

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Necessity of Associative Democracy: Bringing Corporatism Back In

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Abstract

Liberal electoral democracies face serious intrinsic as well as external problems that threaten their viability. Associative democracy (AD) holds the promise of alleviating them. I argue that a long but currently strangely ignored tradition of (neo-)corporatism has demonstrated the feasibility of associative governance arrangements. Nothing prevents governments to push corporatism into domains other than labor relations, such as education, health, housing, or climate change. I propose a two-tiered structure of AD in which extended classic corporatism forms Tier 1 and a layer of commons Tier 2. To maintain their creative, authentic organization, which collides with the organization of state bureaucracies, commons must not be integrated into state structures. Instead, they must be institutionally represented through confederate bodies which are mandatorily consulted by Tier 1 actors.

Keywords: associative democracy; (neo-)corporatism; commons; participatory democracy; political realism

Introduction: associative democracy, corporatism, and beyond¹

There is something obvious, if not inevitable, about the idea of associative democracy (AD). It holds that by delegating the management of societal sectors to voluntary associations organized around a common need or interest, integrated into the polyarchic, institutional structure of representative democracy, a deeper, more effective and legitimate form of democracy is, in principle, possible. AD is based, not on competition, but on principles of cooperation, solidarity, and mutual support. A democratic configuration that, as an improvement to liberal democracy,² has always presented itself as a more humane and equitable alternative to the injustices of the capitalist order. AD is one of these ameliorative exemplars (like participatory and direct democracy) that keep the hope of democracy alive. Its perspicuity derives from the fact that voluntary civil associations are everywhere, even in the most repressive circumstances (Evans and Boyte 1986; Goldfarb 2006). So, why not leverage this most common of social phenomena to realize a better form of government?

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The good news is that despite the many practical and moral objections that have been brought against AD (Bader 2021, we will return to them later), for more than a century it has been successfully realized the world over as an effective form of socio-economic governance (Schmitter 1974; Streeck and Kenworthy 2012). Democratic theorists may not always have recognized this as it goes by a different name: (neo-)corporatism. It is testimony to the bias towards political pluralism in democratic theory (more on this later too) that corporatism and AD are rarely mentioned in one breath. In this essay, I will make a plea for corporatism as an important and viable form of AD for our times. My argument has three parts. First, because of Anglo-Saxon inspired distrust of the state and a concomitant market model of democratic functioning, democratic theorists have lost sight of the importance of state-society collaboration as a solution to the problems of representation and legitimacy that plague democracies worldwide. Second, corporatism in a modernized version is both a necessary and viable answer to the internal and external problems that afflict liberal democracies. However, third, even corporatist versions of AD are prone to structural epistemic deficiencies. We not only need to expand corporatism to a wider range of sectorally and functionally organized civil society organizations, but also to include nonconformist, citizen-led commons, to insert creative solutions based on experiential knowledge into the national, democratic governance framework.

This essay is structured as follows: in the section “Associative Democracy and the Crises of Democracy,” I introduce a recent contribution to the debate on AD: Bader and Maussen’s important book about AD as an answer to the polycrisis of democracy. I will use their work as a window upon the questions and dilemmas that surround contemporary liberal democracies. The section “Is Associative Democracy the Answer?” contains the moral case for AD as a promising answer to the crisis of liberal democracy as it figures in contemporary democratic theory. This section ends on an equivocal note. AD is a promising, perhaps even obvious answer to the crisis of liberal democracy, but the objections against it, both practical and theoretical, seem overwhelming. In the section, “The Mysterious Disappearance of Corporatism from Democratic Theory,” I do two things. I give a brief overview of the main principles of corporatism and argue why an updated version of it opens an important avenue for resolving some of the most urgent problems confronting liberal democracies. I also argue that our perspective on corporatism is muddled because of the intellectual bias towards Anglo-Saxon political pluralism in much democratic scholarship. In the section “Balancing Realism and Idealism: A Prudent Proposal for an Associative Democracy for Our Times,” I present my proposal for a reconfigured form of corporatism as workable AD. My proposal has two parts: a first tier of associationalism along the lines of corporatism but going beyond industrial relations to include other social domains. A second tier, which consists of the inclusion of a stratum of commons into the AD arrangement without arrogating or coopting what makes commons unique as a form of citizen-led socio-economic governance. My proposal answers to three practical and theoretical challenges: to guarantee that the authentic voice of citizens is heard in the institutional building of government, to compensate for the danger of epistemic deficiency which threatens institutionalized collaborative arrangements as much as centralized political decision making, and to heed political realism as a key principle by which to judge the merit of any solution to the polycrisis of liberal democracy. In the final section, I draw

conclusions about AD as an urgent solution to the sorry state of contemporary liberal democracy.

Associative democracy and the crises of democracy

The latest contribution in the ongoing debate about AD is *Associative Democracy and the Crises of Representative Democracies* by the German-Dutch team Veit Bader and Marcel Maussen (2024). Bader is a veteran of scholarship of AD and the book is both a summing up of his life-long work as well as an update of the developments in democratic and economic governance of the last 30 years. Maussen worked with Bader to whittle the text down to a book-length manuscript and contributed a chapter on democratizing health care. The book presents an admirably comprehensive and nuanced analysis of the challenges to liberal democracy and the solutions that have been suggested to address them. In this article, I will use this important book as a springboard for my analysis of the continued importance of AD in a world where autocracy is on the rise and democratically elected governments fall short in addressing the problems of our times.

The Introduction to the book is a tour de force of comprehensive, level-headed and unflinching writing about the deep problems of contemporary liberal democracy. The authors walk the reader through the challenges these pose to authorities and analysts alike and suggest possible solutions. Liberal democracy is not experiencing a mere hiccup in the centuries' long journey of liberal representative governments, they argue, but a "deep crisis challenging the basic forms of governance of modernity" (2024, 1).

These forms of governance combined well-known institutional matrixes: political power was mainly concentrated at the level of centralized and ethnographically bounded states, the institutions of polyarchy secured the democratic nature of governance (via elections and general suffrage, parliamentary oversight, elected officials, a critical public sphere, rule of law and guarantee of rights, a professional bureaucracy, and so on); and a capitalist market-economy generating sufficient levels of prosperity whilst some redistribution of wealth through welfare state measures secured life-opportunities for those less well off. (2024, 1)

Here the authors specify the parameters that shape the crisis: democracy's institutional complexity, its reliance on the geographically bounded nation state, and its pact with the global capitalist order. From this triad of conditions, a series of unavoidable "tensions" emerge: the structural constraints on equal participation, the limits to the problem-solving capacity of complex democratic states, the short-termism of coalition governments in proportional systems and unrepresentative irresponsible government in first-past-the-post-systems, and the deep, paralyzing conflicts between legislative, executive, and judicial powers. These factors alone are sufficient to endanger democratic effectiveness and legitimacy, but they are aggravated by three "major and long-standing structural tensions" between democracy and capitalism:

- (i) the tension between a socio-economic regime that guarantees consolidated private property rights and a regime of political democracy based on universal suffrage; (ii) the tension between a socio-economic regime that produces and

reproduces deep inequalities and structural asymmetries of political resources and a political system supposedly striving for fairly equal political chances for all; and (iii) the tension between the privatized control of the larger means of production and of the organization of work and services and the idea of democracy as collective self-determination. (2024, 2)

Finally, this fragile, perennially unstable arrangement is set upon by a series of external forces which undermine its continued viability:

(i) the increasing complexity of modern or post-modern societies; (ii) the consequences of neo-liberal politics and policies; (iii) shifts from government to governance; (iv) increasing globalization; (v) massive growth of supra-, trans- and international politics and governance arrangements, (vi) new information and communication technologies and the mediatization of politics. (2024, 2)

Curiously, the authors fail to mention two of the most important destabilizing external factors: the global financial sector and the accelerating climate catastrophe. First, the privatized production of money has resulted in a financial sector of such gargantuan size, has created such a powerful banking lobby, and has so effectively infiltrated governments everywhere, that in most countries it operates as a *de facto* shadow government.³ Second, the failure to reach even the minimal goal of limiting the increase in global temperature to 1.5°C has resulted in whole regions becoming unfit for human habitat, increased climate migration, a north–south divide in climate mitigation, and the poisoning of the civil sphere by the political polarization between climate change activists and deniers. The two are related of course. The power of banks to direct investments of the money they have themselves produced steers them in the direction of easy, safe returns, such as mortgages and the carbon industry (Bollen 2025). The major political ideologies, social democracy, and market liberalism, offer no solution to these accumulating threats to democracy and life itself. Even without the invocation of global finance and the climate catastrophe, the Introduction and Chapter 1 of Bader and Maussen’s book read like a modern-day democratic Book of Revelations. “Is there any hope left?” the authors bleakly ask (2024, 15).

Is associative democracy the answer?

The literature agrees that associationalism as a political–economic doctrine has two major characteristics: the advocacy of a decentralized, democratized economy “based on the non-capitalist principles of cooperation and mutuality,” and a system of devolved governance based on a federation of civic associations organized on local and functionalist principles (Hirst 1994, 15). In democratic theory, AD has become largely identical to the second, political–administrative, pillar of associationalism. Discussions of associationalism have bifurcated into two separate domains—AD and economic democracy—thereby not only relegating the latter to a rather innocuous specialist domain uncoupled from liberal democracy (Cumbers 2020), but also signaling that economic and financial organization is a domain for specialist experts that is off-limits to democracy (Hirst 1994, 95; Krätke 2008, 6; Wood 1981, 68). Against this trend, Bader and Maussen propose a “theory of complex democracy” (2024, ch. 2) in which they

restore a broad band associationalism as a counterforce to unbridled capitalism. Their take on AD as an approach to institutional design acknowledges that the limitations of the nation state in a world of multilevel governance and the tension-ridden alliance with global capitalism that threaten liberal democracy, cannot be treated separately (see also Fraser 2022).

Bader and Maussen have given us what is probably the most informative contemporary discussion of AD. Their target, as with all discussions of AD, is the “growing structural differentiation and interest diversity of the modern polity” (Schmitter 1995, 97) and the diminishing effectiveness of liberal democracy in coping with this diversity. However, it testifies to the bias towards political pluralism and market autonomy in democratic scholarship that theirs is a pluralist associationalism that is based on multiple, non-hierarchically ordered, competitive voluntary associations that vie for attention by the state. Bader and Maussen’s book is situated in the tradition of other classical texts on AD, such as Cohen and Rogers (1995), Hirst (1994), and Warren (2001), all of which approach associationalism from a liberal pluralist perspective. In fact, the very concept of AD has become synonymous with a pluralist, competitive conception of liberal democracy. Before we turn to a discussion of corporatism as an older and viable arrangement of navigating the “interest diversity of the modern polity,” it is instructive to present the theoretical and practical difficulties of a more pluralist form of AD as presented by Bader and Maussen.

Although simple as an idea, the practical issues of implementing AD are daunting. In an extended commentary on a core article in the AD literature by the philosopher Joshua Cohen and the political theorist Joel Rogers (Cohen and Rogers 1995), Bader has helpfully organized these implementation issues in three categories: moral, prudential, and realist objections (Bader 2001). AD claims to be an improvement on liberal democracy, so if there are compelling principled objections against it, the discussion stops right then and there. Bader reiterates a host of moral remonstrations that have been made in the literature: AD cannot overcome background inequalities and ends up reinforcing the representation of vested (economic) interests, associations inevitably turn into oligarchies with at best limited internal democracy, a system of civic associations is not strong enough to realize economic redistribution, narrow interest group representation will undermine civic consciousness and create “mischief of faction,” and institutionalized associational pluralism will threaten social and political unity (Bader 2001, 48).

Second, even if AD were morally acceptable or even superior to liberal democracy, it might not deliver what is written on the tin. These are the so-called ‘prudential objections’ to AD which are usually the result of the negative unintended consequences of negotiated governance (Bader 2001, 53). Bader mentions sub-optimal economic performance, lock-in effects (the emergence of an oligarchy of powerful associations), and joint-decision traps (unintended sub-optimal policy outcomes among associations with widely divergent interests) (op. cit. 54; van Engelen, 2001, 144). Finally, there are realist objections, negative effects of AD that demonstrate that despite its *prima facie* attractiveness it is simply not feasible as a functioning governance model in advanced, multilevel, capitalist democracies. For example, as we will see below, depending on their power and authority, groups have different possibilities to opt out of associational arrangements. Perhaps the goals of AD—more democracy and more efficiency,

more equality and more efficiency, more efficiency and more accountability—represent impossible tradeoffs (Bader 2021, 59).

Perhaps the most difficult “design” issue of all concerns the role of the state in facilitating and protecting associations in complex multilevel governance arrangements that extend beyond national borders. Does the nation state have the capacity to fulfill this role? Some commentators express serious doubts as they simply do not see the willingness or capability of states to support civic associations in the face of the power of, and its entanglement with, the corporate sector and the finance industry. Katharina Pistor, for example, has convincingly shown how the law is biased towards the protection, production, and concentration of capital. This does not only apply to domestic law but extends to global capital as well (Pistor 2020).⁴ This theme is extended by the political economist Wolfgang Streeck who not only observes that most nation states are locked into international agreements and global trade networks, but also that these *de facto* empires, “global-capitalist *GrosSstaaterei*” as he calls it, and democracy are incompatible. It is not only that beyond a certain scale the complexity and the inevitable diversity and conflict within a vast geographical and social expanse can only be managed by forceful suppression or corruption, but empires are designed to protect the global market economy from democratic nation states (Streeck 2024, 62). These are serious objections for which, at best, incomplete solutions exist. Bader does not intend to answer this tally of objections. According to him they generate institutional design challenges that theorists and researchers in AD must urgently address. In its engagement with real-world social groups, AD can only be contextual. To create some order in this confusing debate, I infer four underlying general issues.

First, we must be careful not to compare one or more ideal types of democracy but their real-world configurations. Liberal democracy is in serious trouble, as we have seen before, perhaps even more serious than Bader and Maussen convey. Given the many problems of liberal democracy, it is obvious that the odds are stacked against its successful transformation towards a more accountable, inclusive, and sustainable version. In a world where tyranny and illiberal democracy are on the rise, and where governments are more inclined to lend their ear towards the financial/corporate sector than the needs of citizens, AD appears a feeble solution for such overwhelming challenges. Yet, it holds out the promise of addressing the chronic shortcoming of policy delivery and lack of trust in democratic politics among citizens, or the “deep crisis in the governance of modernity” as Bader and Maussen call it (2024, 1). One of the main causes of this deep crisis is the epistemic deficit in governing complex societies, the structural lack of relevant information and knowledge at the top of hierarchal systems of governance, as well as the legitimacy problem that follows from it, which is expressed by the waning trust of citizens in the political and administrative class and the declining popular acceptance of collective measures. These are challenges that confront every political regime, independent of its nature.⁵

Second, we must avoid the abstract theory trap. As we will see in the next section, corporatism has shown to be a politically and economically workable democratic arrangement. But even in a narrower pluralist AD, careful empirical research shows that what look like unsurmountable problems in theory (like the joint-decision trap), can be overcome through pragmatic action (van Engelen 2001, 147). We can also refer to many examples of successful interactive or collaborative government, a kind of

AD-light often initiated by governments struggling with governability, legitimacy, and knowledge issues (Agger et al. 2015; Edelenbos and van Meerkerk 2016). These are the kind of experimental initiatives that reveal the “inherent tensions and trade-offs” in institutionalized multilevel governance (Bader and Maussen 2024, 68). Careful analysis of the specific national and cultural conditions that shape both the institutional design of these different forms of negotiated governance and their outcomes can tell us a lot about the conditions of possibility of more pluralist forms of AD. While collaborative governance is possible in some cases, it fails for example in situations of large power differentials and/or powerful economic interests (Johansson 2023; Wagenaar 2015). This turns the spotlight on the all-important issue of the relationship between associations and the state.

Third, the issue of power raises several crucial real-world implementation issues that concern the role of the corporate and finance sector in AD. (I will return to the importance of heeding political realism in the next section.) This is of course one of the key tensions in liberal democracy that Bader and Maussen identify and that affects any attempt to deepen or improve it. In a short, powerful commentary on Cohen and Rogers’ article, Wolfgang Streeck asks, for example, why social groups would be willing to voluntarily give up the freedom to act for a seat at the table. It makes obvious sense for disadvantaged interests who would see their position acknowledged to partake in collective decision making. For powerful interests, who get their way anyway, participating in AD arrangements can only mean a loss of influence. This is not just a theoretical issue. For example, years of negotiating in the “Omgevingsraad Schiphol,” the forum in which all groups that are affected by Amsterdam airport (airport, airlines, regional governments, local governments, residents of surrounding communities), discuss issues of start-and-landing capacity, noise, and air pollution, have regularly hit an impasse.⁶ One of the reasons is the willingness of the most powerful actors to “forum hop”; to initiate in parallel negotiations with the Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management to see their interests recognized. And more often than not, this undermining of the deliberative process by powerful corporate actors occurs in secret, behind the scenes, as Bollen shows over and over again with regard to weakening banking regulation (2025). As Streeck argues, to level the playing field for all organized interests in AD “may require an effective prohibition on voluntary self-exclusion” (1995, 186).⁷

Many proposals for AD assume that the territorial and functional boundaries of the political community coincide. However, the organization of deliberative political communities organized according to principles of equality and accountability becomes increasingly difficult in contemporary, multilevel, open democracies. Some groups, such as banks or the powerful interests in the airport forum, are more internationally mobile than others. The relevant community for large corporate interests is not the nation state but global capital markets, or the lowest-cost wage environment, or the most favorable fiscal regime, or the least burdensome regulatory environment. Forum-hopping, in other words, has come to stand for the ability to choose the most optimal environment to satisfy the organization’s needs. In Streeck’s words:

As the internal structures of political communities are increasingly conditioned by the emigration, or the possibility of emigration, of vital functions and functional groups to larger systems, the fundamental compact underlying associative

democracy – the provision of collective political status to groups in exchange for their acceptance of a socially sustainable redefinition of their interests – becomes less and less possible or more and more biased towards those that can afford to move out (1995, 189).

As I will argue later, following Streeck, to retain the “fundamental compact” of AD the solution must be sought in a reassertion of the ideal of the nation state, functionally collaborating at higher levels of political aggregation (Streeck 2024). In addition, AD should be pursued at lower levels of aggregation, such as regions or cities, and higher levels, such as in EU law, international climate accords or global agreements on minimal corporate taxation.

Fourth, AD requires a functioning civil sphere. Perhaps, to fully appreciate the importance of a well-functioning civil sphere for AD, it is good to remind ourselves what the civil sphere is about. I quote the sociologist Jeffrey Alexander:

I would like to suggest that civil society should be conceived as a solidarity sphere. In which a certain kind of universalizing community comes to be culturally defined and to some degree institutionally enforced. To the degree that this solidarity community exists, it is exhibited and sustained by public opinion, deep cultural codes, distinctive organizations – legal, journalistic and associational – and such historically specific interactional practices as civility, criticism, and mutual respect. Such a civil community ... is always limited by, and interpenetrated with the boundary relations of other, non-civil spheres. (Alexander 2006, 31)

Here is the rub. In many societies the invasion of the civil sphere by spheres that operate on wholly different principles has taken on such proportions that it has severely compromised the functioning of the former.

The biggest threats come from the corporate/financial sphere and social media, which in the case of the large tech companies almost completely overlap. On the positive side, social media platforms have increased political participation, helping to articulate citizens’ needs and interests. These gains are however undone by the negative effects of social media use, such as increased polarization, mutual distrust, lying as an accepted political strategy, fake information, and the breakdown of civility and mutual respect. Social media algorithms, in the service of furthering the platforms’ business model, and more recently the tech oligarchs’ political objectives, at the cost of promoting discord and extremist, authoritarian world views, distort political discourse and agenda setting (EGE 2024).⁸ The rapid rise of artificial intelligence (AI) adds to this poisonous mix the ability to create convincing fake stories and images. The result is the erosion of the civil sphere as an autonomous realm and the impairment of its capacity for self-repair (Alexander 2006, 33). This development jeopardizes both the healthy associational life and the state–civil society relationships that are a prerequisite for AD.

Arguably, within a climate of neoliberal austerity and more assertive right-leaning governments, the climate for AD has become less promising. First, businesses will do almost anything within their powers to persuade the state to give preferential treatment to those associations they favor and disallow the ones they see as threat to their

position. Second, the devolution of national sovereignty to transnational organizations makes the realization of associative schemes exceedingly difficult. Third, if the civil sphere is badly polarized, if civility has broken down, if the media, and politicians themselves, favor business interests, if people distrust the ability of institutions like legacy media and science to provide them with reliable information, then AD might be doomed from the start. Perhaps Bader and Maussen were right when they rue if there is any hope left for democratic reform.

The mysterious disappearance of corporatism from democratic theory

In the remainder of this essay, I will present a workable, feasible proposal for AD. My argument, in brief, is that corporatism offers a viable solution to the development of AD in contemporary society. Corporatism rests on the active collaboration of the state with organized societal interest. I take corporatism to be the devolvement of public tasks to civic associations as well as its institutionally organized coordination with central government, as a complement to, or augmentation of, liberal democratic political and administrative arrangements. Or, as Schmitter in his seminal article succinctly defines it: Corporatism is a particular “institutional arrangement for linking the associationally organized interests of civil society with the decisional structures of the state.” (Schmitter 1974, 86). Corporatism differs from political pluralism in the demands it makes on associations. In effective corporatist arrangements state and associations need to find a modicum of alignment. In practice associations need to be singular, noncompetitive, hierarchically ordered and monopolistic. Usually only one broadly organized, umbrella association becomes the collaborative agent for the state. In exchange the state can expect a certain moderation of demands and conformance of interest (Schmitter 1974, 93). For example, in a corporatist system of industrial relations, unions and employer organizations are expected to bargain hard over wages and work conditions, while keeping an eye on macro-economic stability. The expectation that the associations have the public good in mind even when they bargain for the interests of their members makes it possible for the state to devolve some of its sovereignty to them.

Feasibility requires that any associative design lives up to the demands of political realism. That is, it must accord with the functioning of real-world political-economic institutions, accommodate the give and take of power politics, take the historical and cultural experiences of a polity into account, and accommodate the resolution of conflicts of interests and values (Galston 2010; Geuss 2008). (Neo-)corporatism occupied the consciousness of democratic theorists in the 1970s and 1980s and has since then more or less disappeared from the disciplinary agenda. The reasons are not hard to apprehend. In general, corporatism has always been met with a certain skepticism among progressive theorists due to its associations with fascism and reactionary Catholicism (Schmitter 1974, 87). This sentiment has abated somewhat in the face of corporatism's success in macro-economic governance and industrial relations in the context of the expanding welfare states of the 1960s and 1970s. Since the late 1970s several developments coincided that subverted the idea of AD. Neoliberal doctrine argued for autonomous markets, unimpeded by intrinsically inefficient, misdirected state action. The rush of globalized trade arrangements resulted in the advent of “negatively

integrated” market arrangements (“by eliminating restraints on trade and distortions of competition”) to the detriment of “positive integration” which bolsters legal inter-governmental coordination mechanisms and national policy making capacity (Scharpf 1998, 157). At the same, the position of political parties as conduits between civil society and politics began to decline together with their traditional alliances with social partners (Bader and Maussen 2024). Under the influence of changes in the labor market, the privatization of public organizations, and a resurgent corporate sector, some social partners, such as labor unions or peak organizations in health or education, struggled to retain their role in social-economic bargaining. Together with a general climate of accelerating individualism it is little wonder that the idea of corporatism went into decline.

It is perhaps remarkable then to observe that, while democratic theory moved towards less institutionally demanding, more competitive, pluralist conceptions of associationalism, the practice of corporatism as peak bargaining between organized interests, supervised and directed by the state, has, against the odds, persisted in some form or another in northwestern and middle Europe, Japan, and Latin America. In countries like Austria, Germany, Belgium, the Netherlands, Slovenia, and Norway, industry-level collective bargaining still has between 70% and 90% sector coverage. Perhaps equally remarkable is the observation that corporatist practices are also encountered outside industrial relations, in areas such as education, health services, care, and government (Busemeyer and Trampusch 2011; Palier and Martin 2007). The conditions for this persistence is the presence of unions that cover a sufficiently large percentage of the work force, and the existence of institutionally established “social partner” bodies, such as compulsory labor and employer associations. In all these countries pattern bargaining between unions and employer organizations (wage agreements in a key sector that become the lodestar for other sectors) are considered by the partners and the government to be sufficiently functional to impose stability, coordination, and social order on the national economy to offset their costs.

For various reasons, these conditions are currently under pressure. Under the influence of the factors we discussed before, corporatism has diversified and “loosened,” with variations in coverage, organization, the role of state, and the strength of coordination. In addition to the traditional corporatist arrangements, we also observe the emergence of other forms of more or less permanent collaboration in formulating and implementing public policy between state agencies and self-governing civic associations in what can be called pseudo-corporatist ways. One of the defining features of corporatism has been the demands it makes on associations. In effective corporatist arrangements associations tend to be broad rather than specialised in their domain, few rather than many, and more formally rather than informally organized (Streeck and Kenworthy 2012, 448). These and other measures give the association “representational monopoly” in the corporatist setup (op. cit, 451). What we see in the last two or three decades is a gradual relaxing of those demands to bring a wider variety of civic organizations within the orbit of state-society collaboration. It is plausible to assume that this is a reaction to the fragmentation and individualization of society we discussed earlier. For example, Mark Warren has described how, in advanced democracies, government organizations are actively reaching out to civic organizations to engage them in deliberation, empowered participation, and co-governance in a wide

range of policy endeavors, a phenomenon he has called “governance-driven democratization” (Edelenbos and van Meerkerk 2016; Wagenaar et al. 2010; Warren 2014). Bollier and Helfrich (2015) have amply documented the worldwide rise of commons—bottom-up, peer-governed, community initiatives to produce and deliver social goods and services—in a wide variety of domains (see also Wagenaar 2019). The question is if this broader spectrum of civic associations can form a sufficiently robust foundation for an enduring form of AD? This question must be approached from two angles. On the one hand, we need to ask if the wider variety of civic associations is able to handle complex tasks of inquiry, deliberation, problem solving, negotiation, and conflict resolution, both internally and with institutional partners, that form an integral part of AD. On the other hand, we need to ask if, and under which conditions, state agencies are able and willing to enter in good faith into productive collaborative relationships with these civil society organizations?

Regarding the first question, in a what is probably the most comprehensive recent study on civil society organizations, the political scientist Nicole Bolleyer asks herself what democratic contribution civil society organizations (CSOs) can still make in a climate of “societal individualization, digitalization, financial crises, populism, the increasing state dependency and professionalization of CSOs and, most recently, the Covid-19 pandemic” (Bolleyer 2024, 2).⁹ Bolleyer discerns a trend towards professionalization as a way to survive in a societal environment where membership has become decidedly volatile. There are tradeoffs between professionalization, membership representation, and state capture, or, in more general terms, between private interest representation and public governance, that present real dangers to the democratic quality of civic associations, or, more pertinent to our purposes, a renewed corporatist compact as the foundation for AD. As Bolleyer puts it:

Irrespective of membership organizations’ primary mission, the strategies they choose to ensure their own survival in increasingly individualized societies invite or reinforce their societal detachment. This detachment is considered unfavourable to internal participation, as well as to interest representation that is responsive to societal interests and concerns ... [T]he way these CSOs increasingly organize suggests an enhancement of advocacy without a cultivation of civic engagement. This, in turn, points to a growing discrepancy between organizations’ ability or willingness to function simultaneously both as venues for participation and as vehicles for democratic representation (op. cit., 5–6)

Bolleyer’s study, however, shows, somewhat contrary to corporatist theory, (1) that under pressure from a declining and more volatile membership, civic associations tend to professionalize to the detriment of internal democracy, and (2) that the conditions for making a participatory contribution to democracy are more diverse than traditionally assumed. In fact, as she observes:

[N]either a “political mission”, “public good orientation” nor a “democratic governance structure” should be used as defining characteristics of CSOs and thus demarcate the conceptual and empirical boundaries of how one might study the diversity of CSOs or, relatedly, their democratic contributions. Instead, we need

to focus on membership organizations that, in principle, have the potential to make contributions deemed relevant to democracy (Bolleyer 2024, 8)

It exceeds the boundaries of this paper to discuss in detail the different configurations of political participation and interest representation in civic organizations on the one hand and their contribution to democracy on the other (Bolleyer 2024, 19). Bolleyer argues however that this framework does not capture the full range of civic associations and their contribution to democratic governance. Many such organizations are not so much in the business of political organization and interest representation but offer their members an opportunity to engage in collectively valued solidarity activity, such as producing green energy or providing social care. Bolleyer calls this the “societal responsiveness” dimension of civic organizations, in addition to the political participation and interest representation dimensions (Bolleyer 2024, 28). What distinguishes these organizations is the close relationship between the inner life of the community in which they are embedded and their characteristic organization and functioning. It is no stretch of the imagination to think of commons as belonging to this category of “societally responsive organizations” whose mission is not in the first instance political. In other words, Bolleyer’s work brings commons potentially within the purview of AD. To assess if this is a real possibility, we need to look at the state’s willingness and capacity for sustained collaboration with such “societally responsive organizations.” In the next section, I will argue that the answer to this question hinges on intelligent institutional design.

Balancing realism and idealism: a prudent proposal for an associative democracy for our times

Where do we stand? Liberal democracy as we know it is in serious trouble. In many countries, democratic institutions are eroding. Trust in politicians is in serious decline. Political parties are in crisis and no longer fulfill their traditional mediation functions, while the radical right makes large electoral gains (Bader and Maussen 2024, ch. 4). Politics is dominated by giant transnational corporations and monopolistic tech firms (Crouch 2011) which operate on the front stage of politics. The political class seems unable or unwilling to resolve urgent problems such as the climate crisis, unaffordable housing, the hollowing out of labor contracts, or the diminishing life perspective of large parts of the population. Does democracy as a political arrangement have anything to offer against these challenges? Or, to put it more trenchantly:

[U]nder what conditions, national and international, and with what sort of state and state system, [can] a kind of democracy be instituted, or restored, that can again become a countervailing power rather than a subordinate sideshow of modern capitalism – that can, in other words, re-domesticate an economy released into the global open by neoliberalism at the peril of society and of itself, and, in the process rebuild it as an economy of, by, and for the people. (Streeck 2024, xiii)

Against this background, some democratic theorists propose AD as a possible solution. However, feasibility requires that any associative design lives up to the demands

of political realism. That is, it must accord with the functioning of real-world political and business institutions, accommodate the give and take of power politics, take the historical and cultural experiences of a polity into account, and accommodate the resolution of conflicts of interests and values (Geuss 2008).

In an abstract sense this sounds fair enough, but in a concrete sense these are almost impossible demands. The first duty of the democratic reformer is to be aware of what they are up against. When measured in GDP or revenue, 63 of the 100 largest economies are businesses, not countries.¹⁰ The finance industry is a complex global behemoth that reaps outsized profits from being granted the exclusive right by public authorities to produce money, uses this money to set up a rentier economy or enter risky financial speculation, and is deliberately untransparent about these arrangements to the outside world (Bollen 2025; Kay 2015). Transnational corporations and wealthy individuals siphon off tens of billions of dollars annually to tax havens (Harrington 2024). The tech industry works at breakneck speed, supported by inconceivable amounts of capital, to develop digital tools that reshape the worlds of work, communication and politics. The billionaire owners of these giant accumulations of capital have unprecedented influence on governments worldwide. It would be unrealistic to believe that such financial and technological might will voluntarily give up the advantages it gains from the current configuration of thin liberal democracy and global capitalism. On the contrary, much of the activity of the corporate sector and finance industry is opaque, subverting democratic mechanisms through lobbying, coopting elected officials for behind-the-scenes legislative activity, and taking over vital government functions.¹¹ The expectation that large companies would accede to a national democratic arrangement of self-governance that assumes equality, transparency, and accountability is simply not plausible.

Realism is the recognition that politics is a distinct and difficult craft that follows its own logic (Diesing 1962), a craft that, according to Bismarck's famous dictum, is often not pretty to behold. It accepts that conflict is the default state of politics and that political conflict is very different from intellectual conflict, more urgent and passionate because there is more at stake, and more likely to be settled through the working of power than measured debate (Galston 2010, 397)¹² Political realism positions itself as resolutely anti-utopian. Given the laws of unintended consequences (Sterman 2002), the best that political actors can do is "preventing the worst" (war, tyranny, anarchy) (Galston 2010, 394).¹³ Political realism is not nihilism though. It is about working and living together and making choices in situations where (political) actors are constrained by power asymmetries and insufficient knowledge and resources. It is also about leveraging the capacities of the state and civil society to restrain powerful corporate elites, support democratic institutions, uphold the rule of law, and protect civil society. Even in unpromising situations political actors have shown to be able to reach accommodations or resolve conflicts. A viable political realism requires a dose of utopianism, an application of political and social imagination, to open the valves of creative problem solving. Contrary to realist belief (Geuss 2008), utopianism is not the political sin of frictionless wishful thinking. Instead, it is a collective hermeneutic that invites anticipatory imagination (Levitas 2013, 5; Wagenaar and Prainsack 2021, ch. 2). Utopianism involves the specification of "a good society set out with some degree

of institutional specificity” (Levitas 2013, 65). While utopianism without realism is powerless, realism without imagination is stagnant.

While the doctrine of political realism has a *prima facie* validity, its demands pull in different directions. On the one hand, value pluralism, conflicts of interests, and entrenched power differentials require coalition formation and political bargaining. The default response is for dominant political-economic actors to influence, negotiate, bargain, and decide without the distraction of democratic participation. The problem with this well-known, often validated, hierarchical realist design, however, is epistemic deficiency. The problem of epistemic deficiency has two aspects. First, central political actors lack the requisite knowledge that is decisive both for an adequate understanding of the issues at hand and the formulation of creative solutions (Hirst 1994). Such local knowledge must be simultaneously granular, reflecting the experience of users “at the coal face,” and synoptic, reaching out across a diversity of meaning and value. While the first is provided by civic and professional associations, the second requires the coordinating function of the state which assesses new experiences and understandings in light of public interests. In thin liberal democracies in which elected officials and public administrators operate in close alliance with corporate and financial interests, the channels through which this kind of knowledge flows from towns, neighborhoods, or industrial parks to the central decision-making bodies, are simply not there. The system of interest representation is biased against civil society actors and citizen groups. It is also substantively biased in that economic and financial issues, followed by security and defense, received more attention than social and environmental issues. As Schattschneider famously said: “The flaw in the pluralist heaven is that the heavenly chorus sings with a strong upper-class accent” (1960, 35).

The second, related, aspect of the epistemic deficiency in liberal democracy is that it restricts creativity and constrains effective problem solving. The exposure to only a limited number of actors, who gain access to political decision makers because they are guaranteed to think in similar ways, almost guarantees a restraint on creativity and innovation. In addition, the interest profile and standard operating procedures of large institutional actors and the specialization and division of labor that results in the separation of organizational functions, one of the hallmarks of political realism (Galston 2010, 393), restricts the range of possible solutions to large societal problems. Food production in the Netherlands (and no doubt in most advanced societies) is a case in point. Like most advanced societies, the Netherlands suffers from large public health issues and severe environmental degradation as caused by the global food production chain. As a major exporter and importer of agrarian products, it occupies a central position in the global food industry. This results in pollution of water, soil, and air, as well as the deterioration of nature, landscape, and biodiversity. A small number of giant global food corporations and large national supermarket chains determines the supply of food, much of which is unhealthy (Hassink 2025). Large national problems such as the effluence of nitrates in water and air, or the reduction of obesity among the population, have resulted in policy impasses. Government and parliament have been incapable so far in finding effective solutions. But, as Hassink notes, at the local level the picture is a very different one. Farmers and citizens, work together to produce and consume healthy products in harmony with the natural environment. For example, in more and more cities, citizens create “city-gardens” where they grow vegetables and often

consume the harvest together in community meals. The side-effects are an increase in health, wellbeing, and a sense of community. The Netherlands has over 600 so-called community farms. These are farms that do not use fertilizer and pesticides, and involve citizens as volunteer, investor, and customer. Many of these farms deliver to environmentally conscious restaurants (*ibid.*). Problems that are intractable at higher levels of scale and aggregation, are often fairly easily resolved at the local and regional level where supply and demand and the different elements of the production and consumption system are united. Hassink notes, however, that so far, national players have shown little interest in engaging with these local and regional initiatives.

I have argued that corporatism might be a realist solution to the value pluralism, conflict of interest, and political and social fragmentation of societies, past and present. Against the dominant market doctrine, in countries all over the world, corporatism has proven to be a remarkably robust arrangement for domesticating passionate political conflict and creating the conditions for the enduring collaborative governance of the economy, industrial relations and other social domains. These collaborations take different forms but they have certain features in common.¹⁴ These are: a pre-sorting of issues, the co-optation of group leaders, institutionalized access channels, the “juridization or legalization of group conflicts through administrative courts or bodies,” a “political culture that emphasizes formalism, consensus and continuous bargaining,” a “symbiotic relation with clientelist practices in certain issue areas,” and “the deliberate narrowing and encapsulation of relevant publics.” (Schmitter 1974, 101). To this, recent research on civil society organizations has added that a wider variety of civic organizations than the literature on corporatism suggests, can make a potential contribution to democratic governance (Bolleyer 2024). The question is: are states willing and able to devolve governance to civic organizations?

In the remainder of this paper, I propose a two-tiered system of AD that is based on the experience of corporatism. It combines timely and authoritative political decision making, authentic political participation, and a solution to the double-barreled epistemic gap, while it does not raise unrealistic expectations towards democratic reformist transition. The first tier consists of a sectorally organized, institutionalized, system of AD that builds upon extensive experience with (neo-) corporatist arrangements. The second, complementary tier, consists of bottom-up citizen initiatives organized according to principles of commoning, that is loosely, although formally, related to Tier 1 and builds upon “the stubborn persistence of collectivism inside the nation state and the market” (Streeck and Kenworthy 2012, 442; Evans and Boyte 1986).

Tier 1 AD acknowledges the essential role of the state in governing complex societies (Streeck 2024, 64, 67, 292–293). The state coordinates and organizes the considerable resources and knowledge required to maintain a functioning public infrastructure, provide affordable housing, organize a public health and social care system, provide accessible, high-quality education, support scientific research, and uphold the rule of law. The state also maintains an effective, up-to-date security apparatus and the capacity to navigate the global economic environment. Despite half a century of small-state ideological rhetoric to the contrary, harsh experience has shown that, in our contemporary world, these are the minimum requirements of any functional modern state (Wagenaar and Prainsack 2021). In Tier 1 AD, the state assigns semipublic status to civic associations according to neocorporatist principles in exchange for their willingness to take

over certain public functions such as policy formulation and implementation, to coordinate these activities with state agents, and to align their demands with the public interest. Instead of the government or parliament selecting associations, the process of the sharing and delegation of public functions should follow a course of evolutionary learning (Ansell 2011). As we saw in the preceding section, in neocorporatist arrangements the structure of the association is crucial for the outcome of the process. Given these organizational dynamics, an iterative transition model could begin with those sectors (industrial relations, public servants, education, care), where associations are still in place in many countries and experience with peak bargaining exists. The lessons learned in one domain can be applied to another. Neocorporatist arrangements can be expanded to sectors such as housing, public transport, farming, energy, climate, or finance. Nationally, such a moderated form of AD would be anchored at the local and regional level. It would capitalize on existing associations that are either sectorally or functionally organized. In these domains, umbrella organizations representing employers, employees users/consumers, farmers, tenants and homeowners, and so on, deliberate and negotiate with each other, in the presence of government representatives, on wages, work conditions but also issues of sustainable agriculture, the energy transition, housing affordability, cost of living issues, or public banking. Over time, these national neocorporatist arrangements can evolve into the countervailing power to exploitative, extractive capitalism that Streeck envisions.

Such neocorporatist arrangements rest on a rich ecosystem of associations. This is the second element of a revived AD. Many of these associations will be fairly standard interest organizations such as the association of milk producing farmers or homeowner associations. But, over the last two decades, in many countries, hundreds of bottom-up local commons have emerged, such as the community farms, that produce public goods and services. Think of green energy, sustainable food, cooperative housing, social or childcare, and even banking services (Bollier and Helfrich 2015; Hassink 2025; Wagenaar 2019; Wagenaar and Healey 2015; Wagenaar and van der Heijden 2015; Zechner 2021). Language is tricky here. Although they are civic organizations, they are much closer to informal community life than the more formal associations of Tier1. Commons are in spirit and organization closer to what Sarah Evans and Harry Boyte call free spaces. They argue that:

[P]articular sorts of public spaces in the community, what we call free spaces, are the environments in which people are able to learn a new self-respect, a deeper and more assertive group identity, public skills, and values of cooperation and civic virtue. Put simply, free spaces are settings between private lives and large scale institutions where ordinary citizens can act with dignity, independence, and vision. These are, in the main, voluntary forms of association with a relatively open and participatory character ... (1986, 17)

The most developed statement of the organizing principles of commons is the Triad of Commoning as formulated by the commons scholars and activists David Bollier and Silke Helfrich (2019). According to the authors, the triad captures “the core purpose of commoning: the creation of peer-governed, context-specific, systems of free, fair, and sustainable lives” (2019, 97). The Triad consists of the values and principles that govern

the social, the institutional, and the economic sphere, or, in the words of Bollier and Helfrich, the spheres of “Social Life, Peer Governance, and Provisioning” (ibid. 98). It goes too far within the constraints of this article to spell out all the principles of the triad of commoning.¹⁵ To get a flavor of the radical otherness of commons, I list a few organizing principles from each sphere.

Commons are self-organized arrangements. They are “the exploratory process by which people identify their needs and devise situation-specific systems for provisioning and governance” (Bollier and Helfrich 2019, 123). First of all, they embody a set of principles that govern social life. One is the cultivation of shared purpose and values through “collective reflection, traditions, celebrations, and participation in all kinds of activities.” A second principle is to contribute freely without the expectation to reciprocate in direct ways. A third example is to rely on the “deep reservoirs of embodied and situated knowing” (op. cit. 108). Peer governance involves among others honoring transparency to create a sphere of trust and sustain personal relationships. It creates heterarchical ways of organization, and it relies on peer monitoring and graduated sanctions to ensure consensual compliance (see also Ostrom 1990). Finally, provisioning is the commoners’ term for producing goods and services. Instead of functionally separating producers and consumers, “production and consumption are integrated as one organic process of planning, design, documentation, and provisioning along with use, reuse, and waste management. ... [T]he output is made available to others and the benefits are retained and shared.” (op. cit. 165). Again, the Dutch case of sustainable local food agriculture is an example where through processes of provisioning, “[c]ommoners ... cultivate affective ties to their care-wealth—forests, farmland, water, urban spaces—which often become part of their culture, social lives and identities.” (op. cit. 166)

This brief characterization of the operational logic of commons makes clear that it will be difficult for elected officials and public administrators to integrate commons in their everyday practices of governance and bureaucracy. There is a world of negotiating, bargaining, crisis management, budgetary legerdemain, lobbying, and judicial rulings. Commoners operate on principles of reciprocity, mutual trust, conviviality, peer governance, and decommodification. In fact, as the title of their book indicates, Bollier and Helfrich ascribe insurgent power to commons, and this is perhaps not an optimal basis for a stable, effective government.¹⁶ To integrate commons in a workable AD arrangement would surely violate basic principles of political realism. But commons do not need to enter the halls of government. In fact, for an effective form of AD, it is perhaps better for commons to remain on the periphery of state action. Commons have proven to be effective in governing local and regional functional domains. They are flexible, have short communication lines, and do not suffer from the rigid functional specialization (silos) of state bureaucracies. Commons are multifunctional (van der Heijden 2010). They have shown to be well-equipped to harness dynamically complex systems (Wagenaar 2007). Government bureaucracies would be well-advised to devolve the governance of lower-level functional or territorial domains to commons.

However, devolvement must not mean jettisoning. To profit from the broadening of the epistemic horizon, governments must create and maintain stable channels of communication between state agencies and commons. There are different ways to

integrate the implementation and innovation functions of commons in the political-administrative state apparatus. One could think, for example, of a binding directive to consult relevant commons in cases of new policy initiatives and explain how commons knowledge has been integrated in policy initiatives.¹⁷ Or the government can create a Ministry or Secretariat of the Commons, which not only facilitates commons but also issues opinions on policy initiatives based on the local knowledge of commons. To prevent that this becomes a dead letter, citizens may ask parliament to question the executive about its responsiveness to commons knowledge.

But these are in the end weak, non-binding mechanisms, that do not commit state actors to serious deliberation with commons. In the spirit of AD I propose instead an institutionalized confederate structure of commons which is bound with state actors in a corporatist arrangement that forms the second tier of AD. The *Commons Confederation* obliges the state, according to a mutually agreed playbook, to consult, deliberate, and negotiate with representatives of commons about pressing policy issues. Such a *Commons Confederation* is, from the side of the participating commons, organized according to the well-known confederalist principles of peer governance rooted in individual commons, communal values, a small number of directly chosen delegates who are strictly mandated to confer with state actors, and who are recallable at any time (Bookchin 2015). It is important that the confederation is binding for both parties, which, given the asymmetrical power relations between state and communities, is particularly important to secure that the state acts in good faith. Such a pact could take the shape of a confederate charter that is approved by parliament. It would prevent among others one-sided withdrawal from the confederation by more powerful actors and forum hopping to get a better deal. It would enable transparent agendas to make lobbying by powerful actors less likely, repair information asymmetry, and require a regular reporting obligation to parliament.

A *Commons Confederation* has several advantages. First, it is problem oriented. It builds upon existing, bottom-up associations that spring from citizens' own perception of collective problems that go unheeded in society. It would bind the state to such democratically derived collective needs, without imposing its own agenda on associations. The Confederation is organized around the concerns that form the *raison d'être* of the individual commons, such as producing green energy, healthy food, accessible and affordable care, public banking services, and so on. Second, it preserves the communal values and practices and the deep democracy that form key principles of commons. Third, it would create the necessary stability for commons and state actors to develop mutual trust and respect for each other's judgement and role in the collective house of governance. Fourth, regular reporting by responsible ministers about commons consultation in parliament, as well as journalistic reporting on corporatist consultations, would lift commons out of their local confines and make them a much more visible element in the public sphere than they are now. At the same time, fifth, it would shield commons from the damaging actions of powerful actors. An institutionalized *Commons Confederation* that interacts on a regular basis about policy issues, would make it much harder for state or corporate actors to coopt successful commons or constrain them by the *raison d'état* of high government. Longton and Scholl find for example that the state was not only able to shield an alternative food community from being overpowered by the low-price policies of profit-driven corporate retail chains,

but also support the network in demonstrating their benefits to the public and the business sector (2025, 18). And sixth, it leverages the state's experience with interactive or collaborative governance. A chartered confederate structure ensures that this form of interactive governance does not consist of well-intended but isolated, stand-alone initiatives, but instead is consolidated and comprehensive. Through the confederate mechanism locally developed creative solutions to wicked problems start to disseminate through the political-administrative system. Yet, at the same time the system is incremental; it can be developed, sector by sector, region by region, country by country, gradually learning about what works and what doesn't in specific contexts.

The purpose of an institutionalized communication conduit with the substratum of commons in society is not to force governments to accept the experiences of commons but to enhance the diversity and variation within the government system. By being exposed to the experiential knowledge and situated values of the work of commons, state agencies engage in a process of evolutionary learning (Ansell 2011). The commons could grow into a generally valued laboratory of citizen-generated governance solutions. Such an arrangement would contain the three change mechanisms that are considered crucial to harnessing complexity: increase variation in the system, increase interaction with knowledgeable peers, and spread and adjust creative solutions that work (Axelrod and Cohen 2000, 22). The institutionalization of a bottom-up, democratic innovative function within the political-administrative complex is no guarantee that it will act as a counterforce to the dominance of corporate-financial might. But through its "problem-solving" stance and the sponsorship by at least some elements of the state, commons knowledge enters the civil sphere with much greater authority and a higher chance to change public attitudes and even values. The beauty of a confederate arrangement is that it operates simultaneously at arm's length, safeguarding the integrity of the involved actors, and up close, allowing for mutual trust and understanding to develop. For commons, this has the considerable advantage that it would protect them against cooptation and takeover by political or corporate actors. The commons represent the heuristic value of utopian thinking. There is no principal reason why commons cannot move the Overton window. Commons can be the utopian leave in a realist system of government.¹⁸

And, perhaps most importantly, giving citizens real responsibility for managing societal sectors, by applying "the method of cooperative intelligence", would contribute to the transition of thin democracy to developmental democracy (Macpherson 1977, 74). It would deepen democracy by taking the role of citizens and local organizations in national governance seriously. Their immersion in the dilemmas and entanglements of everyday practice give them a certain rootedness in the plurality and resistance of the social-material world. It strengthens community identity and self-respect, while it allows commoners to practice public skills such as presenting one's position in the public sphere, leadership, conflict resolution, articulating the common good, and engaging in collaborative efforts (Evans and Boyte 1986, 18). Commons act as schools of democracy. In this way, a *Commons Confederation* has the added advantage of counteracting one of the perversions of liberal democracy, the manipulation of public discourse by social media and biased, corporately controlled, legacy media. This is benefit of AD that curiously is seldom mentioned but has become more important than ever in a society that is dominated

by social media and media oligarchies owned by right-wing billionaires. People who are directly involved in the governance of their community are less vulnerable to the seductions of crude ideological propaganda in (social) media.

Such a two-tiered system of national AD does not go far enough, however, in addressing global issues such as tax evasion, assertive tech companies and the erosion of the civil sphere by the toxic effects of the private banking system, social media, and climate breakdown. For this, we need a parallel initiative of international associations that are supported by transnational organizations. The EU, for example, attempts to regulate the tech industry through a combination of legislative frameworks, such as the General Data Protection Regulation, the Digital Markets Act, the Digital Services Act, and the AI Act. These regulations aim to curb monopolistic behavior, protect user privacy, and create greater accountability for harmful content. Yet, the rapid pace of technological innovation and the immense economic and political power of tech giants often leave policymakers scrambling to catch up and make them vulnerable to lobbying, creating a regulatory environment characterized by reactive measures and hesitant enforcement. Moreover, it would be important for EU regulation to go beyond the frame of fair market competition that has dominated its legislative effort so far and treat digital platforms as public places and digital infrastructure as public infrastructure (Prainsack 2026). By extending the confederalist logic to the supranational level, there is no principled reason why confederated civic associations could not be integrated in the EU governance framework.

Conclusion

We cannot be grateful enough to Bader and Maussen to have reignited the debate about AD in a time that it is needed more than ever. Throughout modern history, AD has been one of the most powerful exemplars holding up the ideals and possibilities of democracy. Although their book is surprisingly moot on (neo-)corporatism, although not on economic democracy, it can act as a stimulus to rethink and redesign associationism in politics, economic life, and democracy, and go beyond important but more limited reforms such as collaborative governance or deliberative democracy. It is in sync with the revived debate about the “rehabilitation of the nation-state as the main arena of democratic politics under capitalism” (Streeck 2024, 56; Rodrik 2012). There are no easy solutions here, as Bader and Maussen repeatedly emphasize. But in a seemingly monolithic neoliberal world, where political and economic elites try to tell us that “there is no alternative,” their book, and the wider themes it touches upon do contain the contours of a real democratic alternative that connects civic associationism and insurgent civic power with the *raison d'état* of everyday government. Moreover, an alternative that is not a mere abstract ideal but that is in accord with the requirements of political realism.

Admittedly, such a form of AD is a weak force against the developments that have resulted in the current “deep crisis challenging the basic forms of governance of modernity,” as Bader and Maussen called it (2024, 1). Moreover, I also have not answered the question why states would be willing to break free from their pact with the business and finance sector to devolve power to civic organizations. Perhaps the answer is precisely in the combination of urgency and lack of perspective in repairing liberal democracy’s

obvious shortcomings. Governments in many liberal democracies are with their backs against the wall. In the face of encroaching illiberalism, a threatening climate collapse, a persistent inability to deliver on their promises, and a changing geo-political order, involving societal organizations in governance may seem as not a bad option. Perhaps we overstate the seeming weakness of AD. By harnessing the democratic power of associations and the innovative, insurgent power of the commons, communal values and nonprofit-oriented economic solutions will enter the political-administrative system. By actively working on the governance of local environments and seeing their efforts acknowledged by political and administrative decision-makers will immunize citizens from the divisive powers of the tech platforms and open up new democratic spaces. Problem-oriented utopian imagination will seep through government and inject a necessary dose of diversity and experiential knowledge into administrative-political decision-making to fire-up our collective imagination. Perhaps a new generation of political leaders will stand up that, in the words of that great champion of democracy in totalitarian times Václav Havel, will allow the “power of the powerless” to flourish so that we can all have a shot at living in freedom, dignity, and decency.

Notes

¹ I am grateful to the Reviewers for *Democratic Theory*, Mette Nordahl Svendsen, Barbara Prainsack, Jean-Paul Gagnon, and the participants of the CeSCoS writing Group at the University of Vienna for their constructive and generous commentary on earlier drafts of the article.

² Democracy is a large, complex, and diverse political-economic phenomenon, so terminology is tricky here. The authoritative Varieties of Democracy project (V-DEM) distinguishes two kinds of electoral democracy: electoral democracy, a compromised version of liberal democracy, and liberal democracy proper. Both are characterized by six features, explicated by Dahl: “elected officials, free and fair elections, freedom of expression, alternative sources of information, associational autonomy, and inclusive citizenship” (in: Lührmann et al. 2018, 62). In addition, “Core components ... include legislative and judicial oversight over the executive providing checks and balances, as well as the protection of individual liberties, including access to, and equality before, the law” (ibid.). When the rule of law is weak liberal democracy becomes an electoral democracy. When free, fair, multiparty elections are missing the regime is either an electoral or closed autocracy (Lührmann et al. 2018, 63). In the remainder of this article, I choose to follow the V-Dem terminology and use the term liberal democracy.

³ The literature is large and growing. We made an attempt to analyze the working of the financial sector and sketch a more democratic alternative in chapter 7 of *The Pandemic Within* (Wagenaar and Prainsack 2021). An impressive analytic overview of the global money system and the power of the banking lobby in fending off even minimal reforms, however only in Dutch, is Bollen (2025). A good English-language analysis is Kay (2015).

⁴ Bollen’s description of the entanglement of the state and the financial sector in the USA and Europe is an illustration, as enlightening as it is dejecting, of the way the institutional-legal bias towards capital works in practice (Bollen 2025).

⁵ These problems are rooted in the “predicament of complexity” that confronts every elected official and public administrator. It goes far beyond the boundaries of this paper to discuss the importance of complexity for politics and policy making. A succinct summary of the literature can be found in Wagenaar and Prainsack (2021), ch 2.

⁶ <https://www.vliegghinder.nl/nieuws/artikel/schiphol-overleg-staat-op-springen>.

⁷ The policy scholar Paul Cairney speaks of “venue shopping,” to “seek more sympathetic audiences” in a variegated and multilevel landscape of governance. He does not relate it to the asymmetrical institutional mobility of actors which gives some influential actors preferred access to key decision-making bodies (Cairney 2012, 189).

⁸ For an extensive analysis of the harmful effects of this last point, see: <https://medium.com/@hendrik.Author/are-we-entering-the-age-of-cyber-fascism-807771bc7298>.

⁹ “Civil society organizations (CSOs) are defined as organizations with a voluntary membership (be those individuals or corporate actors) that are private, separate from government, self-governing, non-profit-distributing, and generally have a formalized infrastructure” (Bolleyer 2024, 1). These are NGOs, faith-based organizations, labor unions, employer associations, advocacy organizations, charitable trusts, and so on. For purposes of this proposal, and for reasons that I will explain, I see commons as occupying a special position within the category of civic organizations.

¹⁰ See Prainsack (2026). These are 2016 figures. With three companies in the top 20 in 2024, this number probably needs to be adjusted (2026, 70).

¹¹ For example: <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/apr/06/trump-musk-billionaires-influence-national-security>.

¹² Galston: “Realists see political conflict as ubiquitous, perennial, ineradicable, and they regard political moralists as being far too sanguine about the possibility of achieving either normative or practical consensus.” (Galston 2010, 396).

¹³ Galston: “Among the hallmarks of this endeavor are a moral psychology that includes the passions and emotions; a robust conception of political possibility and rejection of utopian thinking; the belief that political conflict—of values as well as interests—is both fundamental and ineradicable; a focus on institutions as the arenas within which conflict is mediated and contained; and a conception of politics as a sphere of activity that is distinct, autonomous, and subject to norms that cannot be derived from individual morality.” (Galston 2010, 385).

¹⁴ What I mean to invoke here are two key features of political realism: that politics is “about action and the contexts of action” and that context is always “historically located” (Geuss 2008, 11, 13). From a certain perspectival distance, it may be possible to discern relatively stable types of corporatism such as the more bottom-up societal and the more top-down state corporatism that Schmitter distinguishes (Schmitter 1974, 103). In real-world, functioning democracies the specific form that corporatism takes will have elements of both. In this essay, I am interested in merging both forms of democratic state–society collaboration.

¹⁵ See Bollier and Helfrich (2109), Part 2 (pp. 93–200) for an overview and explanation of the Triad of Commoning. The phrase “radical otherness” suggests fanciful, impractical thought. But the example of the local and regional food systems in the Netherlands shows that in fact commons are effective, concrete, problem-oriented, and representative of the needs of citizens and communities. The commons are radically different only from the perspective of the standard operating procedures and practices of transnational corporations, investment banks, hedge funds, and national and transnational administrations.

¹⁶ This is confirmed in everyday administrative life. Social movements that were swept into government during the municipalism period in Spanish politics struggled both with their administrative duties, the hostility of the sitting bureaucrats, and the exaggerated expectations of their followers (Wagenaar 2023, 72; Bua and Davies 2022).

¹⁷ In the 1990s, the city of The Hague had issued such a directive to consult relevant citizen groups about new policy initiatives (Wagenaar et al. 2010).

¹⁸ The advantage of such a loose, non-binding, but formally recognized role of commons in state governance is that it puts no principled limits on their horizon of imagination (except for deliberate intent of destroying democratic institutions or civil society). For example, much original and stimulating thinking about a sustainable society can be found in indigenous communities, such as the Haudenosaunee Confederacy (a confederation of six indigenous nations in upstate New York and Ontario) or the indigenous societies of Northwest Columbia (Lyons et al. 1998; Trosper 2009). In a neoliberal society, it is not conceivable that indigenous thinking will have any truck with policy makers or business elites. However, under the influence of the progressing climate catastrophe, indigenous principles for organizing economic activity in a sustainable manner, could very well act as epistemic resource for a progressive environmentally conscious government. (The Haudenosaunee example was kindly suggested to me by Jean-Paul Gagnon).

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