

Challenging Power in the Public Debate:

The Conversation as a Commons

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Introduction

Today, there is a strong narrative arguing that conditions for policy making is changing, on local as well as global level. Driving forces seem to be the recurrent global social, economic and ecological crises which the present political and economic systems are unable to handle (see ex Scharmer 2013). According to this narrative, the underlying contradictions and imbalances that have lead to these crises are complex, and thus demand knowledge and resources from a wide set of actors in order to be resolved. Mainly, solutions are supposed to present themselves in the form of new and well designed governance models built on cross-sector collaborations. At the same time, the conditions at hand include interdependency, intractable conflicts and high levels of uncertainty. There are also critical changes in the relationship between citizens and the state and the role of citizens (and citizenship) in the public sphere (Sørensen & Torfing, 2005; Holston 2009) as well as weariness of state withdrawal (Bradley 2015).

One of the responses to the social, economical and ecological crises is a surging interest in commons (Parker & Johansson, 2012). Commons have a historic legacy from pre-modern societies and their economic structures, which makes the concept appealing if the current global capitalist market economy is identified as the main culprit behind the recurrent crises (Alves dos Santos Junior, 2014; Bradley 2015). This is especially true for urban conglomerations, distinguished by consumerism and anonymity, which have, however, also been regarded as strong drivers for democratization through mass-movements, such as the labour movement.

Today, a new form of what might be called insurgent citizenship is developing, confronting the entrenched regimes of citizen inequality and demanding rights to urban space (Holston, 2009). Two main factors are at play in this development, both accelerated by a globalized economy: On the one hand, nation states are generally incapacitated by their increasing difficulties to tax both production and consumption. At the same time, global mega-cities and regional clusters are challenging the nation state as the supreme political entity. Together, these tendencies have put contemporary forms for governing and governance under a great deal of pressure. It can be argued that the modern project, including the rise of representative democracy as the governing tool par excellence, paradoxically have left citizens, or commoners, with less opportunity to partake in political life,

compared to in pre-modern times. Institutionalized and professionalized representative democracy seem to have created an enclosure that severely confines the space available for people from different strands of society to engage in constructive dialogue. Networked governance, building on the discourse of cross-sector collaboration, have also largely been confined to institutional actors who tend to reaffirm political structures rather than challenge them. One should therefore not be surprised by an accelerating polarization in a political field where contempt for politicians seem to be ever-increasing, and where people even start seeing action outside of legitimate governance structures – including taking to the streets - as their only available option.

Background

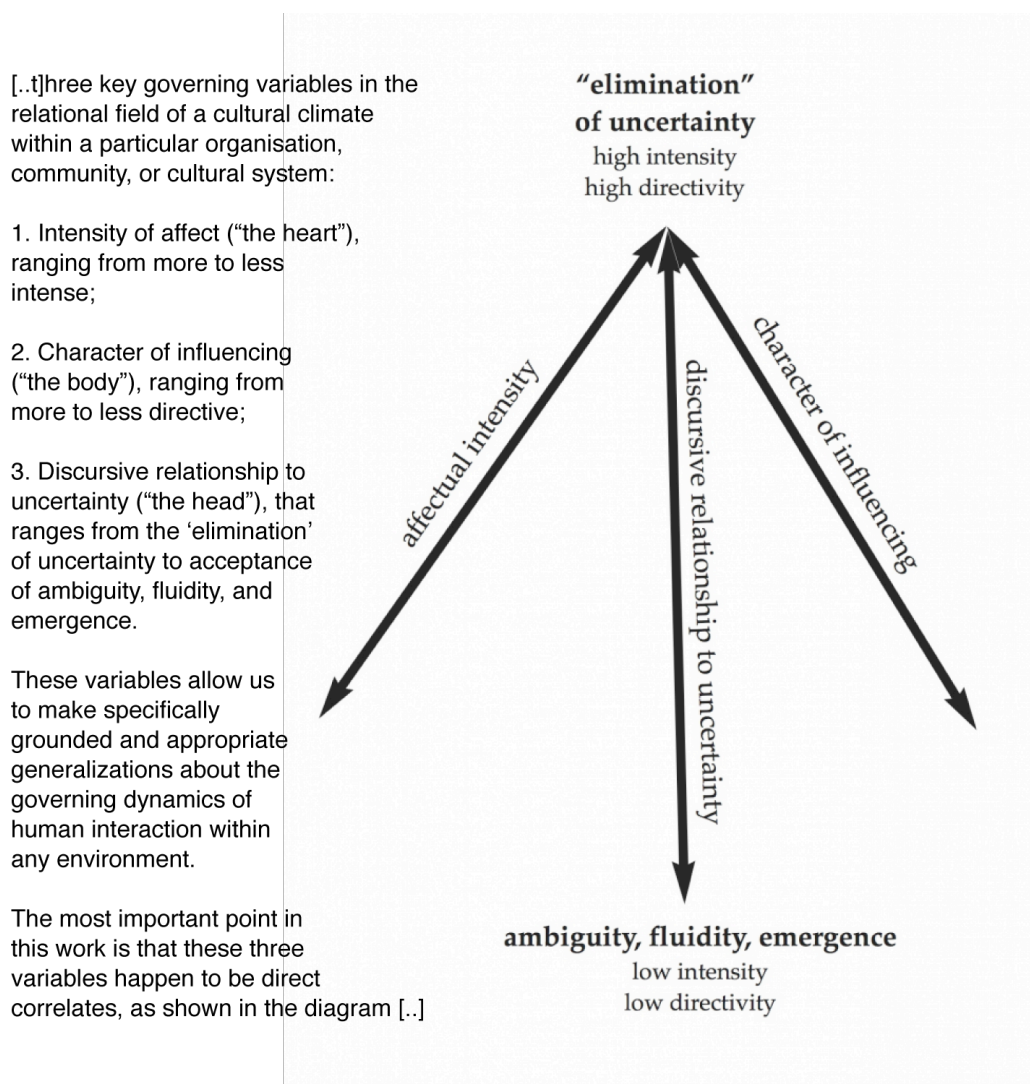
Since the discussion on commons generally is conducted with the tools of the structural framework it seeks to challenge, it is logical that the main focus tends to be on management and administration of resources, rather than on arenas for political dialogue (McCann, 2004). Surprisingly little attention is targeted towards the underlying structures of urban political debate, where agendas and speaking orders are legitimized and predetermined by discourse and established power structures. Invitations to panels and seminars, moderation and comment, are in general guided by already evident positions in the discourse and landscape of power, based on institutionalized, perceived “expertise” – academic or otherwise – or a position of power, by being a “decision maker”. Sometimes a random representative of “the public” or from “vulnerable groups” may be invited to provide “diversity”. But the structure is already given and institutionalized, the repertoire of answers defined beforehand, and thus the outcome will rarely be something else than a reproduction of the map of institutions and networks of political power (McCann, 2001; McCann, 2004; Kester, 2005).

There are, however, alternative interventions that aim to challenge these structures, providing what might be understood as a commons of ideas and politics, focusing on unsettling the formal structures of political debate. One such example is the Conversatory (<http://conversatory.org>), an initiative that can be described as an open source art-based research intervention (McNiff, 2008), and which works as an open conversation that involves joint and deeper reflection, understanding and clarification, while providing an arena for testing of ideas (Kester, 2005). Most important is that before embarking on a Conversatory, all participants are required to leave behind their formal attributes of power, such as title, professed expertise, credentials, complacency etcetera. In a Conversatory it is the thoughts, reflections and experiences of the participants that are at the center. Based on a given theme, it may then take off in any direction.

The conceptual construction of the Conversatory stems from a joint analysis of experiences the group behind this text have made in different critical endeavours over a long time. For Lars Novång, years of exploring the potentiality of artistic strategies in innovation processes have made it necessary to also investigate why participatory art projects tend to involuntarily counteract their own aims. Based on a growing awareness of this problem, his practice has evolved in a direction where it contests the position of the artist as a “facilitator” or “catalyst”, since this notion stems from an elitist idea which puts the artist at the top of a predetermined hierarchal structure. This particular hierarchy (at least in the framework of the so-called art world) tends to encourage artists to exploit participants in their collaborative practice in order for the process of creating social meaning to transcend into an artifact, recognizable as art. When complying to this structure, artists,

even when executing extreme criticality, suffer the risk of "betraying" the creation of social meaning, by means of becoming immersed in the logic of commodification. Interestingly enough, this phenomenon also seem to apply to so-called social entrepreneurs, or social innovators, who by claiming their particular "authorships", partake in a translation of collaborative efforts into a market logic, and thereby also become accomplice in the immersion of e.g. the sharing economy into mainstream capitalism.

For the purpose of avoiding the above and other pitfalls participatory art practices regularly encounter, we think that participatory projects – whether artistic or not – need to be more vague, slow, self-reflexive and iterative, in order to make it more difficult to uphold predetermined hierarchal relations, i.e. artist/public, author/participant, etc.



Anthony McCann: The Cultural Climate Framework

For Fredrik Björk, working for a number of years in different research and developments projects within the discursive concept of 'social innovation', often in so-called 'cross-sector collaborations' with NGOs and public administration, the experiences led to a conclusion with similar implications. The institutional framework where these 'social innovation' projects are funded and performed would joyfully embrace 'social innovations' as long as these do not challenge, or even attempt to

investigate, the structures and logic that uphold the system. The consequence, is a risk of 'jumping to solutions' (Scharmer 2013), rather than engage in reflection and dialogue; which also may result in interventions that target the symptoms of injustice, inequality and ecological deterioration, rather than the underlying causes, and thus may actually work to prevent any change to established power structures.

For Per Johansson the importance of open dialogue regarding intellectually challenging topics has been a major long term concern. Most recently he, together with acclaimed radio journalist Eric Schüldt, has developed a pod radio format that creates an atmosphere which, in a searching way, invites the listener to join them in a dialogue on subjects ranging from history of science, digital technologies, biology to theology, ancient philosophy and metaphysics. Three major series have been produced (Man and Machine, The Tree of Knowledge, Myths & Mysteries) with a total of about 1 million unique downloads and still growing. Apart from the engaging content the almost Socratic dialogue format itself has deeply inspired people from all walks of life.

All the above experiences have proven to be equally useful and disturbing, when analyzing the discourse in the 'Social Innovation' field. We have concluded that in order to be serious about change, it is crucial to have the courage to take a step sideways, out of discursive enclosures. Otherwise, one is prone to unconsciously re-enact patterns which may well constitute the DNA of the problems one has set out to solve.

Experiences from one work have been of particular importance for the development of the Conversatory. In this, still ongoing project – Friendly Development – long term unemployed have been invited to collaborate with a group of artists in a quest for innovative strategies in relationship to the rapidly crumbling Swedish labour market. Initially, the project aimed at a joint exploration of new modes of transaction, e.g. collaborative consumption, time banking, social enterprising, and other emancipatory tools for replacing the role of stigmatized unemployed with a more proactive and entrepreneurial position. However, it soon turned out that the majority of the unemployed participants actually resisted this “forward-aiming” strategy in different low-key, asymmetrical ways – a phenomenon which proved hard to uncover, since the resistance was not conscious, but rather consisted of a re-enactment of deeply engrained behaviour patterns, learned in the nowadays obsolete workplaces they once populated.

After discovering this problem, all participants in the project jointly decided to replace the entrepreneurial strategy with a more slow, reflexive, and collaborative learning process. In reality, this meant spending much more time drinking coffee, while engaging in aimless conversations. Gradually, these daily conversations underwent a transformation from ordinary coffee table chats, to increasingly sincere and profound discussions, thereby constituting a self-organized un- and re-learning situation. In this informal setting, also benefitting from the mandatory attendance by a very diverse group, all participants – artists included – gained an increased ability to deconstruct their predicament and discover aspects of it that had earlier been impossible to unveil, due to engagement in too much instrumental activity. Much more can be said about this collaborative learning process, apart from it being a major inspiration for the Conversatory, but here's not enough room for a more in-depth analysis. However, we have found the Friendly experience worth mentioning, because it highlights how the wickedness can also be the potentiality of problems one encounters, when setting out to engage with people for the purpose of emancipatory change. Also, it provided much of the context in which the group behind this article started to collaborate.

The Conversatory: the process so far

Even though the core idea for the Conversatory stems from our joint life experiences (as well as our academic and artistic ones), the concept is of course heavily indebted to a long tradition of critical, participatory art practices. In this section, however, we will just walk you through the concept as such and some early findings in the prototyping process.

This is how the Conversatory and its purpose is presented on the website (conversatory.org) – including the concept, which is open-source:

A CONVERSATORY

- breaks the magic circle
- escapes the exclusiveness of a roundtable
- is more profound than a panel discussion
- embraces the unexpected and unforeseeable
- facilitates a probing exchange of thoughts, unobstructed by answers
- promotes an unconstrained reflexiveness, which may help things gain clarity

Today's media landscape entails exposure to enormous quantities of information and communication, most often of the one-way kind, formed as claims and advertising, thoroughly amplified and commodified. A general specialization and professionalization, combined with increased effectiveness, also have led to a situation where the lived expertise of a majority of people is neither sought for, nor made visible.

In this time of profound change, the voice of more people need to be heard and an abundance of new questions need to be posed. New and diverse perspectives need to be introduced. At the same time, our traditional and institutionalized forms for learning and communication doesn't really provide any space for this.

In society, an increasing number of people are expressing both concern and a growing need for more and new forms of dialogue. The Conversatory is one way, our way, to try to meet these demands."

CONCEPT

A Conversatory is an open-source format for mutual and in-depth reflection, understanding and clarification.

A. Before entering the Conversatory its participants have to leave what they represent, i.e. title, merits, presumed expertise, self-satisfaction, etc in a coat check for attributes. They are also requested to part with or shut off all their electronic devices.

B. The person or persons initiating the Conservatory may start the conversation, but should as soon as possible shift to participating in the conversation on the same terms as anybody else. All participants in the conversation are equal and should have equal opportunity to partake.

C. A Conversation Piece, e.g. an object or an image, can be used to initiate the conversation. Texts, images, films, etc, can also be included in an invitation to a planned Conversatory. However, it is not allowed to require specific preparation from participants.

D. The Conversation must be allowed to take other directions than intended or wished for by the initiator(s)

A Conversatory is not a forum for debate and have no pre-defined, specific aim. Neither is it an ordinary chat, because it's expected to lead somewhere – e.g. to more specific questions, to a dilemma, to something that might be equally difficult to embrace or reject. The following also applies for a conversation in order for it to be regarded as a Conversatory:

1. All participating interlocutors are simultaneously present in the same space.
2. They never form a closed circle, always leaving room for more.
3. The subject is regarded important and urgent by all participants.
4. The conversation has intellectual and existential depth.
5. All participants are prepared to learn from one another, but no prior knowledge is demanded.
6. The conversation is conducted in a spirit of interest in clarification, rather than in making claims. Ideally it discusses something that the participants don't really understand, but jointly tries to specify in order to better understand.
7. No electronic or digital devices may be used during the conversation, since it is a matter of concern for the participants only. For this reason the conversation must not be amplified, transmitted, recorded or overheard. However, participants may take notes which they are free to use in whatever way they see fit, provided this is approved by all participants in the Conversatory.

After the above conceptual framework was completed in the beginning of 2015, we immediately started trying out the Conversatory in different settings. The first round of conversatories were arranged in May in Malmö, Sweden. The context was called the "Future Week", and was part of an urban development project in a suburb of Malmö, Sweden. Our chosen theme for these conversatories were "the right to use the city", specified in topics such as "Do we use the city better by avoiding what we usually do?" or "the city as conversation".

A second round of conversatories were arranged during "Skåne Innovation week", an initiative from the Regional government of the Skåne Region. There, our main theme was "Do we have the courage to become the most innovative region in Europe by the year 2020?". Our ambition was to take the conversation on governance of the innovation system to unusual spaces, and to enable people who would normally not be included in the conversation on innovation to take part.

After that, the Conversatory have participated in the public art project "Hidden Art", where we arranged open (as well as hidden) conversations. Later this fall we are invited to participate in a large conference on adult education, where the topic will be the contemporary obsession with measuring (the theme of the conference).

In general, we have ourselves been surprised by the potentiality of the Conversatory concept. In the first stages of prototyping, some conversatories had a tendency to become too similar to academic seminars. This we managed to solve by simply ruling out the opening remarks we initially thought were necessary. Most important, however, has been our discovery that we needed to calibrate the "coat check" ritual and make it significantly more violent in order to make it serve its purpose as intended. Ever since our 9th Conversatory, all participants have to state what they represent, i.e. title, merits, presumed expertise, self-satisfaction, etc, in writing on a specific form. Then, before taking their seats, they have to individually insert their personal form into a rather loud and unfriendly electric paper shredder. This small ritual has proven extraordinary helpful in reminding everyone of their non-representativeness. The paper shredder ritual also conveniently provides material for a Conversatory documentation, that in no way violates our concept.

Discussion and concluding remarks

In her book *Artificial Hells*, Claire Bishop describes a trend in today's participatory art, towards an emphasis on process over image, concept or object (Bishop, 2012). This, of course, makes spectatorship in a traditional sense more or less impossible – something we have tried to take seriously, by means of putting a ban on documentation in the Conversatory concept. Our position is of course rather radical, but consistent with our strive to also avoid another serious pitfall, namely the notion of the public. In the context of trying to re-define, re-invent, or simply discover the commons anew, we find it crucial to distance ourselves from the kind of shallow understanding of the public that may well be one of the obstacles at hand. On a more practical level, this of course means that we have to distance ourselves from the notion of the public as a more or less anonymous and collective audience, a notion which implies a spectatorship that is a key driver in the commodification process which, in turn, has proven to incapacitate the political potential of many a critical participatory artwork. Even more important, however, is a deeply ingrained notion of the public, as in public space, embedded in our western culture as a mythological backdrop, that by means of being more or less invisible to us, tend to limit the space in which we are able to address many contemporary challenges.

Andrea Phillips, in a recent talk in Malmö, Sweden, "*Forgetting the Public*", eloquently pointed out that the idea of the public good, which has emerged during the last 300 years, is an Anglo-European concept, rooted in liberal ideas, with a substantial place in the history and geography of colonization. Public space, thus, is a "weapon of hegemony within the extreme eradication of other forms of life that has occurred over the period of colonization". She also pointed out that post-enlightenment, contemporary critique of the idea of the public – whether stemming from thinkers like Habermas, Arendt, Sennett or others – "seems to want to keep and alter this concept of the public, rather than eradicating or forgetting it" (and thereby she implies that also these thinkers, like most of the rest of us, may be subject to what we, in this text, have chosen to refer to as "hegemonic enclosure"). Phillips, in her brief talk, concludes the following: "[the] complex is this: How to hold on to the important elements of publicness that have developed in European culture, whilst forgetting, and thus decolonizing ourselves from the processes that have constituted the always institutionalized concept of publicness in the first place? [...it's] a complex maneuver we have to do with our bodies and our minds – and we have to do it collectively. How can the forms of forgetting that we practice allow us to transform publicness into an, as yet unresolved, form of egalitarianism? – for this is the ever present, yet never achieved promise of being public."

We find her question extremely pertinent, and like to think that our model for open-ended, reflective and non-representative conversations, hopefully can contribute to such a precarious endeavor, just by being a simple and useful tool.

The dialogic situation provided by the Conversatory allows its participants temporary escape from their discursive enclosures – through the simple act of conscious non-representation. The aim of our intervention is thus to create an opportunity to discover and explore new, or forgotten, modes of interaction. By doing so, we increase the possibility to invent or rediscover a fundamental property of the commons that may not just be a model for management of shared resources, but rather a shared notion of being (decent and friendly) humans.

A cornerstone of our concept is that the Conversatory insists on *not* being instrumental in its dialogical practice. Against the apocalyptic backdrop of our times, this might look like an irresponsible strategy: is it possible to defend a slow, open-ended and undetermined process, while

being in a state of emergency? Actually, we conclude that it is the right thing to do, because – paradoxically – profound and non-directive conversations might well be exactly what is needed to find out, or, rather discover, new and/or forgotten ways in which to address the seriously wicked problems our society is facing. What we definitely cannot afford is to be in such a hurry that we involuntarily create more of what we really need to rid ourselves of.

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