Editorial Introduction

Governance for the Human Future:
The Centrality Of Dialogue

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Anxiety, Optimism, and Unease

Today, there is an ever present anxiety about the failures in the practices of representative democracy. As observable in the current global political turmoil, the electoral process in many parts of the world is fraught with rivalry, antagonism, corruption, manipulation, and other deep-seated problems. To move away from such a political impasse, scholars and researchers have proposed to revisit the governance 'turn' starting three decades ago (Boussaguet, Dehousse & Jacquot 2011). The burgeoning intellectual curiosity and academic interest at the time was part of the continued effort to reconceptualise a new form of governance, not based on voting, but centred on dialogue.

Integrating dialogue in governance has the promise of engaging diverse actors and stakeholders and involving multiple perspectives in collective decision making through consensus. This is regarded as one of the major characteristics of participatory democracy – an inclusive and collaborative approach for all to take part in the political process (Gill & Thomson, forthcoming). With emerging practices, such as the cooperative movement, Barcelona's participatory governance model, the worldwide citizens assemblies, and Climate Assembly in the UK, there is a growing optimism in the possibility of co-creating a better future through dialogue and collaboration.

Whilst recognising the need for an inclusive and consensus-based approach to policymaking, there is at the same time an unease about the theory's naivety, owing to

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the seeming unfeasibility of the practice. Many have cast doubt on humans' collective capacity to *do politics* together. Amongst the typical objections are that people tend to be too selfish, lazy, ignorant, aggressive, unmotivated, and easily persuaded, for dialogue to be meaningful for them. Moreover, there are too many people with too diverse opinions and too unreconcilable interests to make consensus possible (Menser 2018).

There are more serious concerns around how institutions can be structured and engaged in participatory governance. Which institutions could facilitate public dialogue? How might these dialogue practices be implemented through the different institutions in order to co-ordinate inclusive and harmonious consensus building? What institutional processes should be put in place to carry forward the public-generated decisions and public-proposed policies?

The Need for Systemic Transformation

Humanity is facing 'polycrisis' in the words of French thinker Edgar Morin (1999). Morin also suggests that the global economic and political systems themselves have aggravated the crisis in multiple directions. These systems also tend to inhibit the emergence of new socio-economic and political structures that can transcend traditional institutional boundaries and that can enable people, communities, and organisations to participate in decision making that affects the well-being of all. An obvious path forward starts from re-imagining good governance.

However, it has been less obvious until now that what is required is, in effect, a much desired shift from the control by *government* (i.e., the state and other formal institutions) to an open-ended, multi-layered participatory process and collaborative approach to *governance*. In other words, this is not an attempt to widen inclusion and participation, nor an innovation to improve government, not even a proposal to reform existing institutions. Instead, what is demanded is a total reset and a systemic transformation.

What might constitute such systemic transformation? Questions about the necessary conceptual arguments and their practical implications come from all directions. Understanding what is truly desirable and possible for participatory governance has helped move research to beyond merely diagnosing what is wrong in the current systems. New ideas take such forms as inspirational politics, humanising economy, and positive peace (Gill & Thomson 2019). Given that governance is at the heart of the new conceptualisations, the intellectual leaning has consistently been towards the definition of governance as a process of coordination and facilitation to enable collective decision making at different levels (see Levi-Faur 2016). In this sense, an innovative conception of governance concerns *what people can do together*. This is in

contrast to the traditional definition of governance that is about what *the governments should do*. When understanding governance as coordination and facilitation of decision making, scholars and researchers in the related fields then recognise that we must reconceptualise dialogue and consensus in the light of its myriad potentials in participatory democracy.

Innovative Conceptions of Governance

Theoretically, to advance this shift from government to governance, there should be a concern as to firstly what constitutes good governance and secondly what should characterise the processes of governance thus conceived.

To advance a conception of good governance, it requires a normative understanding of the *good* in this context. At a most fundamental level, the good ought to consist in the primary non-instrumental value of the person, including human life and our well-being (Gill & Thomson, forthcoming). This valuable nature of all persons should count towards human dignity, and thus human equality, that is, all persons are equally non-instrumentally valuable. In recognising this primary good, we can see that good governance must prioritise, as central in the political agenda, the good life and well-being of all, or the common good.

This leads to our second concern. Good governance that aims to serve the common good of collective human well-being ought to characterise the political process as involving, at a basic level, the equal, inclusive participation of all. In this regard, there are two associated recognitions. On the one hand is the acknowledgement of and respect for people's self-identifications. This leads to the rejection of using identity designations as criteria for political participation, be it citizenship, place of origin, and other social categories. All should have the opportunity to participate in the political process equally. On the other hand, and more importantly, is the understanding of equality of all persons that can help us disclose the fallacy of separating people into categories of the *governing/governor* and the *governed*. When we are all equal in a primary sense, there cannot be some who rule over others.

Therefore, the notion of the equal value of all persons not only helps establish the good that governance process ought to promote, but it can also, at the same time, challenge the power hierarchy in politics and repudiate any form of instrumentalisation of persons (e.g., through manipulation, discrimination, alienation, marginalisation, and even persecution). It also characterises governance as involving dialogue and listening to the voices of diverse stakeholders in reaching consensus on strategies towards nurturing the collective good life and well-being.

The Centrality of Dialogue

With increased use of the word 'dialogue' in governance, its meaning can sometimes be reduced to tokenism, such as allowing some people to have a say, rather than enabling full and meaningful political participation. The centrality of dialogue in good governance thus requires deeper exploration.

What innovative conceptions of dialogue might be put forward? How should we understand the rich meanings of dialogue in participatory governance and in implementing public policies for the common good? What kinds of dialogue should be involved, and how might such dialogue contribute to consensus? What does consensus look like and how is it achieved? Likewise, how might dialogue transform conflict rooted in the divergent interests and needs of stakeholders and transcend the tensions in the myriad ideas and perspectives voiced by the multiple actors?

Furthermore, how might meaningful dialogue in participatory governance enable us to launch collective inquiry and raise good questions that interrogate the structural conditions of socio-economic and political systems? What are the dialogue processes necessary to contest postulations underlying the practices of public institutions at all levels? And how might the different power and cultural dynamics play out during dialogue when reflecting on the need for systemic transformation?

The Special Issue

The *Journal of Dialogue Studies* has taken up these contemporary topical challenges and questions by inviting this Special Issue. The papers are selected by their theoretical robustness, methodological originality, and diverse contexts of case studies. Despite grappling with conceptual, methodological, contextual, and practical complexity, these papers can be viewed as a coherent whole in their intention to advance innovative ideas and unfold the promise of dialogue in participatory governance, and in their critical analyses of lessons drawn through research and reflection.

The theoretical strengths are evident in all the papers. For instance, Garrett Thomson argues for the different kinds of dialogue necessary for participatory decision making, and what constitutes consensus. This includes a distinction between the formal dialogue process and informal trust building to enable the possibility of meaningful consensus. Thomson's proposal is echoed and further illustrated by Alexandre da Trindade and Fábio Merladet's paper that conceives, through a Freirean lens, dialogue as both a path to help the community to reach decisions in congenial ways and an inherent condition for human's relational being. Drawing on the Popular University of Social Movements (UPMS) meetings in Latin America as illustrative analyses, da Trindade and Merladet bring to life Paulo Freire's conception of dia-

logue as social praxis – from naming the problems in the world towards transforming the world.

To such theoretical force, Carolina Nvé Díaz San Francisco expands on the notion of culture of dialogue by drawing on the experiences of pro-democratic actors in Equatorial Guinea and its diaspora; whilst Saiyyidah Zaidi adopts the perspective of human flourishing to examine the subtle differences between dialogue and conversation. These add layers of complexity to our understanding of the part that dialogue can play in governance.

The conceptual developments in this Special Issue are further complemented by papers that take the opportunity to challenge the limitations of the existing understanding of dialogue, and/or draw on other theories to critique the inadequacy of the theoretical foundation needed to support the emergent dialogue practices in different governance settings. Take the governance of public health as an example. Tineke Abma and Barbara Groot argue that an innovative conception of dialogue is required to go beyond its rational base and epistemic insensitivity and injustice. In doing so, dialogue is conceived as in part an ethic of caring that enables both embodied and storied understanding, whilst taking into account the relational nature of health in decision making. This conception of dialogue in participatory health governance in the Netherlands helps address the power imbalance in collective decision making and prevents the voices of the vulnerable from being silenced. Likewise, the limit of standard conceptions of dialogue is further challenged by Medha Bisht from an Asian/Indian cultural perspective. Bisht proposes a conception of dialogue by infusing and integrating narrative in the dialogic process. This reflects an Asian understanding of the relational nature of strategies setting when engaging in dialogue, for example, about the River Ganges' water management. In a similar vein, Ali Moussa Iye reflects on the endogenous conception of dialogue in governance from the perspectives of traditional African nomadic societies, in contrast to and alongside contemporary conceptions of dialogue as applied in national political processes within the African continent and in trans-national processes amongst international organisations.

This tension continues throughout the Special Issue between the seemingly 'universal' conceptualisation of dialogue which undermines the particularities of cultural, economic, and political contexts, and the highly localised understanding which has limited resonance elsewhere.

There are also illuminating analyses of the structural obstacles to overcome in order to embrace dialogue in governance. Taking a post-structural feminist perspective, Talia Esnard accentuates the need to be aware of the power structures and discourses in public policy dialogue. This leads to the recognition of the importance of inclusiv-

ity, visibility, and equity for empowering women entrepreneurs in public policy making. Bringing in quality of life and human flourishing as an evaluative criterion, Esnard's critical analysis weaves the political economy and social structures within the challenges of public policy design and implementation in the Caribbean. Owen Logan, Martyn Hudson, Alex Law, and Kirsten Lloyd interrogate the part that arts, aesthetics, and cultural and emotional experiences play in defining the public interest dialogically. In doing so, they advocate for equality and pluralism in participatory governance whilst pointing out the main blockages and impediments (political, institutional, and professional) to the integration of dialogue and participation in cultural governance in the UK. Mike Hardy and Uroosa Mushtaq's literature review introduces further food for thought by raising our awareness of intercultural dialogue's contribution to trust building and transforming tensions and conflicts at multiple levels, hence the need for continued 'dialogue on dialogue'. Using the global social movements as case in point, they outline the important role leadership can play in facilitating and coordinating horizontal dialogue for solidarity, and vertical dialogue for institutional change.

These conceptual discussions and case studies further serve as the backdrop to allow analyses on the communities' struggle for the opportunities of equal political participation. Sneha Roy's paper illustrates how identity-based and emotion-driven politics engineered by the Modi government can make equal inclusive dialogue and collaboration of Muslim and other minorities in Indian politics feel like a conceptual and practical illusion.

In a most substantive analysis, Simon Lee reflects on grassroots dialogue in Northern Ireland (NI) thirty years on, focusing on the theoretical underpinning of NI approach to dialogue, exploring how it had worked then, and drawing insights into the experiences of NI dialogue. These are hugely relevant to this Special Issue's concerns of dialogue in good governance. In particular, Lee emphasises the value of inclusive listening in dialogue (i.e., involving people from both sides of the conflict, especially those who feel that they are undervalued) which is by way of an invitation to the process of the formation of relationships. This is because the narrator and the listener are bound in a mutual-witnessing relationship, where trust, esteem, and caring can be cultivated. Listening itself is an act of parity of esteem, a recognition of the equal value of all persons. In listening, we can transcend the binary of us-vs-them whereby the dialogue can become a relational flow. He also highlights the importance of giving due space for the voices of memory but leaving open a space for imagining a common future. Above all, the NI experience advances the need for fully integrating dialogue in governance, that is, 'let the dialogue seep into the mainstream of thinking about ways forward'. This includes the recognition that good governance involves people making decisions for themselves towards the common good.

Governance for the Future of Humanity

Taking the Special Issue as a whole, the papers have indeed unveiled new vistas of theory and practice. They not only stress the centrality of dialogue in participatory governance, but they also identify specific relational practices that can help scaffold the dialogic participation, consensus, and trust, including the attention to inclusive listening, the recognition of multiple perspectives, the respect for the voice of all participants, the responsibility for and commitment to congenial relational bonds, and so forth. As highlighted, dialogue is not just a practice, a governance process for participatory decision making, a pathway towards collaborative consensus making, dialogue reflects, above all, the relational being that we are (Gadamer 1975).

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