

CitizenActor: Reimagining Democracy through Civic Innovation and Creative Resistance

This article develops an applied philosophical reading of civic innovation, arguing that it constitutes not merely a category of social practice, but a politically significant figure here designated the CitizenActor. Drawing on Foucault's analytics of power, Dewey's conception of democracy as experimentation, and the capability approach associated with Sen and Nussbaum, the article proposes that civic innovation operates as a form of creative resistance that reconfigures the dispositifs structuring collective action. Rather than apprehending democracy solely as an institutional architecture, this analysis reconstructs it as a situated practice, an experimental mode of governance, and a normative orientation toward social justice. The CitizenActor emerges from this inquiry as the agent who does not merely participate in democratic life but actively produces its conditions.

Keywords: *civic innovation, CitizenActor, applied philosophy, social justice, Foucault, Dewey, democracy, creative resistance, dispositif*

Introduction

Contemporary democratic theory faces a persistent tension between, on the one hand, the proliferation of institutionalized forms of political participation and, on the other, the manifest erosion of their legitimacy in the eyes of citizens. Distrust, abstention, political polarization, and pervasive feelings of powerlessness coexist with a remarkable efflorescence of civic initiatives emerging close to concrete social, ecological, educational, and cultural needs (Rosanvallon, 2006; Norris, 2011). This double movement, institutional fatigue alongside grassroots civic renewal, calls for a philosophical reappraisal that neither dismisses institutional democracy as irreparably compromised nor idealizes citizen initiatives as self-evidently emancipatory.

The present article advances such a reappraisal by developing the concept of the CitizenActor, a normative and analytical figure emerging from the study of civic innovation understood in a philosophically demanding sense. The hypothesis defended here is that civic innovation, far from constituting a mere repertoire of local experiments, delineates a new political subjectivity and enables a reconfiguration of what democracy can mean: not primarily as institutional architecture but as situated practice, collective experimentation, and creative resistance oriented toward social justice.

The argument proceeds in the following steps. Section 1 proposes a conceptual clarification of civic innovation, distinguishing it from adjacent notions and identifying its constitutive normative dimensions. Section 2 situates this phenomenon within a brief genealogy of democracy as civic invention, drawing on Aristotle, Rousseau, and contemporary democratic theorists. Section 3 develops the concept of the CitizenActor through the examination of paradigmatic cases. Sections 4 and 5 mobilize Foucault's analytics of power and resistance to elucidate

the critical dimension of civic innovation. Section 6 draws on Dewey's conception of democracy as a mode of life and experimentation to illuminate its constructive dimension. Section 7 articulates the connection between civic innovation and social justice through the capability approach. The conclusion draws together these strands into a synthetic account of experimental, inclusive, and creative democracy.

Throughout, the term 'applied philosophy' is understood in a demanding rather than derivative sense: not as the simple application of pre-constituted theories to contemporary cases, but as a philosophical practice that confronts real social configurations, allows itself to be informed by them, and in return provides conceptual tools to describe, evaluate, and orient them (Dewey, 1927; Brown, 2015). Similarly, 'social justice' designates not an abstract regulative ideal but a set of concrete tensions: inequalities of access, asymmetries of power, the silencing of certain voices, and struggles over the redistribution of capacities to act (Rawls, 1971; Sen, 2009).

Civic Innovation: From Technical Practices to Democratic Normativity

A preliminary conceptual clarification is necessary. The term 'civic innovation' designates processes of designing, implementing, or diffusing innovative solutions that originate from citizens or collectives and that explicitly target dimensions of collective life (Von Hippel, 2005; Moulaert et al., 2013). In this minimal sense, the notion encompasses a broad range of practices: participatory budgeting, open digital platforms for deliberation, community cooperatives, solidarity clinics, commons-based knowledge production, and alternative financial architectures.

However, a purely descriptive definition is philosophically insufficient. Innovation takes on a properly 'civic' character not by virtue of its citizen origin alone, but by reason of its normative orientation. Civic innovation is distinguished by its explicit aim to strengthen democratic participation, to serve the common good, or to empower individuals as active members of a political community (Ostrom, 1990; Latour, 2017). More fundamentally, it produces not merely objects, services, or digital platforms but forms of governance, rules of interaction, conditions of access, and modes of value attribution, in a word, dispositifs that structure collective action (Foucault, 1977).

Five constitutive dimensions can be identified. First, a participatory genesis: citizens are directly involved in design, technical choices, and governance rather than positioned as passive beneficiaries. Second, a common-good orientation: civic innovation prioritizes social justice, inclusion, or ecological transition over market efficiency or organizational performance. Third, organizational transparency: openness and traceability are treated as structural requirements rather than optional features. Fourth, effective accessibility: the reduction of inequalities of access to resources, services, and knowledge is an explicit goal. Fifth, a constitutive effect on citizenship itself: civic innovation strengthens the capacity of individuals and collectives to act, decide, and self-organize.

These dimensions are not merely descriptive; they are normative. They specify what innovation must aim at if it is to be democratically significant. Civic innovation

thus constitutes a privileged terrain for applied political philosophy precisely because it embodies, in concrete form, the tensions and aspirations that political theory addresses at the level of principle.

Democracy as Civic Invention: Elements of a Genealogy

An often-neglected historical insight must be foregrounded: democracy does not progress solely through formal institutions; it also, and at certain historical junctures primarily, advances through civic inventions (Manin, 1997; Sintomer, 2007). The relevant genealogy encompasses the Athenian Ecclesia and its practice of sortition, medieval communes, the revolutionary clubs of the French Revolution, the labor movement's organizational innovations, the civil rights movement's repertoire of non-violent resistance, and the feminist and ecological movements of the late twentieth century. In each case, it has been citizens acting collectively who invented new forms of participation, representation, and decision-making, displacing the locus of political power and transforming subjects into actors.

This intuition is foundational in the canonical tradition of political philosophy. For Aristotle, citizenship is defined by effective participation in judgment and rule rather than by mere membership in a political community (Politics, Book III). The citizen, in this sense, is not defined by a legal status but by a practice. Rousseau, for his part, argues that sovereignty cannot persist without the active and continuous exercise of the general will; popular self-government is not a property that a constitution confers but a capacity that citizens must continuously enact (The Social Contract, Book II). Both thinkers converge on the view that democracy is constitutively dependent on the active engagement of citizens themselves, not merely on the adequacy of formal procedures.

Contemporary civic innovations, participatory budgeting, open deliberative platforms, cooperatives, digital commons, must be read within this lineage. They are not marginal supplements to democratic life but constitute, in Tocquevillian terms, contemporary schools of democracy and, in a more critical register, laboratories of social justice and applied democratic experimentation.

The CitizenActor: Conceptual Construction

Rather than cataloguing a comprehensive inventory of civic innovations, it is analytically more productive to identify paradigmatic cases that illuminate the structure of the phenomenon. Four domains deserve attention.

In the domain of governance and public finance, participatory budgeting, initiated in Porto Alegre in 1989 and subsequently diffused across hundreds of municipalities worldwide, represents a systematic experiment in the redistribution of decision-making power over public resources. Its institutional logic aims to increase transparency, reduce power asymmetries, and render citizens effective actors in the allocation of collective goods rather than passive recipients of administrative decisions.

In the domain of digital deliberation, platforms such as Decidim in Barcelona and DemocracyOS in Argentina seek to institutionalize more traceable, inclusive, and scalable forms of political deliberation. They do not merely digitize existing procedures but transform the architectures of participation, raising questions about the governance of digital commons and the conditions of algorithmic accountability.

In the domain of knowledge production, OpenStreetMap exemplifies collaborative geographic data production grounded in openness, free reuse, and horizontal cooperation. It challenges the commodification of spatial knowledge and instantiates a form of epistemic commons governed by principles of reciprocity and shared ownership.

In the economic and financial sphere, initiatives such as alternative banking cooperatives, local complementary currencies, and citizen crowdfunding platforms propose a reconfiguration of value circuits and governance modes that contest the monopolistic claims of financialized capitalism over the organization of exchange.

The conceptual yield of these cases is not primarily normative assessment, it does not follow that each initiative is in every respect just or emancipatory, but rather the identification of a shared form of political agency: distributed, situated, non-institutional in the classical sense yet deeply normative (Isin, 2008). It is from this structure that the figure of the CitizenActor is constructed.

The CitizenActor is neither a simple consumer or user of collective goods, nor a traditional activist defined by oppositional identity, nor a political entrepreneur seeking institutional power. The CitizenActor is the one who acts upon the very conditions of collective action, modifying dispositifs, designing new rules, instituting open infrastructures, and reconfiguring the architectures through which democratic life is organized. The CitizenActor does not merely participate in democracy; in a constitutive sense, they produce it.

Foucault's Analytics of Power: Dispositifs and Resistance

The analytical resources provided by Michel Foucault's late work are indispensable for theorizing the critical dimension of civic innovation. Although Foucault's principal empirical domains, madness, sexuality, penal institutions, medicine, appear distant from civic practice, he himself insisted that his concepts should function as 'toolboxes' rather than doctrines, to be deployed wherever they possess methodological purchase. What matters is not thematic proximity but conceptual pertinence.

Foucault's fundamental reconceptualization of power is the relevant starting point. Power, in his account, is not primarily a hierarchical relation or an instrument of explicit domination possessed by a determined subject. Rather, it designates 'a mode of action that does not act directly and immediately upon others, but acts upon their actions' (Foucault, 1982, p. 220). Power structures the field of possible actions, orients conduct and produces subjectivities. It is exercised through dispositifs, networks of heterogeneous elements (institutions, laws, discourses, techniques, spatial arrangements) that produce and regulate the conditions under which subjects can act.

This conception of power entails a specific methodology for its analysis. In 'The Subject and Power,' Foucault proposes that power relations are best revealed not through examination of their internal rationality but through the resistances that oppose them. Resistance does not stand outside power; it is coextensive with it, and it discloses, through its very existence, the contours of the dispositifs it contests. Civic innovations, on this reading, constitute forms of creative resistance that reveal, by contesting and transforming, the dispositifs through which power is ordinarily exercised.

Moreover, Foucault argues that philosophy, since the Enlightenment, has the task of monitoring the excesses of political rationality and maintaining a critical vigilance with respect to the normalization effects of dominant dispositifs. Applied philosophy, in this sense, is not merely a theoretical exercise; it is a practice of critique oriented toward the conditions of possible transformation.

Creative Resistance and the Immediate Enemy: A Politics of Proximity

Foucault introduces a productive distinction between the primary enemy of political contestation, large structural formations such as the state or capital, and the immediate enemy: the concrete dispositifs through which power is exercised in the ordinary fabric of daily life. Civic innovations almost invariably target the latter. They do not, as a rule, seek the abolition of banking, education, healthcare, or urban governance, but the transformation of the specific modes through which these domains organize access, decision-making, subjectivity, and exclusion.

In finance, cooperative and local monetary initiatives redesign the architectures of credit, savings, and collective ownership, contesting the dispositifs through which financialized institutions concentrate decision-making power. In healthcare, solidarity clinics and community health initiatives challenge the exclusionary effects of certain institutional dispositifs, proposing alternative configurations of care, access, and therapeutic authority. In education, open and commons-based dispositifs contest the standardization and institutional closure that characterize dominant educational systems, proposing alternative articulations of knowledge, authority, and participation.

In each domain, resistance does not take the form of a seizure of power from a determinate enemy but of a reconfiguration of the dispositifs through which power is distributed and exercised. As Foucault specifies, such struggles target not institutions as such but specific forms of power (Foucault, 1982). They contest the hierarchical pretensions of dominant dispositifs, affirm the right to difference, and challenge the mechanisms of subjectivation that produce standardized rather than singular subjects. In this sense, the CitizenActor is paradigmatically a practitioner of creative resistance: their action operates at the level of dispositifs rather than at the level of sovereignty.

Dewey: Democracy as Experimentation and Way of Life

If Foucault illuminates the critical and resistant dimension of civic innovation, John Dewey provides the philosophical resources to articulate its constructive

scope. For Dewey, democracy is not primarily a political regime or a set of procedural arrangements, but a mode of associated living grounded in communication, cooperation, and shared inquiry (Dewey, 1927). This conception, which Dewey describes as a 'way of life,' refuses the reduction of democracy to electoral mechanisms and governmental procedures.

In *Creative Democracy, The Task Before Us* (1939), Dewey argues that democracy is a living process governed by 'faith in the capacity of human beings for intelligent judgment and action if proper conditions are furnished.' It is embodied not in formal institutions but in ordinary practices, habits of association, and forms of interaction that either promote or inhibit cooperative intelligence. Democracy, on this account, is constitutively experimental: it advances through trials, errors, and iterative adjustments rather than through the application of fixed principles to pre-given situations.

This conception illuminates the epistemic structure of civic innovation. Civic initiatives do not claim to instantiate a pre-determined ideal; they test solutions, evaluate their effects, adjust them considering experience, and sometimes abandon them in favor of alternative approaches. They enact, concretely, what Dewey calls the experimental method in social affairs, a mode of inquiry that applies the logic of scientific investigation to the challenges of collective life without reducing social reality to a laboratory.

The CitizenActor, on this reading, is precisely the agent of experimental democracy: the one who, rather than waiting for institutional reform from above, initiates processes of collective inquiry, creates provisional dispositifs, evaluates their effects, and refines them in the light of shared experience. Dewey's contribution is thus not merely descriptive but normative: it articulates a criterion of democratic validity, namely, the capacity of a practice to promote cooperative intelligence and expand the conditions of shared experience, against which civic innovations can be evaluated.

Social Justice and the Redistribution of Capacities to Act

The connection between civic innovation and social justice can now be made explicit. Civic innovations do not merely redistribute material resources; more fundamentally, they redistribute capacities to act, to participate, and to decide. They reduce specific power asymmetries, render marginalized experiences and knowledges visible, and create new conditions under which individuals and collectives can exercise effective political agency.

This perspective finds its most rigorous theoretical formulation in the capability approach, according to which justice should not be assessed solely in terms of the distribution of primary goods or resources but in terms of the real opportunities available to individuals to lead the lives they have reason to value (Sen, 2009; Nussbaum, 2011). Capabilities, understood as substantive freedoms or effective opportunities to do and to be, are irreducible to resources, since the conversion of resources into functionings depends on personal, social, and structural factors that vary significantly across individuals and contexts.

Civic innovations constitute, in this framework, spaces where social justice becomes concretely practicable, observable, and revisable. They do not merely instantiate a prior conception of justice but generate, through their operation, new information about what justice requires under specific conditions. Participatory budgeting reveals asymmetries in the distribution of public attention; open health initiatives disclose gaps in the accessibility of care; cooperative economic structures make visible the distributional effects of mainstream financial architecture. In each case, the innovation functions simultaneously as a justice-promoting intervention and as an epistemic device that produces knowledge about the conditions of justice.

The capability framework thus provides a normative criterion complementary to Dewey's experimental criterion: civic innovations are democratically and socially significant to the extent that they expand substantive freedoms and effective opportunities for the individuals and communities they involve.

Conclusion

The analysis developed in this article supports the following thesis: civic innovation constitutes not a supplementary or marginal dimension of democratic life but one of its contemporary sites of philosophical truth, a domain in which applied philosophy becomes operative, social justice acquires practical determinacy, and democracy is enacted as lived experience rather than formal procedure.

The concept of the CitizenActor synthesizes the three analytical registers developed in the preceding sections. In Foucauldian terms, the CitizenActor is a practitioner of creative resistance who operates at the level of dispositifs, contesting and reconfiguring the architectures of power that structure collective life. In Deweyan terms, the CitizenActor is the agent of experimental democracy who produces, evaluates, and refines provisional solutions to shared problems through cooperative inquiry. In the terms of the capability approach, the CitizenActor is the one who expands substantive freedoms and redistributes capacities to act among those who are structurally marginalized from effective democratic participation.

Reimagining democracy through the CitizenActor entails conceiving it not as a stable state to be preserved but as a dynamic process to be continuously reinvented. The CitizenActor does not seek to seize power in the classical sense; they transform the forms through which power is exercised and distributed. By acting on dispositifs and the architectures of collective action, they contribute to an experimental, inclusive, and creative democracy, one in which the philosophical ideal of self-governance is not merely affirmed but, however partially and provisionally, enacted.

Several avenues for further research emerge from this inquiry. The relationship between civic innovation and formal democratic institutions requires more sustained investigation: under what conditions do innovations that originate outside institutional frameworks generate transformations within them? The conditions of scalability, how practices that are effective at local or community scale can influence broader political structures, remain insufficiently theorized. Finally, the

question of failure deserves attention: not all civic initiatives succeed, and the analysis of failures may be as instructive as the analysis of successes for a philosophical account of experimental democracy.

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