

Book Review

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Donna Podems (Ed.). (2017).

Democratic Evaluation and Democracy: Exploring the Reality.

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[Democratic-evaluation-and-democracy](http://www.infoagepub.com/products/Democratic-evaluation-and-democracy)

Reviewed by: Saville Kushner, *Emeritus, University of the West of England, Bristol, England*

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This volume explores the interplay between evaluation and democracy, set within a South African context with the intent to provide practical, grounded examples that explore how evaluation and evaluators have contributed, or not, to supporting a newly formed democratic society. (p. 14)

Analogous to the way that members of a society mobilise as “the shock troops of a democracy” (Fung, 2006) [evaluative] institutions need to reflect the confrontational character of democracy where necessary. McKee and Stake (2002) depict participatory evaluation approaches as troublesome for donors and their implementing partners, but invaluable for improving program efficacy. At an institutional level, in a democratic dispensation, this observation applies: in a democracy we should be “paying for trouble making,” for the people’s sake. (p. 193)

Competition for control of democratic governments is intensifying, as different elites continue their jockeying for position. In the United States, the corporate sector is in the ascendant with Donald Trump; the European Commission bureaucracy controls the European Parliament; in Thailand, it is the military machine; in Iran, it seems that the theocracy is losing its grip; and the ever-present Media stakes its claim through the likes of Rupert Murdoch (everywhere) and Paul Dacre (in the United Kingdom). The emergent player is, of course, the information elite where the Gateses, Zuckerbergs, and Musks seem poised to stake out territory.

Where history and circumstance have favored us, the competition has been mediated through democratic forums such as parliaments in which all these interests are represented and individually constrained. The better the information available to parliaments, the more effective they can be in balancing claims to influence. But recent times have seen an erosion of parliamentary and public sector power bases in civil society with a corresponding erosion in the kinds of checks and balances that ensure this sensitive mediation—when it came to a confrontation between the Federal Bureau of Investigation and Apple over iPhone privacy, there was a wave of popular support for the corporate giant over the publicly accountable policing agency. The question underpinning all others with respect to Donald Trump is this: *Are the famed U.S. checks and balances and separation of powers sufficient to the task of holding true to the democratic trajectory of that society?* They are undergoing a stress test.

In this context, we see the emergence of the program evaluation function—in the guise of program evaluators, quality inspectorates, performance monitoring agencies, and auditors. This is an intriguing species introduction to the political jungle, for it typically claims to be free of material interests, the means of exchange in this jungle (accepted that evaluators earn money and prestige through their work). Evaluation is not to be “checked and balanced”—it *is* a check and balance. It is

in competition with no other political animal—but it watches them all. This places this novel institution on a par with the most venerated of social institutions—the courts and tribunals. Indeed, the core of its business, as with the courts, is the impartial analysis of events, the management of evidence in deliberative processes, and the feeding (if not always the making) of judgment.

This is potentially a dangerous player, for it is *theoretically* beyond the reach of prejudice, privilege, bribery, and co-option—even precedent. Evaluation is, in essence, self-limiting. Once an evaluator has been commissioned, it is only a failure of courage or commitment that prevents her telling the story. Of course, we evaluators are often subject to limiting pressures and concede to them—but, usually, we choose to do so with mortgage, marriage, and employment status in mind—or, indeed, through a sense of reasonableness. Unlike the courts, our warrant is thin and little supported.

Little wonder, then, that attention has been drawn to the connections between this discipline/practice and its democratic context. The potential to make transparent the otherwise secretive competition between values and interests in our democracies—competitions which are *always* replicated in miniature in social programs—is significant and it can alter subtle and usually local balances of power. It is rare for any evaluation to have an ecological effect on a democracy—but it happens. Look at Iraq war dossiers, look at UK Royal Commissions or U.S. Congressional Reports, and look no further than the Coleman Report (Coleman et al., 1966), which passed the social equality buck from schools back to government. For this reason, evaluation has become an important instrument for governments of all hues and at all levels, but one that is handled with the care of a prototype virus.

It is of great interest, then, to learn what we can of the progress of program evaluation in countries where democracy is emergent, still fragile, and front and forward in public consciousness. In this sense alone, Donna Podems's book, *Democratic Evaluation and Democracy: Exploring the Reality*, makes for important reading, especially since the contributions as a whole have an essential mix of academic and political insight. The book in its entirety speaks intelligently of how program evaluation is positioned with respect to civic values in a country which continues to experience the labor pains of democratic rebirth. The contributions examine such topics as how power functions and how evaluation should seek "entry points" to play an unimpeded information-brokering role, how to confound the authoritarian leanings of bureaucracy by replicating the critical evaluative function at many levels, and how to shift from a functional to a systemic approach to the evaluative presence. There are chapters in which some degree of perplexity proves irrepressible even to the author in trying to understand why evaluation should, but does not, work—most notably, perhaps, in the case of centralized accountability for schools with the use of standardized testing. A consistent theme running through accounts is the aspiration toward *participation* and *inclusion*—enshrined both in nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and in civil society organizations but also in official bodies—along with its constant falling short. People are not ready to participate in such arcane and exposed processes; officialdom too often lacks the technical competence and the political space to allow it. No surprises here, but plenty of case material to adumbrate.

Donald Trump serves to remind us that democratic gains, no matter how hard-won, are always contingent on their continued support. Without continuing expressions of belief, Tinker Bell's light dims. There is no historical "ratchet" that guarantees to sustain advances—democracy is in its essence ever fragile. In terms given by Chantal Mouffe (2000), it is, and can only be, the "unfinished revolution." As we learn in this book, political contexts are both multifaceted and volatile, embracing and rejecting of open analysis, driven by values to promote inclusion but constrained by interests to restrict it. Program evaluation has achieved a robust presence in South Africa but responds to steps both forward and backward in democratic progress.

The accounts in Podems's book are saturated with these dynamics and with the attempt to stabilize democratic gains with the use of evaluation. These accounts are often courageous in

exposing the issues. This book is a case study—an important case—of where evaluation is positioned systemically in the striving for national self-determination. Its principal focus is on evaluation policy, with, perhaps, too little attention paid to method. It is a case of Patton's (2011) *Developmental Evaluation*, in that faced with the complexity of unstable equilibrium, “on the edge of chaos,” program managers are forced back onto responsive, evaluative, unprogrammed thinking. In this book's analysis, we read directly of the “large number of interacting and interdependent elements” (p. 1) through which Patton characterizes international development contexts and which frustrate “linear” thinking and preprogrammed solutions.

At the core of the book's analysis is the model of *principal/agent* transaction in which a principal (here, the citizen) authorizes an agent (government, evaluator) to advance their interests. This is a model of accountability which echoes the UN's *rights-based* approach in which actors are defined either as rights holders or as duty bearers—the latter deriving their warrant for action from the failure of the former's rights. As an analysis, it lacks weight, since it addresses only a limited range of democratic possibilities—mostly confined to representative democracy—and it is not well attuned to the general commitment throughout the book to deliberative democracy. Nor is it attuned to the transparent complexities of the South African political system in which assuming the status of “agent” too often exposes people to the temptations of corruption or incompetence.

South Africa—whatever the level of official corruption and the irresponsibility of its elites—is, by the evidence of this book, aware of the potential of program evaluation, aware, too, of the threats posed to it, and intelligent about devising policies to protect it. This book analyses in considerable detail the functioning of the *Department of Planning, Monitoring, and Evaluation* (DPME), established as a department of state to serve as a ringmaster and source of authority for program evaluation across sectors and districts. The DPME and its sibling program, the Government-wide Monitoring and Evaluation System, emit standards, provide advice and quality assurance, and convene an administrative culture of evaluation. But the country is more savvy than to imagine this alone will serve open information needs. We learn of evaluation being embedded at different levels—in professional groups and associations; in intermediary organizations—some labeled *Institutions Supporting Democracy*—which serve both as sponsors of and audiences for evaluation; in civil society organizations as well as NGOs. Some contributors move beyond the analysis of evaluation as a characteristic of systems, to the emergence of a countrywide culture of evaluation—defined by and operating through a set of values. There are, it seems, commitments at all these levels to participatory methods and even to deliberative democratic methods (inclusion, dialogue, deliberation). Just as needed, a number of contributors provide brief (all too brief) case studies of how these bodies work, and how evaluation does and does not fare well with them. Through these and other accounts, we get a sense of the challenges which emerge with creating an evaluative culture.

underdeveloped deliberative practices; the challenges of technical competence; the inadequate means to process and use information in exercising oversight [and] an overriding structural limitation . . . the executive dictates to its parliamentary caucus, and the power of an ostensibly independent institution is curbed. (pp. 199–200)

There are rich stories in this book which highlight the perils of internalizing evaluation into the bureaucracy, as is happening at a great pace—whether it be national governments which, as in South Africa, are typically setting up administrative departments to manage it; the United Nations/Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, which police the sustainable development goals and international development evaluation; or evaluators themselves who seem intent on creating an international bureaucracy for evaluation practice (see the work of EVALPARTNERS and the Organization for International Cooperation in Evaluation). The inevitable paradoxes and tensions are as clear in this volume as are the promises and the aspirations. As we read of evaluation in the context of

school performance, housing and community development, land restitution programs, and economic development, we too often have to read between the lines to see the analysis of “trouble-making” that dogs evaluation progress in the country. There is insufficient direct analysis of how bureaucracies—by default secretive, jealous of information, hierarchical, staunch defenders of the status quo—dance this choreography of embrace and rejection of evaluation critique and transparency.

One of the core lessons of the book is this:

Evaluation . . . is not inherently linked to democracy. Rather, evaluation that is an instrument of democracy is evaluation of a particular form and with particular characteristics. (p. 176)

Indeed. If we read carefully *across* these contributions, we see instances where evaluation is imported as a generic—exogenous, we would say—model, and others, where evaluation is shaped by local circumstances. With care, we can see pitfalls and promises of each. But the implication of the statement runs deeper. It says that evaluation is not an instrument for democratizing a country—that job is for politicians. Evaluation can be an instrument to support those who take on the challenge. Most contributors look to House and Howe (1999) and their model of deliberative democracy, which seems to offer the promise of evaluation as a reforming instrument. None, other than Podems, reaches back to the original author of Democratic Evaluation, Barry MacDonald (1987), who rejected the idea that evaluation was reformist. He defined democratic evaluation in terms of the *role* the evaluator plays, not in terms of the *goal* of evaluation.

“At its core,” writes Podems, “democratic evaluation encourages evaluative thinking in various spheres of society to bring about social change” (p. 8). To encourage evaluative thinking: an openness to critique, the recognition of alternatives, the tolerance of difference, and a reliance on negotiation and persuasion. There is, if anything, too much of an emphasis in the book on systems analysis and on evaluation policy, still not enough on evaluative thinking. But both are present.

Lehn Benjamin gives an analytical summary of the book in its penultimate chapter and with clarity focuses our attention on core questions—a prelude to the final chapter in which Donna Podems gives a pedagogical rendering of the book—how to use the chapters for “constant comparison.” These contributions realize the greatest promise of case study—as a curriculum. They affirm the inestimable value of the book in our continuing learning about what evaluation is and might be, what it was and might become. The prognostics are not clear and are not all positive. There is as much evidence for us to take away the thought that evaluation is an instrument for “evaluative thinking,” as there is evidence to suppose that evaluation is just too lost in the entwining undergrowth of administrative systems. Where there is a need for democratizing information—where we face the challenge of reducing “information poverty”—evaluation, by the evidence of this book, can both help and hinder. If we take a zero-sum view of power, in order to empower civil society, we have to disempower political and administrative hierarchies; to empower parliament, we have to disempower the executive and its outriders in the state bureaucracy. Here is where evaluation becomes “troublesome.” How much “trouble” can South Africa tolerate? How much trouble can your own context tolerate? Read this book and you will know better.

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