

Unsteady State: Civic Service Design as a Space of Democratic Contestation

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Abstract

In liberal modernity, state legitimacy rests on the idea of democratic representation. As a political philosophy of public rule, democracy implies possibility and indeterminacy, yet state regimes (like taxation, border control, and prisons) operate with an air of certainty—often there seems to be no ‘realistic alternative’ to the systematic forms they take. Acquiring a similar sense of inevitability, public services discharged by most industrialized states take shape within opaque bureaucracies, amidst complex discourses of technical and policy expertise that, in turn, dismiss claims based on experience or preference as excess. This discussion proposes that we examine civic service design as a possible arena for democratic contestation, a frame with the potential to unsteady this aura of inevitability and locate a reconfigurative politics in emergent public participation. Drawing from scholarship at the intersection of design studies and political theory (e.g. Collier and Gruendel, 2022; DiSalvo, 2012; Fry, 2010; Manzini, 2019), this discussion makes the case for bringing state logic into reflexive encounter with other (potentially transformative) bodies of knowledge—a distinct promise offered by civic service design—but cautions against regarding this as a solution in and of itself. Instead, it calls for an ongoing critical examination of particular applied design practices that actively seek to locate productively unsteady openings for democratic contestation. This forum also invites us to consider a speculative case study casting civic service design as a mode for democratically contesting state exclusion and violence towards migrants. As an invitation to rethink service design potentials, it will speak to the conference theme of social innovation, localities and transformative processes, as well as pluriversal ideas within the theme of services between and beyond worlds.


Keywords: democracy, civic service design, participation, social innovation

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