Democracy in Meso-Level Institutions: Towards a General Framework

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I.   **Introduction**

Advocates of deepening democracy often stress the importance of democratizing the various institutions and associations that compose our economic and social lives\. Landemore describes this as a "lateral expansion" of democracy and suggests that "[m]any allegedly non-political institutions would probably benefit from such a lateral expansion of the scope of popular rule, including the army, the church, the university, hospitals, schools, and even families" (Landemore, 2020, 219-20). Similarly, in their outline of Rosa Luxembourg's socialist vision of democracy, Muldoon and Booth (2022, 10) suggest that democratization needs to go beyond the institutions of the state and include "corporations, economic regulatory institutions, schools, universities, the media, cultural institutions, the civil service and political parties."

Quite often calls for such lateral democratization are made in a generic way without details about what it would actually mean. Sometimes, they are made with a gesture toward the academic work on workplace democracy, since, for various reasons, the details of what democratization may mean for workplaces have been hashed out in greater detail. Besides workplace democracy, arguments for lateral extension can be found in work on democratizing universities, churches, unions, and political parties. However, academic work on this topic usually focus on what it would mean to democratize one type or another of such institutions, which has resulted in a kind of fractionalization of the scholarly literature.

The purpose of this article is to pose the more general question of what lateral expansion entails. We follow Mark Warren (2017) in understanding democracy to mean "empowered inclusion" but ask what inclusion means given the distinctive qualities of such institutional contexts. Many adopt a Westphalian understanding of meso-level institutions, where democratic space is divided into separate and autonomous self-governing units; democratic inclusion, on such a view, requires that membership grants the right to participate in this self-governance, and that most people are members of only one such unit. In contrast, we suggest that lateral democratization must be sensitive to the particular purpose of each organization and what it means for that purpose to be reinterpreted and deliberated upon in a more inclusive way.

Consequently, democratizing meso-level institutions is complex and will look different in different contexts. Democratization of any particular institution rarely entails the dramatic or revolutionary

removal of a tyrant and giving power to the people. Frankly, lateral democratization, we think, is a far more technical question than normally thought, requiring thinking through things that are not the stuff of manifestos or grand oratory. Nonetheless, we believe that lateral democratization, the building of a robust democratic infrastructure for society, is important and therefore the attention to the complex meanings of democratic inclusion in these contexts is important.

In a sense, we argue against thinking of workplace democracy as a model for lateral democratization to be imported to different institutional contexts. To be sure, there is nothing wrong with attempts to democratize the workplace or with the rich academic literature on the topic (of which we are proud contributors). The problem is that the rhetorical move of labeling certain structures as "democratic" glosses over various difficulties. In reality, the details of the actual existing models of worker-controlled businesses are very complex and the question of whether they are democratic is contentious (Stehr, 2022; Cockburn & Preminger, 2023). Or, consider an institution closer to home for many of us: the university. Making universities more democratic is important. But once we begin to consider the possible routes for making a university more democratic, the picture becomes murkier, so much so that it is easy to question the very goal of democratization (consider, as an illustration, calls for student control over curriculum and its tensions with academic freedom and professorial direction of scholarship). We believe that the goal of democratization is worthwhile and therefore sorting through the different possible meanings of democratization in the context of such institutions is important.

We begin in section two, by clarifying the relevant properties of meso-level institutions. We then seek to make two contributions. The first, which we pursue in section three, is to offer a broad map of the possible ways to conceptualize the meaning of democratizing meso-level institutions. We then turn to elaborate on the reason-based approach to democracy that we propose. To do so, we explore in the fourth section the sorts of reasons that are relevant for meso-level institutions, and then, in the fifth section, put together the different considerations into a general framework of democratizing such reasons.

II.   Approaches to Democratizing Meso-Level Institutions

In this section, we focus on the idea of meso-level institutions and discuss their key features.[1] Meso-level institutions differ from the institutions of the state in their being organized around a purpose, which the institution is trying to achieve – the pursuit of profit, the promotion of education, meeting housing needs, health care, etc. In complex societiest is beneficial that certain social ends be pursued in multiple ways, including through these more parochially oriented institutions. As we elaborate on later, this means that deliberating on what any institution ought to do, or how it ought to be governed, has to take its purpose as a starting point. We offer three key features of such parochial purpose-oriented institutions.

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[1] We use the term "meso-level institution" instead of "organization" or "association" to denote their relationship to other institutions. Put differently: we use the term to highlight their political and social nature, and to push against seeing them as mere aggregations of private persons.

Three Features of Meso-Level Institutions
The first feature of these institutions is that they operate between the formal apparatus of the state and the private sphere. Thus, on the one hand, they have a certain degree of independence from the government, especially in how they decide to organize themselves. They are not organs of government like the military or an independent agency (even though sometimes they have deep ties to government). Generally, membership in these institutions is voluntary and may be restricted based on criteria that are internal to the organization. On the other hand, these institutions are not fully private. They are outward-facing to a significant degree in that the mission that they pursue is part of a social division of labor.

The second feature of meso-level institutions is that they operate according to shared norms, which can be subject to reasoned deliberation, reflection, and modification. For the kind of institutions that we discuss here, the ability to claim "we do whatever we want" or "this is an internal private matter" is limited. To be sure, there may be groups in society that are purely internally oriented. In this article, we look at organizations that are to a significant degree outward-oriented. For this reason, we do not include families or idiosyncratic social clubs under the category of meso-level institutions, even though to some extent they share some relevant features. The implication of this is that the validity of the norms that govern meso-level institutions can transcend their particular context; they are not specific to a single association. The reasons that justify certain norms in one university, or for one business, have the potential to be relevant in similarly situated organizations. We argue below that this means that we can talk about a public sphere for organizations of a particular type of mission or purpose.

The third feature of meso-level institutions is that they have a significant degree of responsibility for securing their own resources, mainly financial resources. The type and degree of funding depend on the institution and the context: government grants, investments, debt, membership dues, or donorship drives. Furthermore, resources might also include acquiring other sorts of capital goods, that enable the institution to function as its wishes. Regardless of the type of funding or resources needed, what characterizes meso-level institutions is that their procurement is not guaranteed from, or compulsory of, others. Consequently, the need to secure continued resources is an integral part of the internal deliberation of meso-level institutions.

A Stand Alone or a System Approach?
Given such institutions, how should we think about democratizing them? We can distinguish between two broad models as to why meso-level institutions need to be democratic –what we call "stand-alone" approaches" and "systematic approaches." For stand-alone approaches, making meso-level institutions democratic is understood as a way to generate legitimacy for the institution itself while for systemic approaches it is viewed as part of making society itself more democratic. Put differently, stand-alone approaches put the entire burden of democratic legitimacy on the meso-level institution while systemic approaches consider its contribution to the democratic legitimacy of the entire system.

Like most other organizations, meso-level institutions are norm-based cooperative endeavors. These norms regulate, among other things, who hold which powers within the organization and how decisions should be made. For stand-alone approaches, the answer to the question of why meso-level institutions should be democratic is that democratic decision-making is a way to render legitimate the norms by which intra-institutional power is exercised. Therefore, the answer to the question of what needs to be democratized are these norms. Given that there are different ways to understand democracy, the precise way by which democratic legitimacy is rendered may be interpreted in different ways, such as voting by members, representation at the board, intra-organizational separation of powers, or allowing all those who are affected to weigh in. But what is shared by different strands of stand-alone approaches is that the democratic legitimacy is a property of each meso-level institution as a stand-alone entity. Democracy is viewed as a local proposition describing something that emanates from the rights of members within an organization qua members of an organization.

In contrast, for systemic approaches, the answer to the why question is that meso-level institutions need to be democratic in order to make the entire system more democratic. For these approaches, the type and scope of democracy in meso-level institutions is viewed as part of the systemic division of the democratic labor needed to sustain democracy in society at large. For systemic approaches, it is insufficient to think about democracy in terms of electoral processes and representative bodies. Rather, for these approaches the burden of democratic legitimacy is distributed across different parts of the democratic system, demanding that meso-level systems be organized in light of this. Democratizing meso-level institutions does not mean that they have to be perfectly democratic on their own, whatever perfect democracy may mean, but that they manage themselves in ways that enhance democracy in society-at-large. Therefore, systemic approaches do not conceptualize democracy in meso-level institutions exclusively in terms of the relationship between the "demos" of the institution and the way decisions are made. Rather, the meso-level organization is democratized because and to the extent that doing so is important for democratizing the larger system, more generally.

We adopt the latter, systemic view here. While some institutions in themselves pose such threats to legitimacy they must be democratized as stand-alone institutions, for the most part we are generally concerned with institutions because of their general place in society. A workplace where workers are generally disempowered is potentially problematic, but could in principle be addressed simply by workers finding a better workplace. This becomes a much deeper problem when firms generally are structured in a hierarchical fashion, or when the economy is set up such that workers don't have the ability to quit their jobs, or when worker-empowered firms don't have access to capital. Take universities, hospitals, and unions, then rinse and repeat Thus, while there may be reasons for individual meso-level institutions to be democratized by their memberships purely as stand-alone institutions, we think generally the moral imperative for democratizing such institutions derives from a broader concern with democratizing this section of social life of which such institutions form interconnected parts.

The Ambiguity of Power

What relation might there be between the democratization of the meso-level generally and one particular meso-level institution, such that democratizing the latter would lead to the former? It's important to note that this connection is not obvious. It is a fallacy of composition to assume that the characteristic of something must be held by its component parts. Furthermore, we might as a democratic body decide that the economy should be populated by efficiency-oriented hierarchical firms, or that higher education should be handled by meritocratic universities; whatever our objections may be to that setup it is not obvious that the undemocratic components of such systems undermine the democratic legitimacy of those systems as a whole.

A compelling way of conceiving of this connection is in terms of curbing power. To assume that the economic, higher education, or industrial-relations systems are on-the-whole democratic despite local instanations of non-democracy is to assume that there is a demos that actually legitimates these things in an equal and democratic fashion. Yet we know this is not the case. Instead our various social systems are the product of power disparities, which shape (if not outright determine) the nature of our institutions. Given, democracy is not simply about subjecting laws and institutions to an overarching democratic procedure, since such procedures are never deocupled from the hierarchies and power imbalances they are meant to monitor and revise.

Instead, in order to render our social systems more democratic, we must strive to curb power where we can find it. Consequently, to democratize the system we must democratize the meso-level institution. In this view, a main feature of democracy is the equalization of social power. Democratic measures, such as allowing people to vote or allowing freedom of speech are forms of empowerment that can counterbalance other forms of social power (see, for instance, Bagg 2018). However, since social power is distributed across society in complex ways, curbing it at the political level with means such as competitive elections cannot be enough. The curbing of social power has to include meso-level institutions. Thus, in this approach, democratization means empowering stakeholder groups who are otherwise marginalized.

The paradigmatic case of this line of reasoning is the one for democratizing workplaces to curb the economic power of businesses and the interpersonal power of managers. Businesses exercise significant discretionary power over various stakeholders, particularly employees. Some of this power can be curbed using labor laws, regulations, and other measures, but the effectiveness and reach of such measures may be limited. Workplace democracy is needed to balance the power relationship between capital and labor (Ferreras 2019). Similarly, Nannerl Keohane (2006) examines more or less democratic models of university governance in terms of the constituencies or stakeholders that participate in governance and the powers given to their delegates.

This way of thinking about democratizing meso-level institutions presupposes that it is clear which parties are more powerful and which parties are less powerful within an organization, and what would it mean to equalize these powers. It takes power as an objective property and its meaning as an antecedent to the democratic process. Granted, in some contexts, like many

workplaces, this makes sense as a first approximation –there is generally no ambiguity surrounding who is giving the orders at Amazon or who is taking orders in the Catholic Church. Nonetheless, in many other cases, different players have different sources of power, some of which are related to hierarchies within the institution and some of which are from outside of the institution; in the latter case, democratizing the institution doesn't do much to curb power, since its bases are extra-institutional.

More importantly, given the specific purposes and norms of meso-level institutions, and their dissimilarities from states in this regard, there are certain power imbalances which may be perfectly acceptable or appropriate for the institution under question. In universities, faculty members may hold power over various curricular and scholarly decisions on campus, but it is not at all obvious that this ought to be curbed, even if curbing it may lead to the university being more democratic in some way. Indeed, often when faculty power in this regard is curbed, it is characterized as the warranted extension of administration or neoliberalism into the academy. We can think of the power that medical professionals have in hospitals, editors have in news media, or clergy have in religious institutions as other instances of where the existence of power –significant in both degree and kind – is not obviously objectionable. In such instances, to democratize such institutions may be to actually demolish them, or fundamentally change not just their organization but the degree to which they function.

Of course, such demolition may be worthwhile. It may be the case that if certain institutions understand themselves and their goals in such a way that it demands relationships deeply offensive to democracy, then too bad for those goals and organizations. The point, however, is that this is not something to be answered a priori. The wisdom of democratizing meso level institutions to this degree, we submit, should not be presumed, given the legitimate and important goals of various meso-level institutions. Rather, we maintain that the preservation of goal-specific power imbalances, and how to balance it with democratic empowerment must itself be done democratically.

III.   Democratizing Meso-Level Institutions

What the above suggests is that the task of democratizing the meso-level is trickier than it might first appear. The imperative to democratize such institutions comes from the worthy goal of curbing social power in our social systems generally; meso-level institutions, being important interconnected parts of such institutions, are thus reasonable targets for extensions of democratic empowerment and inclusion. And yet part of what defines meso-level institutions as such is their specific aims, specific norms, and responsibility for securing resources, all of which potentially justify intra-institutional power imbalance. How do we democratize such systems while preserving the meso-level space for parochial pursuits and norms?

In what follows, we propose a set of conceptual tools for navigating this complexity. Ultimately, on our view, a crucial aspect of demcoratizing meso-level institutions is subjecting the purpose

of the institution to democratic deliberation. Such a simple statement belies considerable complexity since it is not obvious who the demos is in such institutions that ought to be empowered and included. Indeed, as we aim to show, such empowered inclusion will actually demand different things of different people relative to different aspects of such institutions. We therefore look to interpret the meaning of the basic democratic principle of empowered inclusion as the degree to which their mission is interpreted and applied to particular contexts in ways that allow for empowered inclusion (or the degree to which it minimizes disempowering forms of exclusion).

Excluding people and Excluding reasons

There are two ways institutions can exclude, and thus disempower: excluding (categories of) people, and excluding reasons. In the first instance, the decision-making process of an institution can be designed such that it involves certain people while excluding others: consumers do not get to vote in a shareholder meeting, students do not get to vote in faculty meetings, only tenured faculty get to vote on promotion, and so forth. On this view, making institutions more democratic requires broadening the circle of the people who are included.

In the second view, institutions can exclude by limiting certain kinds of reasons from being part of the conversation. For example, to the extent businesses have a mandate to pursue profit at all costs, reasons related to their impact on society and the environment are excluded. If a faculty discusses the curriculum without allowing for consideration of the descriptive diversity of the assigned readings, these reasons are excluded. From this perspective, democratizing meso-level institutions requires expanding the circle of reasons that can be drawn upon in intra-institutional deliberation.

The two forms of exclusions are often related. By excluding certain groups (suppliers of a firm, students in a university), certain kinds of reasons are excluded as well. Nonetheless, they are still analytically distinct routes for making institutions more democratic: broadening the membership, and allowing a broader range of reasons. We consider each in more detail below.

Excluding people. Certainly, institutions sometimes exclude people in ways that are bluntly undemocratic (e.g "no Jews or no Blacks allowed"). Our focus, however, is on the more complex instances where the case for excluding people is related to a legitimate purpose of the organization. There is a common argument for inclusion that is based on the all-affected principle. According to this argument, all those who are affected (or substantially affected) by an institution should have a democratic right to participate in its decisions. But this criterion is not adequate for all meso-level institutions. The all-affected principle suggests that if someone is substantially affected by decisions that they cannot be part of, they are de-facto subjected to external arbitrary rule –they are disempowered and excluded. Thus, to subject students to university policies they had no role in deciding, or various hospital stakeholders to the decisions of medical professionals is to wrongly treat people undemocratically.

One way to respond to this challenge is to suggest that when meso-level institutions are part of a democratic society, people have other channels to have their voices heard and therefore they are not excluded. But this view is simplistic. Since democratic decision-making involves many aspects of life, sometimes people who are significantly affected by decisions do not have viable routes to contest them in the democratic sphere at large. For this reason, extending membership may sometimes be needed for democratizing meso-level institutions.

At the same time, unlike membership in political communities, in meso-level institutions the purpose itself may provide a legitimate ground for exclusion. For example, institutions may exclude based on the degree of commitment to the purpose. It is at least plausible that only those who affirm specific faiths be involved in specific religious institutions, that only Democrats be able make decisions for the Democratic Party or that only those with demonstrated interest in political thought be included in the decision-making body of the Association for Political Theory. Meso-level institutions may also exclude based relevant expertise in interpreting or discharging the purpose of the institution. Thus, non-faculty may be excluded from making curricular decisions intheir department, or non-surgeons excluded from making policy related to hospital surgeries. There is a question about whether membership fees are democratic (more on this later), but shareholding in businesses can be viewed as a type of membership fee, the absence of paying may be legitimate grounds for exclusion.

Precisely because, by design, membership in meso-level institutions is often diffused and hierarchical in ways that would not be accepted in democratic political communities, the more central question is how to ensure that meso-level institutions do not systematically exclude categories of *relevant* reasons.

Excluding reasons. The legitimate exclusion of reasons is a unique feature of meso-level institutions. Political societies (such as nation-states) do not have a mission statement. The democratic process can be viewed as a clearinghouse of different kinds of interpretations of the terms of social cooperation.

Put differently, the main question for societies (in the Rawlsian sense) is how to set (fair) terms of social cooperation; the main question for meso-level institutions is how to carry out their particular mission. The range of reasons that meso-level institutions deal with is anchored in the questions of how to interpret and apply its mission to specific cases. In society generally, the fault line between internal and external is determined by *who* is included: if you are a member, you can participate in the deliberation (about the terms of social cooperation); if you are not, your views on the appropriate terms of social cooperation do not count. In meso-level institutions, the purpose is doing the work of exclusion. Reasons about the purpose of the organization may count. Reasons that are not related to the purpose of the organization have secondary status. For example, being a member of a decision-making body at a university does not provide a license for suggesting that universities should stop being in the business of providing education.

But what is the advantage of putting reasons first? Doesn't it simply leave the question of who decides among the different kinds of reasons? Our answer is that the point is not to fix the demos and decide who has the right to decide. The point is that reasons determine a demos in a weaker sense. They do not assign passports or voting ballots. Instead, they establish a general criterion by which the meaning of inclusion is to be interpreted. The framework that we propose examines how reasons may do the work of exclusion, and what it would mean to make meso-level institutions open to a wider range of relevant reasons. To do so, we identify three circles of relevant reasons.

Three Types of Relevant Reasons

The first circle of reasons, "local purpose reasons," relate to the interpretation of the purpose of the institution and how the purpose applies in particular cases. The narrower the purpose of the institution, the more its interpretation may become a technical issue or a subject of expertise. For example, when businesses reason about whether to invest in a new location or to expand an existing one or when an academic unit decides what subfield to hire, it is about how their mission applies to a particular context. The looser this purpose is defined, the wider the range of different kinds of reasons that may be involved (e.g. how to maximize profit for the quarter vs. how to maximize profit in the long term vs. should we focus on maximizing profit or other social values).

The second circle of reasons, "instrumental reasons," relate to the need to secure funding. Our focus here is on the reasons themselves and not on the actual relationship with funders (which we discuss below when we discuss the possible meaning of democratization). The point is that the intra-institutional exchange of reasons about the purpose and how to apply it is always constrained by the need to secure funding and resources. Because of the nature of meso-level institutions, their relationship with their source of funding is by definition (*qua* a meso-level institution) contingent. For example, when businesses reason about the likely effect of a plan on the value of its share, when academics reason about which project is likely to get funding, or when an organization considers at what level to set membership fees, the reasons are about how to secure funding.

The third circle of reasons, "social interest reasons," relate to how the mission of the institution and its resource-acquisitioning fits into the broader scheme of social cooperation. Institutions reason on how their actions (in pursuing their purpose) may affect the terms of social cooperation writ large and what are their obligations to these broader social goals. For example, when a business reasons about how to respond to a law that affects vulnerable employees or when a university curriculum committee discusses what civic skills college graduates need to have, the reasons are about how the pursuit of the institution's mission fits into a broader social scheme. Now the key point is that there is no agreement about what the broader social goals are or how best to achieve them. In this sense, the reasons exchanged in the internal conversation with the institution are in conversation with the broader social conversation about terms of social cooperation.

IV.   Democratizing Meso-Level Reason

The relationship between the three circles is complex. In one sense, there is a priority to the first circle of reasons. Meso-level institutions are about a particular purpose and the reasons are always about the interpretation of the purpose. On the other hand, the other two circles are co-original. They are not simply about adjusting the purpose to an external reality but it is also about interpreting a complex reality. To be sure, if there was one funding model and if the conditions of the funding were strict and clear, or if the terms of social cooperation were agreed-upon, fixed, and specific, they could be viewed as mere external constraints. But meso-level institutions (as we understand them), operate in an environment that is complex and dynamic, so there is no fixed boundary between an internal deliberation on purpose and external constraints. We distinguish the three circles because the meaning of making meso-level institutions more democratic is different for each one of the circles.

Democratizing Local Purpose Reasons

Democratizing local purpose reasons means allowing more diversity of relevant reasons with regard to the purpose of the organization. An institution is not democratic when relevant reasons are not heard. We describe it as a democratization of local purpose reasons. But what count as "relevant" reasons? On the one hand, there is something here comparable to the democratic paradox of founding: the very original act of setting-up the purpose of the institution also limits its democratic possibilities in giving a priority to those reasons that are "inside" the boundaries and to the founding processes by which these reasons are interpreted. Put simply, if a particular institution has a way of making decisions, they have the prerogative to decide that some reasons are not relevant to the institution (for example, the management of a business can decide that a particular impact on the community is not relevant for their discussion).

However, there is another way to think about the meaning of the democratization of local purpose reasons. By their very nature, reasons have the potential to transcend the particular context in which they are given. If a particular reason may be valid in a particular context, it is possible that it may be valid in similar contexts. Thus, regardless of the particular formal process by which any particular meso-level institution makes decisions, they are part of a broader discursive network, a kind of public sphere, that is shared by other similarly situated institutions. The conversations in these purpose-specific public spheres are often around the scope and interpretation of the meaning of that purpose. For example, in business journals and in different forums of the business community, there is a vibrant debate between different conceptions of the purpose of businesses. In the American Association of Colleges & Universities (AAC&U), there are discussions about the need to make syllabi more diverse and academic freedom. Therefore, the road to lateral democratization of meso-level institutions may not necessarily start by expanding the membership of these institutions locally or expecting them to listen to a wide range of voices. Rather, the locus of lateral democratization may be the specialized public sphere for these institutions.

Democratizing Instrumental Reasons

Again, our focus here is on arguments of the type "ideally, our mission calls us to do X, but our need to continue getting resources, suggest that we do Y" (or a variant: "this is what our funders (would) prefer"). This is a challenge if and when funders are not participants in the ongoing deliberations and do not respond to local purpose reasons. While our focus is on monetary contributions, the category of instrumental reasons is broader. For example, the investment of time and effort by members or volunteers is a concern for meso-level institutions. Instrumental reasons present a different kind of concern because they involve the interpretation of wills that are external to the institution (even when held by people who are otherwise members of the institution).

There can be two ways to think about what it would mean to democratize these kinds of reasons. The first is thinking of making the funding model more amenable to democracy. The second is making the communication with funders more transparent.

Funding Models. institutions can be funded by any combination of three sources: 1) by the members themselves, 2) by other private funders, 3) by public funders. None of these funding models, in itself, is categorically democratic although private funding is probably the least democratic one.

> Private funding: Having the institution funded by private funders who are not members can either pose significant challenges to the prospect of democratizing or, in some limited cases, make it easier. From the perspective of the institution, private funding is a source of arbitrary unaccountable will. Benevolent charitable funders might relieve those who manage the institution from worrying about funding. But in most cases, funding is conditional in stated or unstated ways.

> Membership funding: when the institution is fully funded by its members and equally so, instrumental reasons are no longer relevant for the deliberations, because the funders are one and the same as the members. Put differently, self-funding excludes considerations that cannot be vindicated deliberatively. However, self-funding creates other potential types of exclusion. First, it makes participation costly (in monetary terms) and excludes those who cannot afford the cost. Second, and especially when the investment is significant, membership becomes what Buchanan describes as a club-good that incentivize insiders to exclude outsiders. This is an issue for economic cooperatives (worker-owned businesses, housing coops) that sometimes have strong economic incentives to limit membership.

> Public funding: unlike its private counterpart, public funding is not fully arbitrary. It is based on known public criteria that purportedly stand for the interest of the public. Nonetheless, from the point of view of the institution, any conditions posed by public funding may still be external. Let's look at a hypothetical example: if public funding is available, would it be more democratic for a professional academic association for

political theory to substitute membership fees with public funding? Consider the following three scenarios: in one, the funding is conditional on whether this association engages in supporting the vigorous study of political theory; in the second, it requires the association to prioritize the study of American political thought for funding; and in the third, it requires the vigorous study of *patriotic* political theory. Thus, public funding –even when authorized by a legitimate democratic body – might undemocratically exclude relevant reasons and functions of an institution.

Transparency. The other way to think about democratizing instrumental reasons is by focusing on the quality of communication between an institution and its funders. Again, reasoning about instrumental considerations takes place only when these constraints are not clear and are open to various interpretations. When the funding constraints are fixed, they turn into one of the environmental factors that are considered as part of the deliberations in the first circle. In this respect, instrumental reasons add an undemocratic element to the extent some participants have, or can claim, privileged access to the process of reasoning of funders or potential funders. Such privileged access can allow management to exclude certain options from deliberation by presenting consequences as inevitable (that is: claiming that funders will opt-in or out if these choices are made). This form of exclusion can be removed by making the communication between the institution and its funders more transparent. This puts an obligation on the management of the organization to be transparent about their communication with funders. It also implies an obligation of certain large or institutional funders to provide open and public rationale for their funding priorities.

Democratizing Social Interest reasons

All meso-level institutions encounter the question of how the pursuit of their mission affects the interest of society-at-large, although the details vary widely between institutions. Determining the actual interest of society-at-large is an interpretive task. In some cases, the democratic political process makes its view on a particular question known. But, it may be the case that some do not view the outcome reached by the actual political process as democratically legitimate. Meso-level institutions have to take on the interpretive burden of reasoning about the public interest, whatever it may be.

The question, then, is what would it mean to make this dimension of the process of reasoning more democratic? Again, there are two ways to think about this question. The first is to expect meso-level institutions to engage in consultative-deliberative practices that allow them to get a better understanding of the public interest. Thus, instead of monologically assuming what is the public interest on a particular topic, the idea is that meso-level institutions have to engage in some dialogical processes, for example creating something akin to a mini-public. We have already mentioned the idea that meso-level institutions have to democratically engage their stakeholders. This expectation is a maximalist one in the sense that it expects meso-level institutions to have internal deliberations not just on their local purpose but also to reach a robust understanding of what they take to be the public interest.

There is nothing inherently wrong with meso-level institutions pursuing robust deliberative practices in the hopes of better understanding the needs and interests of society at large. Nonetheless, there is something grandiose in expecting meso-level institutions to generate a better, more right, democratic process. The challenge is that meso-level institutions are constrained by their own mission and by the need to secure resources, which may encourage all sorts of shortcuts or compromises (see Cordelli 2020 on the organizational ethos). The danger is that meso-level institutions may claim to speak on behalf of society because they believe they followed a consultative or deliberative process that they consider legitimate, but which ultimately is not.

A second, more limited interpretation of the meaning of democratization here would focus on the *publicity* of the reasoning. In this view, what is needed to deepen democracy is not for the meso-level institution to reach an accurate democratically legitimate understanding of the public interest, but to give participants in the public-sphere-at-large the opportunity to engage with the internal reasoning of the meso-level institutions when it comes to decisions that may have a broader social impact. Simply put, such decisions are more democratic when they are justified to the public. This means that when a meso-level institution adapts its mission because they believe this will be in the public interest, it should have an additional burden of publicity and transparency with regard to its reasoning on what they take to be the public interest. So, for example, if a business decides not to hold a convention in a particular location because of a discriminatory law passed there, they don't (necessarily) need to follow a deliberative process that improves upon the jurisdiction's that lead to the discriminatory law; but they are obligated to explain and make public their reasoning for boycotting.

Conclusions

Imagine the management or the rank-and-file of a meso-level institution – a business, a university, a church– that are genuinely interested in making it more democratic. What guidance can democratic theory give them? What we have tried to do in this paper is to offer a map of the possible answers –the different ways to conceptualize the meaning of democratization in this context– and to flesh out their broader presupposition.

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