



**The Democratic Imagination: Envisioning Popular Power in the Twenty-First Century.** By James Cairns & Alan Sears. North York, ON: Toronto University Press, 2012. 211 pp. ISBN 9781442605282 (pbk).

The communication scholar or student interested in contemporary debates on democracy may find some interesting food for thought in Cairns and Sears' *The Democratic Imagination*. The book is positioned as an effort to open up the notion of democracy, prompting readers to “define for themselves what characterizes meaningful democracy” (p. 4). As individuals, we are told that we need to rethink democracy in relation to our everyday life: how would we learn, work, and structure our personal relations if we were indeed committed to acting democratically in everything we do? As we ask these questions, the authors hope our collective understanding of democracy may be expanded, leading to a renewed engagement with and commitment to protecting genuine, grassroots democratic movements. The central argument revolves around the idea that democracy has become a rigid yet empty denominator: while we all agree that democracy is inherently positive, we are unhappy with how contemporary democratic arrangements have turned out. This paradox both prevents us from questioning democracy and stymies political engagement.

The solution, as advocated by Cairns and Sears is for individual readers to embark on a critical interrogation of this notion, and the book, meant to serve as a guide, showcases the kind of questions that could be asked of democratic arrangements in all aspects of human life. In so doing, *The Democratic Imagination* could be good material for class discussions and knowledge dissemination. Beyond sensitizing us to the question of how our lives would look if we were to act democratically in everything we do, the book's scholastic contribution to understanding the mechanisms and constraints of democratic practices remains, at best, elusive.

The second chapter of *The Democratic Imagination* opens with the inevitable attempt to define democracy, proposing a simplistic dichotomy between “official democracy” and “democracy from below.” Official democracy is described as the traditional assortment of rights and policies that characterize liberal states: specific freedoms (e.g., of the press, of thought) and systems for electing representatives who govern on behalf of the citizens. In contrast, democracy from below is defined as “collective self-government of all members” (p. 7), where decisions are made “by those who will be affected by choices about how to organize social life” (p. 14). Importantly, democracy from below involves forms of self-government that extend way beyond traditional political arenas. In Chapter 3, several such arenas of self-government are outlined: work, school, and other social arenas (the authors include here family life, sexual relationships, sports, theatre, etc.). Unfortunately, the promise of this argument is not fulfilled. The authors merely introduce the question of the consequences of

self-government for the organization of social life without analyzing the implications or considering the barriers to achieving an appealing vision of self-government. The question of how we may achieve self-government at work or in school is interesting, but merely asking the question does not achieve much. It is not that we, as citizens, do not ponder these questions, it is that we often find ourselves in conflict with other citizens, or in a position of powerlessness, and the book remains silent on this. How can we achieve self-government given the structural constraints we face? How can we deal with institutions that have stripped us of the power to influence decision-making mechanisms? How can we confront legal systems that protect the status quo? What forms of struggle are available in this context? Furthermore, is self-government without problems? The call to democratize from below is inspiring, but, without an understanding of structural limitations or a suggestion about how to achieve self-government, the concept is empty.

The most interesting section of Chapter 2 considers whether democracy could be a form of government in the realm of economic exchange. The authors do a nice job of dismantling the myth that capitalism is the only economic system compatible with democratic political arrangements. In fact, capitalism and democracy cater to different needs: the first is interested in profit making, while the second focuses on equality and inclusiveness. Being profit-driven, capitalism leads to inequality and exclusion, so to be compatible with democratic goals, capitalism needs to be democratized from below, allowing public control of economic resources and means of production. Yet again, the book fails to deliver, stopping short of launching into a serious investigation of this possibility.

The next three chapters continue the case for self-government in relation to citizenship, voting and state bureaucracy. The thrust of the argument here is that citizenship, politics, and bureaucracy have become permeated by the “official democracy” paradigm: they are regarded as arenas of social life that are either under the control of elected representatives or meant to elect the representatives ruling on our behalf. Each chapter provides a brief historical overview of the emergence and institutionalization of its respective theme, concluding that we need to reimagine citizenship, voting and state bureaucracy as arenas to be administered by means of grassroots democratic processes. Representative politics (where citizens designate a politician who will rule on their behalf) and state bureaucracy are presented as intrinsically inimical to democracy from below. From the grassroots perspective, politics and the bureaucracy are a form of top-down domination that seeks to preserve a social order favouring the elites. Again, the chapters fail to provide a thorough analysis of the barriers faced by democracy from below, and, even more so than in other chapters, the discussion turns tangential (see the unclear discussion of post-structuralism and post-modernism in Chapter 4 or the rather messy discussion of gender and race in relation to bureaucracy in Chapter 5).

Chapters 6 and 7 engage with more abstract topics: the relation between democracy from below and knowledge/bodies advances a seemingly Foucaultian argument, but unfortunately, it neither makes an explicit theoretical contribution, nor provides an empirical perspective on these problems. Instead, Chapter 6 launches into a dis-

cussion of expertise, arguing that, while democratic government requires knowledge, this does not necessarily result in a deferral to expertise. Expert knowledge, the authors suggest, goes against democracy from below because it assumes that others know what is best for you. The authors recommend we become self-directed learners and critical thinkers. Chapter 7 seems even less focused in its take on the body: body politics, embodiment, bodies and violence, lean bodies and body images are all thrown into the mix, but the chapter fails to advance a clear argument, other than making a case for the centrality of physical bodies to politics. It mysteriously concludes by saying, “[d]emocracy might offer a richer model for these interactions” (p. 150), but exactly what this richer model might be or what specific interactions the authors had in mind remains unclear.

As the book ends, it almost feels as if the authors have run out of steam. The final chapter briefly glosses over the idea that the problem of contemporary politics is boredom, only to conclude that the struggles against official democracy continue and that other political arrangements are possible. Unfortunately, as the authors never explicitly and systematically engage with the structural constraints of contemporary democracies, this remains wishful thinking. If their goal was merely to get us thinking about our role within democracy, then the book has some merit.

For the communication scholar, the authors’ complete silence on ideology and manipulation, and on the intersections between media, culture and politics remain hard to forgive. Communication scholars have spent a lot of thought and ink on explaining how ideology reproduces the status quo and the interweaving of politics, media and identity. *The Democratic Imagination* is also silent on the implications of adopting democracy from below in various arenas of social life. It merely asks a set of questions to get us thinking about democracy, but without further explanation of the existing structural barriers and limitations of democracy from below, the book does not achieve its potential.

As scholar and a citizen, I have often pondered the tensions of democracy, and I do ask myself some of the questions that Cairns and Sears propose. In my opinion, the major barrier to democracy from below is our inability to recognize and deal with the conflictual nature of politics. The book remains silent on issues that are central to developing a thorough understanding of the problems and forms of democracy from below, the weapons used in this struggle (including ideology and the role of traditional and new media in mediating social relations) and the possibility of mediating between antagonistic interests. Democracy from below means navigating different groups with different agendas and power, and politics, as scholars have long noted, is an ongoing struggle.

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