moments in research when scholars and citizens define a shared problem or bring together diverse insights to shape solution pathways. In some visual depictions of transdisciplinary research, co-creation is literally at the centre of the encounter between actors in science and society (Jahn, Bergmann & Keil 2002). Moreover, in training documents and management schools, and practices such as Design Thinking, Agile Management or Theory U, co-creation refers to the very core of a collaborative process. But what does co-creation mean and, more critically, how to assess its political value?

Broadly speaking, co-creation can be seen as the practical expression of a collaborative trend in the corporate world, in public policy institutions and in environmental and science policy. In various discourses, it has become commonplace to argue that co-creation is necessary when dealing with complex problems. In addition, practitioners and researchers in fields like community organising or public participation refer to co-creation as a desirable ethos for collaboration. In a conventional understanding, co-creation often refers to the collaboration of heterogeneous actors from civil society, academia, policy and industry in shaping solutions to thorny problems relating to sustainability or innovation.

However, the specific definitions of the term strongly vary according to the respective sectors or fields of application. For example, there is a whole field of business scholarship that writes about value co-

creation, usually without touching upon the participatory procedures that scholars and practitioners in public policy seem to emphasise. In public administration as a field of practice and research, co-creation is seen as a way of citizen involvement in the implementation of public services (Brandsen & Honingh 2018, Voorberg et al 2015). The multidisciplinary of co-creation is also reflected in fragmented languages (Herberg et al. 2020; Ryszawska et al. 2021). The call for unifying definitions therefore seems naïve as it ignores the social differentiation of political discourse, which co-creation has increasingly become part of (cf. Brandsen & Honingh 2018). A more exploratory and revealing way to deal with this pluralism is to search for the diversity of origins and the practical applications of co-creation. This may lead to an ideal-typical understanding of co-creation, while allowing for critical discussions about the right conditions and best practices. In this keynote, I can only make an initial step in that direction.

What trend(s) do I assign to, and which biases do I encounter when using the co-terminologies? What are the promises and practices of co-creation? My contribution implies, but transcends, the knowledge dimension. By contrast, looking at transdisciplinary practices of knowledge generation, I want to trace the politics of co-creation. That is, I want to describe the conditions under which co-creation may be a good idea. Co-creative collaboration may be a way to tackle issues of public interest, or it may be a insincere trend of involving various voices while lacking accountability or lasting effects. I thus argue that, before becoming a co-creator, it helps to channel your inner social critic.

In the first section, I describe the practice and expertise behind co-creation. The second section deals with some of the origins of the co-creation discourse,

elaborating on the business and academic side. The third section discusses a critical context in recent knowledge economies: the discourse of creativity and networking. In the fourth section, I discuss the social spaces where co-creation takes place, while providing both a more optimistic and a more cautious reading. Finally, in section five, I argue that the co-creative trend represents a normatively open-ended wave of the creativity discourse that is focused on the distribution and design of public goods. Overall, then, the essay articulates a dissatisfaction with co-creation that, once explicitly described, can serve as a more solid foundation for transformative collaboration.

1. Why are we here? The practice of 'process expertise'

In communities of process facilitation, citizen participation and other practices, the term co-creation implies a certain practical wisdom. When collaborating with practitioners in the fields of Art of Hosting or Dynamic Facilitation, for example, I noticed how they keep returning to the same questions. These questions underlie a certain ethos that the practitioners seek when they assume an active role in the interaction process. Lately, throughout the many digital gatherings that took place during the Covid-19 pandemic, it became clear that a good meeting should start with shared clarity regarding why we are here. (see table below).

In my experience, these questions often hit the mark, as they help to counter a naïve collaboration set-up. They indicate a critical understanding of the fact that initiators, facilitators and participants of co-creative

processes often face intricate social conflicts or hidden power dynamics. Giulia Molinengo, Dorota Stasiak and Rebecca Freeth term this critical understanding from an ethnographic point of view as 'process expertise'.

Process expertise in the context of science-policy interfaces unfolds in interaction with other types of knowledge and fulfils its task by generating a weakly institutionalised 'in-between space', in which researchers and policymakers interact to find more inclusive ways of tackling complex challenges. (Molinengo et al. 2021, 1)

This knowledge comprises learnable skills, personal dispositions and a collective team effort. The authors argue that researchers specifically can bring a critical discussion to the backstage of participatory processes, can broker between diverse groups and can structure the combination of diverse insights and experiences. Co-creation is also a popular term in practical fields of change management and group facilitation, such as Theory U, Design Thinking, Deep Democracy, Art of Hosting and Dynamic Facilitation. What these approaches have in common is the idea that general conversations, business meetings and emancipatory processes of collaboration and participation need to be facilitated in a structured, dialogical and inclusive manner. Some practitioners in these fields earn a living by facilitating dialogical processes, or by acting as vendors for public or private participation processes. Practitioners can read handbooks, enrol in training and obtain certificates (as I have done) in order to become part of those co-creation communities. Certainly, the practices and communities of co-creation deserve critical scrutiny, and as I discuss in the following there have been initial critical publications in sociology and the field of Science and

Dimensions of co-creation	Aspects to look out for
Social: how?	Who should be there, who is missing? Whose resources? Whose rules? Whose language?
Spatio-temporal: where & when?	Placing and meaning of the site? Setting in the room? Temporal order and time pressure? Who is host, who is the guest?
Substantive: what?	What purpose? Which currency? Which moments of convergence?

Technology Studies (STS). Scholars in critical and interpretative policy analysis, in contrast, have often discussed co-creation in rather appreciative ways. Frank Fischer, for example, describes an emerging community of practice that embraces 'participatory expertise'. Jason Chilvers similarly speaks of 'deliberating competence' (2008), and Oliver Escobar sees a growing awareness for 'the micropolitics of public participation and deliberation' (2019), which co-creation is part of. Ryszawska and colleagues discuss co-creation and similar practices as exercises of 'participative leadership' (2021).

The more cautious insights in this literature often point towards the danger that participation – by being outsourced to businesses and/or by being defined and dominated by policy experts – itself becomes a technocratic practice. 'Process expertise', in this reading, may currently be in the process of becoming a mere political instrument or even an economic service and standardised product that can be bought and sold. For example, you may wonder if the recent fashion of citizen councils simply is a welcome opportunity for standardising politically risky and labour-intensive processes of citizen participation. Indeed, process facilitation is regularly outsourced to for-profit consultancy firms, and a frequent visitor will recognise the same standardised formats applied in very different contexts. Moreover, a number of sociological studies critically reframe co-creation on a micro-level. Practices such as participatory prototyping are described as performative and ambiguous enactments of technological futures (Dickel 2019), Design Thinking as a restored ethos of capitalist labor (Seitz, 2019), and dialogic approaches of change management as mere simulations of organizational openness (Kühl, 2020). This critical literature paints a picture in which co-creation pretends to be an emancipatory practice, but really fulfils the function of a figleaf for dominant power structures. The organizational setting of co-creative practice often is ambivalent, too: One STS group, which embraces the co-productionist tradition, recently argues that co-creation is part of a toolkit that transnational institutions such as the OECD or the EU use to mechanically mask the democratic deficits of innovation policy. In their reading, the laudable gesture of dialogue indirectly helps to stabilize market-liberal orders (Frahm et al. 2022). Others argue that the critique of a 'social deficit' generally lost its analytical footing as experimentalist forms

of collaboration and inquiry have long incorporated integrated viewpoints (Marres 2020): Co-creative processes may actually – by design or by chance – articulate issues and publics that cannot be explored by conventional analysis or policy making.

One thing that many observers remark upon is the peculiar language of co-creation and its tendency to mushroom into very diverse fields of practice – be it public policy-making or academic research. As Melanie Smallman has it in her abstract for a presentation at the recent gathering of the STS community (Society for the Social Studies of Science, 2021):

Like all the best epistemic imaginaries, co-creation eludes easy interpretation. Researchers have shown that for some, co-creation merely grants the cover of participation to business as usual. While for others, it opens up possibilities for radical collective knowledge making. But co-creation does other work too. It mobilises funding. It creates convening space for scholars, firms and civil society. (4S programme)

Academic terminology, management discourses and civic movements seem mangled up in a colourful discourse of collaborative culture. Yet, the term co-creation can easily become an empty signifier. Despite the difficulty of agreeing on its meaning (Voorberg et al 2015, Brandsen & Honingh 2018), it is certainly difficult to decline the invitation to co-create. The implied promise, after all, is very tempting: Conflicts supposedly are overcome, knowledge is integrated and solutions are found. Often the 'hosts' of a co-creative process even embrace the vagueness of co-creation as a pragmatic approach: the collaboration is intended to be open-ended and entirely context dependent. This way, even critical questions can be re-framed as welcome contribution to 'the process'. This emphatic openness can nonetheless add to discontent with co-creation. Understandably, participants may suspect that the undefined character leaves room for manipulation or false promises. The desire for solutions and collaboration, which characterizes the co-creation craze, may overshadow important problems or conflicts. Even the optimistic reader and the willing collaborator may thus see a growing need to come to terms with the underlying motifs and the potential consequences of co-creation. Such a critique, however, is not easy to place;

scholarly criticism may in fact become a ritual, in which social scientists affirm their position by distancing themselves from the pragmatic practitioner (Irwin et al 2013).

In the following, I give some initial pointers as to how the discontent with co-creation can be formulated in a meaningful way. This also implies that critics should not throw the baby out with the bathwater: where is the buzz around co-creation coming from? What are some of the historical contexts and political reasons behind its recent emergence? Where are co-creative principles being applied? What motives and effects resulting from co-creative practices might be worthwhile after all?

2. Where is co-creation coming from

Co-creation has multiple origins. Two specific contexts indicate how contradictory the term really is: the IT industry and interdisciplinary research. In both contexts, it is important to understand the historically specific culture and political economy that gives rise to the co-creation fad.

Management fads and spiritual roots

Firstly, the ethos of playful, media-based and solution-orientated collaboration is a defining feature of recent discourses about 'new work'. This ethos first developed in places where clusters of knowledge-based manufacturing and bohemian lifestyles overlap (Florida 2002). Especially in the IT industries of California, but also in other hotspots of the post-industrial economy in the late 20th century, creativity is not only seen as the desirable outcome, but also as a style of work. Media historian Fred Turner argues that the spiritual features of this fad – a do-it-yourself kind of productivity and a desire for radical transparency and non-hierarchical relationships – are a long-term off-spring of American counterculture (Turner 2006). Barbrook and Cameron (1996) famously referred to this connection between pop culture and capitalism as the 'Californian ideology': Emancipatory notions of creative (self-)development that emerged with the hippie communes of the 1960s have been commodified in and popularised through IT firms such as Atari, Apple and later Google and others. A current expression of this phenomenon is the Burning Man

festival, for example (Turner 2009). Recent knowledge economies and digital technology corporations have broadly institutionalized an ethos of 'new work' that ostensibly goes against linear ideas of planning and product development. It is not far-fetched to place those management trends – a widely accepted example is Agile Management – in this mixture of corporate identity and communal values. Co-creation, from this angle, not only stems from experiments of participatory democracy, but can also be seen as the expression of a post-industrial and highly competitive work culture. It is obvious to assume normative tensions between the call for democratic dialogue, on the one hand, and the economic and cultural origins of co-creation, on the other.

The underlying values of co-creation become concrete, for example, when agile managers argue against the linear mode of planning that they call 'the waterfall approach': The desired agility of collaboration is intended to counter any kind of hierarchical process that consists of sequential, conditional and regulated steps. The principles of bureaucratic organisations thus represent as a jump-off-point for co-creative practitioners to call for an 'organic' process of coordination. Also the idea of shared problem solving, which often is 'scaled-up' to large-scale issues such as war, climate change and space travel, is a historical line between 20th-century counterculture, the tech sector, and recent policy discourses. Critics of 'solutionism' recently address these and many other sectors, while often pointing out that dialogue is naïvely invoked as a panacea (Nachtwey & Seidl 2020, Herberg 2018, Pfothenhauer et al. 2017).

This also shows how contradictory co-creation is: despite anti-institutionalist and anti-utilitarian intuitions, co-creation is often seen as a management technique that everybody can learn in order to be efficient and solution-oriented. One of the most explicit examples that integrates these ideas is called Theory U, founded by management theorist and consultant Otto Scharmer at MIT. Organisational theorist Stefan Kühl sees Theory U as a short-lived and esoteric management fashion that 'conceals its reliance on purposive rationality' (Kühl 2020). According to Kühl, a rationalist and productivist concept of social action undermines the values it claims to support – be that the diversity of interests, the community value and/or the importance of functional differentiation as a

core idea of systems thinking (Kühl, 2020). In his response, Otto Scharmer (2020) points to the later work of theoretical biologists Maturana and Varela in order to highlight epistemological differences to sociological system theory. His interest lies with individuals and collective agency, with social change rather than institutional stability. These references, or the brief quotation of Schumacher's 'small is beautiful', indicate how Scharmer draws on countercultural intellectuals of the 1970s and 80s. Co-creation in Scharmer's theory is the opposite of 'self-destruction', leading to 'evolution' instead of 'trauma'. One of his more worldly goals according to a recent text on Trump's election successes, is to 'deepen democracy' in order to avoid the 'architectures of separation' that he attributes to 'post-democracy' (2020a). Scharmer cites practical applications in business consultancy, or sustainability and education policies in the UN and OECD (2020).

These multiple references in Theory U indicate that Kühl's critical intuition is instructive, but too focused on the organisational side. What are the political intentions and potential consequences of co-creation approaches? In a favourable reading, you could recognise a sense of responsibility, problem-solving capacity and procedural fairness that, according to co-creative practitioners, should be re-introduced to collaborative spaces. Scharmer and others like him may even want to counteract the methods of lobbying and bargaining that often dominate the interstices of policy, science and industry. Scharmer's mention of 'post-democracy' points in that direction. If this is the underlying intention, it is worthwhile to describe the problem statement more specifically. A further and even deeper criticism of co-creation would discuss the peculiar language that brims with organic metaphors: collaborative results are 'harvested', institutional environments are referred to as 'ecologies', and management processes are seen as 'regenerative flows'. What does it mean to describe public policy issues or political confrontations with the organic metaphors of natural harmony and balance? Which concept of responsibility and which space for conflict remains when political processes are depicted as an ecology? These questions point at some of the spiritual ideas that underpin approaches like Theory U: They combine systems thinking, spiritual reflection and notions of enlightenment. Disparate contexts such as German idealism (e.g.

Pestalozzi's distinction of head, heart and hand), anthroposophy (e.g. reference to Rudolf Steiner), cybernetic thought (e.g. autopoiesis in Maturana and Varela), North American counterculture (e.g. the ritual of conversing in a circle) and the recent platform economy (e.g. project management tools based on 'agile' methodology) have shaped the co-creation discourse. Sometimes co-creation language is even mixed with traditional forms of conflict resolution, for example, when the hosts at the global climate negotiations in 2017 speak of the Fijian tradition of *Talanoa* (Herberg 2017). This indicates that co-creation is a recent iteration of much deeper ideas. They go back to the internal contradictions of modernity, such as organic and mechanical forms of management and solidarity. Nevertheless, it can be said that the managerial understanding of co-creation makes an unjustified claim to democratic dialogue. It remains unclear how organic forms of change management contribute to the resolution of conflicts of interest, the formation of political will, or the legitimacy of democratic decision-making.

Co-terminologies in interdisciplinary research

A more distinct origin of the recent co-terminologies is academic and possibly less problematic: co-production is a term to describe collaborative processes, not only in recent sustainability studies, but also in a tradition of science and technology studies (STS) that Michel Callon (1999) and other scholars initiated in the 1980s and 90s. A little later, Sheila Jasanoff (2004) and other scholars introduced a form of so-called co-productionist STS that captures the constitutional interplay of the sciences and state institutions analytically. Co-production, in this school of thought, contradicts any linear understanding of political problem solving, scientific knowledge construction or science-society-policy collaboration. Silke Beck summarises that '(T)he analytic concept of co-production helps in recognising these implicit and often unintended framing effects of practical-procedural efforts to use co-production as a strategic instrument.' (Beck 2019, p. 191). In that view, STS is an approach to somewhat dismantle the co-creation discourse. Indeed, recent discussions among STS scholars are driven by a certain puzzlement about co-creation and co-production practices. When studying so-called living labs or other formats of innovation policy on a local level, scholars notice that the vocabulary of heterogeneous collaboration is

now part of the hegemonic policy discourses of our time (Engels et al. 2019, Beck 2019). What used to be a critical, or even subversive way to show the problematic involvement of scientific expertise in shaping public policy is now a method of stakeholder engagement. Scholars at recent STS conferences therefore wonder: how can researchers critically engage with self-proclaimed co-creative communities in policy-making, which apparently use the co-terminology to legitimate exclusive innovation policies? Both in industry and academia, co-creation may actually be an expression of moving political decision-making beyond the realm of democratic accountability. It may not necessarily be a toolkit for collectively shaping inclusive policies or questioning the underlying assumptions behind innovation policies. Specifically in STS, the idea of heterogeneous collaboration has always included prescriptive ideas about inter- and transdisciplinary research. That specific tradition of STS, which in the broader Zeitgeist since the 1980s was driven by a more human-centric and emancipatory approach to science and technology, has left a lasting impact in helping to establish the traditions of Mode-2 research (Limoges et al. 1994) or postnormal science (Ravetz 1999). The systemic thought and communal ideals behind these reform programmes indicate a potential overlap with the countercultural roots of co-creation. Co-production in STS, on the one hand, and co-creation in policy offices or corporate culture, on the other, are distinct, but closely intertwined practices.

The confusion is complete when co-productionist STS is used to study co-terminologies. Indeed, 'the co-production of co-creation' would have been a fitting title for the present contribution. Yet such a critique would likely be tautological. It would even worsen the danger of 'STS accounts run[ning] the obvious risk of reinforcing the very activities and tendencies they criticize' (Irwin et al. 2013, 133). This brings me to an important distinction that avoids an overblown criticism: on the one hand, there is the buzzword that practitioners legitimately use to frame their collaborative ethos. Vague language is a normal phenomenon, especially when unconventional collaborations are forged that would otherwise easily lapse into rigid battles over conceptual and thus cultural distinctions. Of course, when using the term 'co-creation', I want to know which trend I am subscribing to. Yet vague discourse and co-creation parlance can encourage

collective orientation and a generous mutual understanding. On the other hand, co-creation is often used to systematically describe, analyse or improve spaces of collaborative transformation. Excessive use of the phrase, in this context, can dismantle the whole project of establishing a culture of sincere collaboration. Sociological critique, but also political action needs to be specific and, more importantly, specific critique can become a basis for political action and scholarly engagement. It is therefore necessary to bring forth the critique that is underneath the co-creation fad. In the following, I give a reading of recent sociological theory that may serve this purpose.

3. Why does it matter? The post-Fordist background of co-creation

Be it in management or research, co-creation is part of a general 21st-century Zeitgeist that revolves around creativity and connectivity. The co-prefix indicates a relational emphasis, while the aspect of creation indicates a desire to be productive and original. The German sociologist Andreas Reckwitz (2018) claims that this desire – he even calls it the 'dispositif' of creativity – goes back to the notion of originality in artistic fields in early modern times (first wave), later shaping the 1960s and 70s counterculture as well as urban planners and creative industries in the 1980s (fourth wave). You can see yet another iteration of the creativity discourse in policies surrounding innovation and sustainability, where co-creation has become a popular term (Voorberg et al., 2015). In approaches to group facilitation, co-creation signifies the moments in a process when problems are solved, collective creativity is unleashed and a broadly humanist style of work and social life is nurtured. This set of values broadly overlaps with the 'new work' ethos, too. As Boltanski and Chiapello pointed out, the values of efficiency are replaced by a generalized need to remain flexible and adaptable (2005). While belonging to the creativity Zeitgeist, co-creation moreover is an expression of something that sociologist Urs Stäheli calls the 'connectivity bias' (own translation, Stäheli 2021). In times of ubiquitous social and digital networks, it is hard to resist the urge or even social pressure to connect. Raising one's voice to claim dialogical inclusion and

emphatically relating to broader discourses of recognition has arguably become the dominant register of societal integration. Stäheli indicates that even the idea of purposeful silence and disconnection, for example, during countryside retreats or digital-detox practices, are often formulated in the language of a society that is obsessed with self-styled identities and collective networks. Interestingly, both Reckwitz and Stäheli seem to depart from the observation that a significant amount of creativity and solidarity cannot actually thrive in a society that is obsessed with collective networks. They insinuate that true originality takes place when individuals or groups do not constantly affirm and recognise each other. Stäheli refers to this problem on the basis of Michel de Certeau's concept of 'tactics', which implies that even the effort to leave urban centres of the network society is a mere adaptation to, or even a passive acknowledgement of 'network fever' (Stäheli 2021, de Certeau 2011). Consequently, the project of transformative practices of co-creation would need to turn from 'tactics' to 'strategies'. That is, to reform, or break with the dominant conventions of collaboration requires more than another form of creative networking. In turn, this also means that discussions about a good life or about democratic reform can and should not be limited to local face-to-face encounters. Dialogue is not a panacea for large-scale political problems.

Reckwitz and Stäheli thus show how emancipatory discourses are embroiled with a dominant post-industrial culture. Yet, beyond this macro-sociological diagnosis, I argue that co-creation is not easy to evaluate from a normative and empirical standpoint. On the one hand, locally embedded collaborative spaces especially, which are currently being revived by citizen movements in various local and national settings, may actually be part of reconfiguring the democratic capacity for creative problem solving (Fischer 2017, Taylor et al., 2020). By contrast to more institutionalised arenas of deliberation, such as expert commissions or cross-sector policy platforms, you could argue that the ideas and/or coping-strategies which can be identified through co-creative processes may help to counter the zero-sum negotiation or the 'least common denominator – quality' of political deliberation and collaboration (Van Bommel et al. 2009). Yet, this requires more than collective creativity. Not only process expertise, as described by the co-creative researchers Molinengo, Stasiak and Freeth (2021), but

also a certain transformation expertise would need to be part of meaningful co-creation exercises.

I suggest that a couple of re-interpretations of co-creation are necessary for co-creative communities of practice to go beyond the shallow discourse of networking and creativity. One interpretation is presented in the following section: Co-creation is part of a broad trend that does not transform but culturally manifests the dispersion and fragmentation of political space. That is, the rise of in-between spaces motivates but, at the same time, undermines co-creative practices. In this context, two very different registers of normative social theory can be applied, which I outline below.

4. What are the spaces of co-creation? The in-between is everywhere

Co-creation does not take place in some sort of vacuum. If proponents are serious about the need for collaborative governance and transformative change, it is helpful to understand change processes in the context of differentiated fields of action. Field sociologists, most prominently Pierre Bourdieu, present social space as a set of fields of action that shape the language, rules and conventions of cooperative or conflictual interactions (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992). From this perspective, you can see co-creation as part of a proliferation of cross-sector collaboration, participatory arenas and interdisciplinary terminologies. This observation can be related to transdisciplinary research (Vilsmäier et al. 2017), to local environmental change (Schneidmesser et al. 2021), or to a broader conception of political space that sees co-creation as part of the 'ecologies of participation' (Chilvers et al. 2018). That is, the collaborative practices, which are supposed to re-integrate policy and expertise with 'affected communities', take place in between various and increasingly dispersed spheres of power and discourse.

Whether co-creation is a good idea in this context, however, depends on one's diagnostic stance: if you see the proliferation of in-between spaces as a problem of the post-Fordist economy, you may be more sceptical. If you see it as an opportunity for democratic reform, you may be more optimistic. This the-

oretical and normative yardstick may even serve the search for a better practice: the proponents of co-creation, in my observation, have a genuine intuition about the need to understand in-between spaces in a broad sociological sense. Otto Scharmer in his public speeches even uses the term post-democracy, agile management starts with a critique of bureaucratic hierarchies, and Design Thinking is often meant to subvert the blueprint solutions of policy and planning. However, such critical intuitions need to be more explicit and they should involve a self-critical take on the limitation of local change management in order to truly inform political action.

Co-creation as promoting 'creative democracy'?

A good starting point to discuss the optimistic reading of co-creation is an essay called 'creative democracy' that John Dewey wrote at the age of 80. Originally delivered as a speech on Dewey's birthday dinner by the philosopher Horace Kallen, the essay reminds the audience of democracy as an open-ended and personal project, or even as the new frontier of American civilization. The sweeping exploitation of resources, the institutionalization of political life and the contemporary contexts of Nazism according to Dewey require the intensified cultivation of collective creativity. The limitations of American society and 'the task before us' did not primarily seem physical, but mostly moral in nature. Dewey therefore sought to "get rid of the habit of thinking of democracy as something institutional and external and to acquire the habit of treating it as a way of personal life (...)". This can be read as a plea for a deeply collaborative culture to become a moral underpinning of democratic life. If institutions and daily encounters would promote experiences of collective problem solving, democracy would be firmly rooted in daily life. Dewey even prioritizes the process as such: "(d)emocracy is the faith that the process of experience is more important than any special result attained" (ibid.)

The more elaborate version of this thought, including the role of scientific knowledge in this context, is described in 'the public and its problems':

The essential need, in other words, is the improvement of the methods and conditions of debate, discussion, and persuasion. That is the problem of the public. We have asserted that this improvement depends essentially upon free-

ing and perfecting the processes of inquiry and the dissemination of their conclusions. Inquiry, indeed, is a work which devolves upon experts. But their expertness is not shown in framing and executing policies, but in discovering and making known the facts upon which the former depend.... It is not necessary that the many should have the knowledge and skill to carry on the needed investigation; what is required is that they have the ability to judge of the bearing of the knowledge supplied by others upon common concerns. (Dewey & Rogers, 208-209)

Be it the prioritization of the process, the appeal to collaborative culture or the inventive methods of deliberation – many democratic principles that undergird the co-creation discourse today arguably go back to pragmatist thought in the tradition of John Dewey (Dewey & Rogers, 2012) or Mary Follett (1924), as they have been elaborated in secondary literature at length (Caspary, 2018, Marres, 2007). Contemporary approaches of course also transcend Dewey, particularly when it comes to science-society dialogues. From a recent standpoint, he maintained a relatively orthodox view on epistemic authority that preserves the status of scholars as the primary creators of the democratic knowledge base. Although his biographer Robert Westbrook argues that Dewey's principles were not implemented in mainstream liberalism (Westbrook 1991), they certainly were generalized, simplified and translated across ideological and political scales and contexts. Especially, the recent trend towards political inclusion in the making of scientific knowledge and institutional policies is a long-term descendent of pragmatist theories of democracy.

Today, the idea of democratising democracy can arguably be recognized in recent applications of citizen councils, or other forms of participatory democracy. There are indications that these concepts have reached a high institutional level of national and international governance, while co-creation is often used as a practical term to promote this process in practice. Beyond parliaments and institutions, the German government, for example, launched an online hackathon at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, a concept based on solution-orientated collaboration that goes back to the IT sector and other fields where co-creation is part of everyday

parlance. Against this background, non-critical practitioners of co-creation could see themselves on top of a positive trend. Moreover, co-creation in political institutions was recently promoted by scholars and politicians that promoted 'citizen councils' in order to improve the responsiveness of political institutions and to institutionalise formats of participatory governance. Most prominently going back to John Dewey and Jürgen Habermas, and more recently adopted by Patrizia Nanz and Claus Leggewie (2019) and many others, public consultation formats and other 'democratic innovations' are supposed to re-connect deliberative public discussions with institutional decision-making (Smith 2009, Escobar et al. 2014, Escobar 2019, Fischer 2017).

In this tradition, co-creation can be seen as an ethos for reviving, or even re-democratising in-between spaces. However, the knowledge economy that I related to co-creation in the previous section also problematises this optimistic reading. Jürgen Habermas himself has lately revisited his take on the structural change of the public against the backdrop of platform media. While an increased fragmentation of social space calls for even more deliberative politics, he is more sceptical and sees the alleged community effects of the internet as colliding with his vision of deliberative dialogue (Habermas 2021). He uses the term '*Entgrenzung*' (displacement) to argue that the communication technologies of the knowledge economy do not act in synergy with the aspiration to democratise democracy, but are rather used as a means for commodifying public discourse. Digital intermediaries arguably control the responsive dialogue between various publics and political arenas. This may seem unrelated at first, but is puzzling when looking at co-creative practices: the very methods that originated in the context of the IT sector – be it Theory U or Design Thinking – are propagated as tools for direct and solution-oriented democratic dialogue. However, co-creative practices are unlikely to counteract the post-democratic developments that they are part of.

Co-creation as promoting post-democracy?

In the expanded view presented above, co-creation is an ambitious experiment, to say the least. Dewey himself already maintained in 'the public and its problems' that industrial societies are overwhelmed with a plurality of political spaces:

There is too much public, a public too diffused and scattered and too intricate in composition. And there are too many publics, for conjoint actions which have indirect consequences are multitudinous beyond comparison, and each one of them crosses the others and generates its own group of persons especially affected with little to hold these different publics together in an integrated whole. (Dewey 2012, 137)

Even Dewey, the eternal optimist, realised that the diffusion of politics beyond formal democratic institutions can overpower the capacity of local groups to solve their immediate problems, or the capacity of institutions to develop fair and effective regulations. This diagnosis seems very current. Noortje Marres, by combining pragmatist theory and STS methodologies, has coined the term 'displaced politics' to discuss how the boundaries and responsibilities of political spaces become blurred: displaced politics takes place '(...) when power goes unchecked by institutional mechanisms of democratic control.' (Marres 2005, 5-6). Many commentators before and after have pointed out such processes, for example, Ulrich Beck's notion of '*Entgrenzung*' (Beck 2002), or more recently Colin Crouch (2004), who argues that transnational markets undermine national democracies. The political theorist Pierre Rosanvallon (2018) claims that the often-discussed crisis of legitimacy is also related to a lack of proximity and responsiveness between elected and electorate. In this context, it is not easy to see if co-creation is the solution or part of the problem.

There are at least two post-democratic tendencies that can be observed. First, co-creation often comes hand in hand with an issue of representation. The call for co-creative processes often starts with the realisation that the democratic systems of representation through elected officials and democratically legitimated institutions do not always represent the underlying societal diversity. Democratic representation in the form of elections is itself in crisis due to increasing institutional complexity, e.g. in the European Union (Kamlage & Nanz, 2017), and societal pluralisation and the trend for presidential or even authoritative leadership (Rosanvallon, 2018). Especially in conflictual and dynamic transformation processes, there is often still the need to open up decision processes to the voices of affected communities. Yet, once co-creative processes are set up to complement

democratic institutions, another issue emerges: the space in between the respective fields – which can be problematized as a post-democratic zone – mostly lacks the institutional facilities and normative underpinnings that would stabilise the collaboration and legitimise the contribution to democratic processes (Herberg et al. 2020). In the absence of a democratically reflected ethos of facilitation, however, co-creative processes may even reiterate the problem of misrepresenting particular interest groups. The participants that were selected to contribute may not be held accountable in front of the groups that are most affected by the co-created results. Moreover, involved partners have little basis to trust the procedural justice of a rather spontaneous or emergent co-creative process; they may fear that the results are not subject to the same checks and balances as democratic institutions. It is therefore necessary to problematise the emergence of in-between spaces, while encouraging a more acute awareness for the practice of practitioners assuming an active role to promote democratic spaces of collaboration.

The second post-democratic aspect of co-creation is the creativity discourse itself, which originates in the history of the discourse about knowledge economy. Clearly, the inclusive connotation of co-creation is co-opted by the priority for cognitive work, for original thinking, or even some sense of individual genius or ‘wisdom of the crowds’. As has been observed with regard to Design Thinking (Seitz, 2019) maker-spaces (Dickel, 2019) and Theory U (Kühl, 2020), co-creative practices – despite their organic language – often endorse a non-reflexive, rationalist and teleological approach to solving collective problems. This is not only an internal contradiction and therefore a regrettable feature of practical life. The links between co-creation and the knowledge economy are even more troublesome when considering the places where they come together: The very context that gave rise to recent ‘new work’ discourses had manifest effects in accelerating socio-economic disintegration, for example, the deindustrialisation and the deinstitutionalization of local solidarity structures in places like the Rust Belt in the US (Gaventa 1982, 2019) or coal regions in Germany (Haas et al. 2022). The political result, more often than not, are disaffected communities and, in relation to dis-appointment and political apathy among affected groups, a breeding ground for right-wing populism

(Haas et al. 2022, Gaventa 2019). The resulting ‘rebel regions’, as historian Anton Jäger (2021) recently coined them, are unlikely and, in practice, extremely challenging places for experiments of transformative dialogue. The lesson of this contradiction does not only apply on industrial workers, but also on other vulnerable groups: it is difficult to imagine that the communities that do not benefit from the knowledge economy can be re-integrated by means of approaches like Theory U or Design Thinking. Processes of displaced politics produce disaffected communities that cannot easily engage in practices of co-creation. There are alternative approaches, for example the work of John Gaventa, that take local experiences as a starting point and link local knowledge structures to the political economic legacies of a particular place (Gaventa 2019). But, these approaches do not run under the discourse of co-creation and borrow their practices from civic engagement rather than the knowledge economy.

5. What to do with the critique of co-creation? A fifth wave of creativity

In this essay, I have positioned myself as a friendly critic of co-creation. Against the societal and theoretical backdrop discussed above, co-creation can be seen in a more or less critical way: It may either amount to a countervailing force that can act against the trend of displacing power beyond democratic institutions and local communities. Co-creation may thus be a practice of re-democratising the interfaces of science, policy and concerned publics. Approaches such as Art of Hosting or Design Thinking possibly provide a practical ethos that is necessary for governance processes to fulfil their inclusive promise. At worst, when the previously described pitfalls and internal contradictions are not acknowledged, co-creative settings can escalate into post-democratic zones: process facilitators may take unwarranted power, co-creation language may exclude the losers of the knowledge economy, or policy makers may borrow local legitimacy without providing transparent mechanisms of accountability.

In that sense, I argue that the jury is still undecided on the political value of co-creation. As a way of concluding the essay, I suggest that we are faced with an

open-ended development that requires practical experimentation and analytical scrutiny. More pointedly, I argue that we are dealing with a fifth wave of the creativity imperative (Reckwitz 2018), which can be shaped and re-directed by a combination of thoughtful critique or radical practice. This wave is and should be markedly different from previous waves: in contrast to the specific design or labour-orientated focus of previous debates of post-Fordist work, parts of the current practices of co-creation are directed towards the just organisation of public goods. Especially the locally embedded collaborative spaces, which are currently being revived by citizen movements, can be part of reconfiguring the democratic capacity for creative problem solving. Yet, the political variant of the creativity imperative requires a constant normative discussion and a correspondingly grounded practical ethos. Practitioner communities and social scientists may therefore take co-creation as a platform for a practical dialogue about political cleavages and emancipatory practices. This has been my main argument in this essay: If one decides to embrace the co-creation as a researcher or practitioner (or both), the respective ethos of transformative collaboration clearly requires a foundation in sociological critique.

This critical remark is also meant for the practitioners of co-creation. Beyond 'process expertise' (Molinengo et al 2021), co-creative practice must be based in transformation expertise. That is, practitioners need a critical understanding of transformations and social structures that underlie the need for collaboration and inclusion. In my experience thus far during professional training and co-creative exercises, many critical questions are frequently not discussed, or even avoided among co-creation communities such as Theory U, Art of Hosting, Dynamic Facilitation and Design Thinking. What does it mean to strive for collective problem solving – who is the collective, what is the problem, and who is responsible for solving it? Moreover, how subversive or transformative is co-creation really? When the demand to be creative, connected, and agile has long become a dominant societal pressure, the language of co-creation hardly is transformative; it can even impede meaningful dialogue with those who cannot or will not meet the creativity imperative. These and other similar questions should not be seen as signs of shallow scepticism or rigid refusal. Rather, co-creative practice can be built around political critique in order to be more

transformative. Practitioners can therefore benefit from the exchange with political theory and sociological observation, while social researchers should engage more openly with the ambiguity that is inherent in co-creative practice.

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