

## A Relational Grounding for (Urban) Governance

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**A RELATIONAL GROUNDING FOR (URBAN) GOVERNANCE. STREET LEVEL  
PRACTICES OF RESPONSIVE IMPROVISATION AND PRACTICAL CHANGE**

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**A RELATIONAL GROUNDING FOR (URBAN) GOVERNANCE. STREET LEVEL PRACTICES OF RESPONSIVE IMPROVISATION AND PRACTICAL CHANGE**

Laws, David and John Forester. *Conflict, Improvisation, Governance. Street Level Practices for Urban Democracy* (New York, NY/Oxon: Routledge, 2015) 371 pp., \$144.00 Hardback, Hardback ISBN: 9781138025684, \$47.96 Paperback, Paperback ISBN: 9781138025677.

Reversing the tide and finally starting to build a relationship between residents and the local government seems more than a stretch, given the escalating conflict and lack of understanding that prevailed as Tonie started his work. Yet this is what he managed to do. His efforts help us see how conflict can provide a starting point for development. (139)

It seems wholly appropriate to start this review of *Conflict, Improvisation, Governance. Street Level Practices for Urban Democracy* with practice. The story above not only provides a window on the main message and contribution of the book, it also illustrates the astute practice-based approach through which John Forester and David Law illuminate the day-to-day work involved in enacting urban democracy. The book presents thirteen profiles of “street level democrats”—“exemplary” and “innovative” (6) practitioners who creatively deal with the tensions and conflicts innervating the everyday practice of urban governance and whose responsive improvisations and practical changes make or break its democratization. Situated in four major cities in the Netherlands, Laws and Forester set out to “theorize concretely through accounts of day-to-day work” (346) in order to reveal the real difficulties and opportunities of navigating complex urban affairs and offer a fresh perspective on the democratic implications of these discretionary practices.

The thirteen profiles are presented in four thematic parts. Part I addresses what Laws and Forester see as the fundamental challenge of urban governance: improvising responsively and creatively in complex political and social realities. Here we meet people like Ellen Hiep,

whose efforts to develop a shared vision for the renovation of a multifarious neighborhood transform the trained incapacity of the housing association in question to learn about the actual problems and desires of residents. In Part II, ‘Learning to change communities’, Tonie Boxman (who features in the story above) narrates how his careful and authentic listening helped to work through a conflict about a community centre. Part III confronts the thorny challenges of cultural and ethnic diversity and immigration. Here Halim el Madkouri teaches us about how becoming aware of how we relate to and learn about others can help prevent local tensions to turn into a cycle of mutual fear, escalation, and polarization. Part IV, finally, encourages us to rethink administration, for example in multi-agency collaboration. The story of Erik Gerritsen shows that encouraging conflict can break patterns of miscommunication and mutual blame and rekindle passion, commitment, and joint problem solving.

These are just some brief examples of the rich grounded profiles through which Laws and Forester are “illustrating through exemplars rather than making a distanced and abstract argument” (346) about conflict, improvisation, and democratization in urban governance. Theirs is a practice approach, an increasingly popular way to refocus our field on the seemingly mundane everyday activities through which administrative actors perform their jobs in interaction with the people, rules, materials, institutions, and bodily dispositions at hand (see e.g., Laws & Hajer, 2006; Wagenaar, 2004; Cook & Wagenaar, 2012) By taking a practice approach, they aim to resist summary and confusing conceptual language and, instead, provide a concrete sense of the actual work involved and the real life challenges, messiness, emotions, interactions, and unexpected turns that present themselves as people engage with complex situations. Throughout the book they avoid extensive theoretical discussion, prioritizing unpacking and grounded theorizing of the practices of their street level democrats over dense literature review. But while their initial embedding in literatures

of street level bureaucracy, conflict resolution, and participatory democracy might seem thin, a substantive and significant argument does materialize.

Laws and Forester argue that street level democrats make a difference to urban democracy by *improvising*. Instead of resorting to habitual routines or a priori rules and solutions, this involves enacting “situated performances that unfold within the *particularity of a given setting* and in response to the particular dignity of those who are involved” (345; emphasis in original). The point, they go on to stress, is not just *that* street level democrats improvise but *how* they engage in such reflective practice and which are the democratic implications. In this way, Laws and Forester claim to go beyond Lipsky’s (1980) focus on administrative discretion and more recent interpretivist analyses unpacking the situated practices through which front line workers develop practical interpretations and locally appropriate responses (e.g., Durose 2009; Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2000). “Discretion provides the space; improvisation produces the quality of the action within the space.” (355) In other words, improvisation is not just contingent interpretation; it is a creative and responsive process of democratization.

Such “democratizing improvisations have three faces” (356): *appreciating the value and significance* of concrete, mundane details and working with the constraints and materials at hand, *leveraging expertise* in the service of the people involved rather than vice versa, and *negotiating action* with all stakeholders to produce tangible results. This can be done through a rich repertoire of practices, including attention and respect for ordinary experience and language; letting go of professional knowledge and arrogance; building authentic and responsive relationships; and provoking anger and conflict to unleash energy and passion. The thirteen profiles illuminate the meaning and significance of these practices in their own, idiographic ways.

Nevertheless, many stories seem to converge on “the presence approach” (123) to front line work, “a strategy of making contact, listening, and learning” in which we “presume less, probe more, announce less and listen more” (343). This is a substantive alternative to the high handed expertise of officials who, from their offices, develop policies and prescriptive models which and sustain authoritative and ineffective relationships. Being present, actively listening, and doing things together can recreate the basis of conversations and relationships for novel solutions and resources to emerge (see also Bartels, 2016). In addition, they suggest a departure from the conventional managerial focus on comprehensive knowledge, control, and accountability towards appreciation of the creative and responsive practices essential to producing practical and democratic change (see also Freeman et al., 2011).

The field of public administration has much to learn from *Conflict, Improvisation, Governance*. It is a treasure cove of rich and engaging stories (which should especially speak to the readership of the ‘administrative profiles’ in *Public Administration Review*), embellished with sound and perceptive author commentaries at the end of each chapter and overall interpretations and conclusions. The book is a testament to the fine interviewing and analytical capacities of Laws and Forester, who draw on long experience with the topic and approach (see e.g., Laws & Hajer 2006; Laws & Forester 2009; Forester 2009; Wagenaar 2011). Their patient, meticulous respect for detail and accessible and engaging writing makes it an excellent and imperative read for scholars, students, and practitioners.

More substantively, the book offers us a rich and much-needed repertoire of relational and communicative practices for revitalizing urban democracy and stimulates us to rethink what democratic politics really is, how it can be enacted, and what it takes to do so well. Its argument for deeper appreciation of how skilful and innovative street level practices of improvisation facilitate critical practical change is particularly relevant in light of the ongoing ethnic tensions, inequalities and polarization troubling urban fabrics in the USA and

elsewhere in the world. The book is situated in the Dutch context of social tensions and about ethnic diversity and immigration and the changing role of (local) government and its relations with citizens. “Street level interaction, particularly with and among citizens [has] defined the way forward.” (30) What is going on and at stake in these local interactions is intimately and reciprocally tied up with broader patterns and global events. With this in mind, the book tells an urgent “democratic story in which we might learn about working with others who are different” (15) across cultural and organizational boundaries.

The book’s focus on idiographic histories and seemingly small local situations might be criticized for lack of attention to the structural, long term effects of the practices of the appraised street level democrats. But Laws and Forester make a convincing case for how these specific cases generate bigger lessons. Based on their practice approach, they argue that urban democracy is an ongoing practice that is (and needs to be) made and remade; i.e., it constantly requires responding to new and unfolding situations and achieving productive interactions and democratic outcomes time and again. As Willem Giezeman puts it in his story, “it’s not living in the moment, no, no, absolutely not. It’s really living in the real” (123). Still, some further reflection on the context of the stories would have been welcome. For example, is there something particular about the Dutch context that enables such exemplary practices of improvisation? Even though Chapter 3 provides a helpful outline of the Dutch societal, political, and policy context, we lack, for example, deeper analysis of the implications of recent austerity-related reforms to its governance and welfare systems for street level democrats.

However, there is a more significant limitation to the book. Whereas Laws and Forester criticize Durose (2009) and others for not going far enough in extending Lipsky’s (1980) view of street level bureaucrats, I believe that their analysis equally does not reach its full potential. Their convincing argument for understanding urban democracy in terms of the

quality of the improvisations through which street level democrats enact and foster mutual responsiveness brushes over the deeper philosophical implications of this reorientation. With their calls to “see practices as relational” (361) and understand “the promise of democratic discourse, not as a static goal, but as a creative process” (19), what Laws and Forester seem to be getting at, but never fully articulate, is *a relational grounding for urban democracy* (see Stout 2012; Stout & Love 2015; Bartels 2015). Indeed, the stories and analyses constantly emphasize “the significance of building relationships” (110), “corroded relationships between housing providers and local residents” (68), “a more reciprocal, interdependent, mutually vulnerable relationship with the youth” (86), and “the relational quality of education—the way teachers talk and interact with students” (238).

Such deeper theorizing could have fostered a subtle, yet fundamental reorientation away from the exemplary practices and responsive improvisations of individual practitioners to a focus on the relationships, interactions, or encounters through which urban democracy is enacted (Bartels 2015). This would be wholly in line with their constant emphasis on “interactions” (e.g., 13, 14, 17, 30, 45) and how it is in the communicative process of encountering others that “we get a feel for what is involved in ‘meeting with’ and ‘listening to’” (346; see also e.g., 22-23, 68, 87, 141, 256, 298). Moreover, as the stories of, for instance, Ellen Hiep and Martien Kuitenbrouwer demonstrate, it is never just a single practitioner who makes things happen but always a collection of people who play multiple roles in transforming the situation at hand. To be sure, the focus on exemplary practitioners is absolutely legitimate and revealing but might have more aptly been used as a window on the relationships between a multitude of actors that form the texture of urban democracy and how creative, responsive improvisations emerge *in-between* them.

A more full-fledged relational perspective would also have made for more convincing criticism of the street level bureaucracy literature. Laws and Forester are on the right track

when they argue that street level democrats do not just “develop a narrative of the situation ... [but are] working out a solution *with* the [other actors] by getting to know them, by building trust, by improvising practical steps ... to move on together” (345; emphasis in original).

However, to my mind, the literature is certainly not short of studies of the democratic implications of how street level workers improvise in interaction with citizens, organizational actors, and the system (e.g., Wagenaar 2004, 2007, 2014; Barnes & Prior 2009; Maynard-Moody & Musheno 2012; Vinzant & Crothers 1998; Dubois 2010; Brodtkin, 2012). Rather, a fundamental shortcoming is that these studies are still grounded a static, individualist focus on the experiences and actions of street level bureaucrats rather than a relational view on their interactions in and of themselves (see Bartels 2015, 25-30).

Finally, further theorizing of the relational grounding of urban democracy could have helped to better articulate wider reform implications. Laws and Forester do not say much about how to spread the exemplary and innovative practices of their street level democrats. How might we for example engage with “typical” (6) practitioners and get them to learn and change? What kinds of reforms would be conducive to more widespread improvising? And how might we transform institutionalized routines, interests, and structures that continue to generate fundamental resistances to innovative and relational practices? Here Laws and Forester could have contributed to further shaping relational governance as an alternative vision for public administration (see Stout & Love 2015).

In conclusion, Laws and Forester join an exceptionally rich bundle of stories about street level practice with extraordinarily astute interpretations of the democratic implications. Besides forming an inspiring guide for improving everyday governance practices, their book stimulates further theoretical development and comparative analysis. It goes without saying that future research on street level democrats and the relational grounding of (urban) governance should be as empirically grounded and conceptually invigorating as here.

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