
Critical Conversations 2023-24: Redesigning Democracy

From ancient Athens to complex systems science

What if everything you were taught about democracy– that it is a system based on elections and political parties– was wrong?

We're delighted to announce the fifth season of Critical Conversations, an expert-led discussion series that allows Library members to ponder the most important issues of our time.

This cycle of Critical Conversations will focus on how we can save democracy, drawing on history, systems mapping, and the emerging science of collective intelligence. Led by Profs. Lex Paulson (Sciences Po-Paris / UM6P School of Collective Intelligence) and Mark Klein (MIT / UM6P School of Collective Intelligence), we will be exploring the following questions: What can democracy's ancient past teach us about today's crisis? How are citizens' assemblies and participatory budgeting pointing the way toward a new model? And how might we organize ourselves to make smarter collective decisions on hard problems like poverty or climate change?

Whether in France or America, debate is central to healthy democracy. Critical Conversations encourages both disagreement and agreement through thinking, talking, reading, and actively participating in community. Since the series' inception in 2020, we have tackled race in America, the climate crisis, and migration. Across seasons, participants have challenged themselves, their peers, and the world in which we live.

Groundwork:

Democracy in its first flowering in the 5th century BCE was based on a simple idea that a permanent class of monarchs and nobles was not the only model for effective

government on a large scale. That the entire citizen body, if properly organized, could govern themselves.

We can see how far the “democracies” of today fall short of this idea. And this is by design– the constitutions of France, America, and 100+ other “democratic” states were designed as elective republics, not democracies. In these “modern” democracies, to the increasing frustration of their citizens, decisions are taken by a more-or-less permanent political elite, responsive mainly to powerful interest groups, and only barely in contact with the citizens they claim to represent.

It doesn't have to be this way. In fact, a new model may already be taking shape. In this series of conversations, we will explore the “alternative history” of democracy in the ingenious institutions of 5th-century Athens and in democratic experiments that have disrupted the status quo from Ireland to Taiwan. In addition, we will draw upon the emerging science of collective intelligence: how a combination of tools from psychology, computer science and complex systems theory can help us design smarter groups, capable of solving this century's hardest problems.

About your instructors:

Prof. Lex Paulson is Executive Director of the UM6P School of Collective Intelligence (Morocco) and lectures in advocacy at Sciences Po-Paris. Trained in classics and community organizing, he served as mobilization strategist for the campaigns of Barack Obama in 2008 and Emmanuel Macron in 2017. He served as legislative counsel in the 111th U.S. Congress (2009-2011), organized on six U.S. presidential campaigns, and has worked to advance democratic innovation at the European Commission and in India, Tunisia, Egypt, Uganda, Senegal, Czech Republic and Ukraine. He is author of *Cicero and the People's Will: Philosophy and Power at the End of the Roman Republic*, from Cambridge University Press, and is co-editor of the *Routledge Handbook of Collective Intelligence for Democracy and Governance*.

Prof. Mark Klein (<http://cci.mit.edu/klein/>) is a Principal Research Scientist at the MIT Center for Collective Intelligence, serves as a professor and Senior Scientific Advisor at the UM6P School of Collective Intelligence, and Chief Scientist at HiveWise Inc, a startup in the collective intelligence space. His research draws from such fields as artificial intelligence, social computing, economics, operations research, and complexity science to develop and evaluate computer technologies that enable greater 'collective intelligence' in large groups faced with complex decisions. He has over 180 publications in these areas, and has served on the editorial boards of many prominent journals and conferences related to AI and social computing.

Session Details:

The 2023–2024 series will unfold over eight sessions, from November 2023 to June 2024. Conversations will begin at **19h00 CET** and **run for ninety minutes, in person, at the Library**. Profs. Paulson and Klein will begin each meeting with some opening remarks, before guiding a group discussion on the topic at hand.

Please note, the instructors have assigned readings to complete **before** the sessions that you will discuss as a group.

This series will take place in person at the Library and is open to both Library members and non-members.

Advance payment and registration is required:

- Non-member rate: 150€
- Library member rate: 120€
- Reduced rate (seniors and students): 100€

Meeting One - *Collective Intelligence: The Human Superpower*

Thursday, November 16th, 2023

Human beings are not the largest, fastest, or strongest species on the planet. Our superpower is collaboration -- at a scale and level of sophistication that make us unique among all living things. How did we evolve this special ability? Why does it so often seem to fail (groupthink, social media, etc.)? What is science telling us about how to design smarter teams and organizations, and what could this mean for democracy's future?

Readings to prepare:

- Michael Tomasello (Max Planck Institute), "[Becoming Human - A Theory of Ontogeny](#)" (video)
- Emile Servan-Schreiber (UM6P School of Collective Intelligence), "[Collective Intelligence - How Diversity Makes Us Smarter](#)" (video)

Meeting Two - *Athenian Democracy: Collective Intelligence at Work*

Thursday, November 30th, 2023

What would it mean to design a society of participatory, collective problem-solving? One place to look is the often-misunderstood "first democracy" of the Athenians (509-330 BCE). We will explore the core principles that made this system work: filling offices by lottery, "civic tribes", and a culture of critical thinking and learning by doing. How did the Athenian people create their democracy against the odds? What were its weak points? And what lessons for us today?

Readings to prepare:

- Josiah Ober (Stanford), "Epistemic Democracy in Classical Athens" (chapter)

Meeting Three - *Democratic Innovation Across the Globe*

Thursday, Jan 11th, 2024

Is the Athenian model making a comeback? In this session we will look at how innovations like citizens' assemblies, participatory budgets, and civic technologies are remaking the debate on democracy today -- and possibly bringing it closer to its ancient roots.

Readings to prepare:

- Vox, "[Study: Politicians listen to rich people, not you](#)" (2015, article)
- Audrey Tang (Digital Minister, Taiwan): "[The Frontier of Democracy](#)" (2021, video)
- Bastien Berbner, "[The Unlikely Friendship that helped Legalize Gay Marriage in Ireland](#)" (2020, article)
- World Bank, "[Toward a More Inclusive Development in Kenya](#)" (2018, video)

Meeting Four - *Storytelling and the Collective Mind*

Thursday, Feb 15, 2024

How do the rituals of storytelling shape our politics? We will explore how the Athenians developed new modes of storytelling -- tragedy, comedy, and the civic festival -- to think through the problems of their day. Could we do the same?

Readings to prepare:

- Aeschylus, "The Eumenides" (play)
- BBC, "[The Greatest Show on Earth - pt. 1, Democrats](#)" (video)
- Bryan Doerries, "[How Ancient Greek Tragedies Can Heal the Soul](#)" (podcast)

Meeting Five - *The wonders of emergence: an introduction to complexity*

Thursday, March 7th, 2024

How can we better understand the way large groups of people think together? Simple models can be surprisingly effective in helping us understand many processes we think of as complex. We will explore some thought-provoking examples, culminating in the wonders of the Mandelbrot set. We will also tease some examples of the dark side of emergence -- known as “emergent dysfunctions” -- and how to prevent them.

Readings to prepare:

- [“What is Complexity Science?”](#) (article)
- [“Introduction to Complexity: What are Complex Systems?”](#) (video)

Meeting Six - *Online Stupidity and Why conversations Fail at Scale*

Thursday, April 4th, 2024

The problems of our century demand collective intelligence, and yet the rise of social media seems to bring nothing but collective stupidity. Why do social media apps and online forums seem to bring out our most extreme, gullible or trivial qualities? Could we redesign them to turn “groupthink” into large-scale, participatory problem-solving?

Readings to prepare:

- [“What is Groupthink?”](#) (video)
- [“The Abilene Paradox”](#) (video, see 06.14 - 10.14)

Meeting Seven - *Why Bad Decisions Happen to Good Groups*

Thursday, May 30th, 2024

Complex systems science can help us understand how individuals who are each trying to do the right thing can create collective disasters. In this session, we will explore some examples of this - including social dilemmas and local optima traps - as well as some of the often non-intuitive approaches to solving these kinds of collective-action problems.

Readings to prepare:

- [“What is the Tragedy of the Commons?”](#) (video)
- [“The Prisoner’s Dilemma”](#) (video)

Meeting Eight - Fixing a Complex System

Thursday, June 13th, 2024

It’s not enough to design a better political system: how do we get there from here? In this final session we will assemble all the lessons of the series -- from history, from complex systems science, and from the toolkit of community organizing -- to figure out how we could bring the dream of democracy to life.

Readings to prepare:

- Donella Meadows, “Leverage Points to Intervene in a System” (article)
- David Ehrlichman, [“Identifying Leverage Points in a System”](#) (article)
- Marshall Ganz, [“Fighting for Social Change”](#) (video)

About Critical Conversations:

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Please write to programs@americanlibraryinparis.org with any questions or thoughts.