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Abstract

This article investigates how disability can work analytically as a 'critique from within'. Our case is the accommodation of citizens with disabilities during the voting process in Denmark. Here disability makes explicit how Danish democracy is produced as disability rubs up against implicit, normalized and mundane infrastructures and practices. We investigate disability as critique in this sense of affording a both analytic and practical 'breakup'. To do so, we promote a 'compositionist' post-actor-network theory approach to disability and to polling and investigate what entry-point for critique this offers. We analyze an incident at a polling booth during the 2013 Danish Municipal election. This renders visible some of the complex socio-material processes through which citizens and the Danish state co-enact and co-authorize one another. We highlight how 'detachments' are vital to such processes and we examine parts of the historical background for the production of authority in the context of managing disability as exception during polling. In doing so we point out that as the organization of electoral processes evolves, new potentialities for infra-critique also emerge.

Introduction

In November 2013, shortly after a municipal election in Denmark, a disabled voter narrated in a public post on Facebook how he experienced the help he received when casting his ballot:

The rules state that two people must follow me into the voting booth, as it is not possible for me to mark my ballot. After much confusion, it was my personal helper [...] and a volunteer who ended up following me into the booth – or an election official (I am not aware of his exact function).

Inside the voting booth, the friendly man first held out the ballot for the municipal election in front of me. Quietly and discreetly, I told him by which list and candidate, my mark was to be placed, after which the man almost shouted: 'WILL YOU JUST CONFIRM THAT IT WAS THE LIST XXX AND CANDIDATE NAMED XXX?' – As if I were mentally disabled or just did not care about elucidating my political position to half of Vejle.¹ The same thing happened with the ballot for the Regional elections. As the icing on the cake, the man finished the session by holding out both my ballots in an unfolded state before they were dropped into their respective boxes. (Nielsen 2013a)²

Facebook users shared Preben Steen Nielsen's post more than 5000 times – a remarkable number in the Danish setting. The story made it into the local news and the thread of comments on Facebook turned into a heated debate. Many comments (from polling officials, politicians, people with disabilities and their relatives) sided with Preben. Several

people expressed outrage about what they comprehended as unreasonable conduct in the polling booth. Conversely, others expressed – with equal ferocity but on behalf of the electoral system – that disabled people should stop complaining and be grateful for living in a country where people with disabilities receive help casting their ballots.

The polling process is obviously crucial as it practically enacts the reciprocal authorization of the democratic state and its citizens; during elections, the state authorizes citizen-bodies as they are turned into voters, and by casting their votes, citizens, in turn, authorize the state as a democratically legitimate entity. In this article, we explore the possibility that the voting process fruitfully can be understood as a ‘composition’ in Latour’s (2010) term, a move which allows us to extend and question both central principles of democracy and the practical way in which voting is organized. These issues become matters of controversy in situations where there is a strong push to ‘modernize’ the electoral process, for example by introducing new digital technologies (Gad and Dalsgaard 2015; Dalsgaard and Gad n.d.). Preben’s awkward incident is fortunately a rare case in Danish elections. Yet, to us the case is analytically interesting as it offers a vantage point for a critique of the Danish polling process, including how it is managed, ‘from within’. Preben’s incident is a temporary breakup of what are normally taken-for-granted procedures, enabling a partial ‘infra-structural reversal’ (Bowker and Star 1999) of the electoral process. This is (on a different scale) much like the analytic affordance offered by the temporary breakdown of the US presidential election in 2000, which revealed the practical messiness of the process and the non-neutral role of its infra-structural components. Citizens, of course, do not normally notice such matters (Lynch 2001; Miller 2004). What is disabling in one setting (a polling booth not affording certain bodies the ability to vote in privacy) can thus be enabling in another (to us, analytically and to democratic debate more generally). The double articulation of democratic state authority and citizen-bodies becomes visible when it breaks up in a meeting with the deviant, exceptional or unexpected (Gad and Dalsgaard 2015). As we will elaborate below, both the normal and the deviant become seen as emergent features of the socio-material setup of polling.

In sum, our aim is to think through disability as a form of infra-critique of the election process in Denmark, and of its organization. This offers a contribution to the understanding of ‘management’ and more specifically the proposed ‘breaking up’ of management. Our approach draws on work in Science and Technology Studies (STS) that analyze disability, not as bodily trait but in terms of how it is continuously articulated and made up in practice and through relations (Moser and Law 1998; Moser 2000; Callon and Rabeharisoa 2008). It also speaks to the body of work in organization and management studies that emphasizes the importance of materiality and the body (e.g. Dale and Burrell 2000; Thanem 2003; Dale 2005; Dale and Latham 2015; Pullen and Rhodes 2015), and to the anthropology of election practices and techniques (e.g. Bertrand *et al.* 2007; Coles 2007).

Our main contribution, however, is to take the analysis to a discussion of how we might conceive of critique as something emergent from or within the socio-material composition of management practices rather than something which is absolute or transcendent to these practices. With this ‘compositionist approach’, we explore how disability disrupts the practical making of elections, inside-out. By using disability to make the implicit explicit we do not claim to reveal a hidden explanatory layer such as ‘power’ or a ‘structure’ that explains electoral practices (cf. Latour 2005, *passim*), and we do not assume to inhabit a moral or theoretical position from which to perform external critical judgment. We build critique from within the case at hand instead of intervening from the more conventional position of ‘critical distance’ (e.g. Whittle and Spicer 2008).

First, we outline our Latourian-inspired compositionist approach and extrapolate how STS-

informed notions of disability allow us to elicit the way disability may breakup the management of elections. Subsequently, we analyze the Danish voting process, tracing features of its processual and socio-material character. This includes suggesting that voting is composed by a series of attachments and detachments; that legislation historically has shifted away from practice towards a valorization of principle; and that infra-critique of elections elicits how authority is negotiated when democratic state-management meets the disabled citizen-body. We conclude with a discussion of some analytic and practical implications of posing disability as an infra-critique of electoral practices. The empirical material for the article includes observations of electoral practices in Denmark interviews with disabled persons about elections, meetings with Dansk Handicapforbund (the Danish Association of the Physical Disabled), debates on relevant legal bills in Folketinget (the Danish parliament), as well as archival studies of the voting legislation.

Compositionism and disability as infra-critique

In following a compositionist style of inquiry (Latour 2010), we contend that realities emerge as heterogeneous compositions of both matters and concerns (technologies, bodies, ideas, etc.) that are only momentarily associated to form patterns of order or organization (Latour 2005). The elements in a composition achieve their characteristics and capacities only in their relational actuality, while still retaining their heterogeneity (Latour 2010, pp. 473–474). This does not imply that relations are the primordial causes of the things they connect. Rather, capacities – for example the ability to act, think or cast a ballot – are themselves effects of processes of connection and disconnection.

A compositionist approach allows us to conceptualize the casting of ballots as a process of attachments and detachments of relations. We will briefly qualify this position by outlining how we see relationality as both a matter of connections and cuts (Strathern 1996; Yarrow and Jones 2014). Thomas Yarrow and Siân Jones analyze how social theory has ascribed positive value to engagement and relationality, whereas detachment, disconnection and separation conversely have been depicted as a negative modern inflection. Relationality has even been positioned as a social antidote to the figure of a detached and individualized modern subject. According to Yarrow and Jones, the works of sociologist Richard Sennett and social anthropologist Tim Ingold exemplify this ‘fetishism of relations’ (in our words), and how engagement has been ethically and ontologically privileged over separation. This view risks romanticizing relatedness, underplaying how a range – if not all – practices profoundly rely on cuts and disengagement.

Representative democracy is often discussed as a matter of ensuring the engaged participation of citizens in elections, voting and democracy in general. This is not least the case in discussions of the ‘inclusion’ of people with disabilities in democracy. This discourse risks taking the positive value of relationality for granted, but when it comes to both elections and disability we see connections and disconnections as equally important and as entangled in one another. From a compositionist position, disability is then an actualization of a specific lack capacity that partially relates a body to a contingent social and material composition.

Seeing the disabled body as emergent from particular socio-material compositions is an argument gaining importance in STS-inspired studies of disability. Galis (2011) for example, distinguishes an STS-approach to disability from medical-natural and social constructivist views. According to Galis, the first depicts disability as a natural phenomenon, which can be diagnosed using medical scientific methods. The latter analyzes disability as the effect of values or norms embedded in medical diagnosis and other social practices. These views, Galis argues, are the negative mirror images of each other, which he and others in STS seek

to bypass (see also Shildrick and Price 1996; Blume 2012; Stephens *et al.* 2015). A compositionist approach implies short-circuiting the asymmetrical reading of ability and disability that characterizes the positions laid out by Galis (see also Inahara 2009). Galis and also Blume (2012) take inspiration from the 'generalized symmetry'³ of Actor-Network Theory (ANT) to bypass an a priori distinction between human beings and a world of things. ANT's tenet of generalized symmetry is not a theory about ontological sameness, but rather a methodological precaution that seeks to avoid presuming what matters and how it does so prior to the specifics of analytical and empirical enquiry (Latour 2005, p. 76). We are then made more sensitive to how asymmetrical compositions abound. However, these asymmetries do not result from universal social laws or structures. This view enables Galis to perceive of the disabled body and its surroundings as interdependent and co-constitutive. As such he defines disability as:

an effect of a process of associations in a network. [...] Different bodily forms, abilities and disabilities [... and] architecture [...] are mutually constitutive. For example, pavements, ramps, stairs, elevators, washrooms, benches, signs, public buildings, wheelchairs, and other infrastructures enact action/agency: disability/ability. (Galis 2011, p. 831)

To talk of 'disability' is to look at how body and environment articulate one another (cf. Latour 2004). When it comes to the act of voting, disability results from specific socio-materialities and technologies affording *and* inhibiting action (Latour 2005, p. 46). Both ability and inability (or disability) in the act of voting are effects of the composition. While STS-informed disability studies use this insight to explore how the disabled body results from particular socio-material setups, our interest is focused more on how disability as part of an ill-composed relation breaks up management. The incident described in the introduction exemplifies how disability may disrupt, question and make visible some of these constitutive elements of elections. Indeed, disability speaks back to – or breaks up – the composition that disables it in the first place. In that manner, we understand disability as an emergent infra-critique of the very composition that articulates the disabled body. Latour (2010) poses composition as an alternative to the modernist idea of critique which follows a 'logic of disclosure' from the outside-in and builds on the view that externally developed theory offers a better vantage point for understanding all empirical matters by revealing their 'really real' conditions, such as relations of dominance and power hidden either underneath a surface appearance or by people's delusions. Instead of relying on the certainty about a world beyond this one, we choose to stress the immanent character that critique may gain if socio-material phenomena are regarded as heterogeneously composed (Latour 2010, p. 475).

The discussion of the concept of critique is too long for us to do it justice here but we can situate our modest intervention in response to Whittle and Spicer's (2008) characterization of ANT as relying on a naturalizing ontology, an unreflexive epistemology and an anti-performative politics. Whittle and Spicer seem blind to the possibility that the academic observer is not sovereign and should not be credited as a champion critical de-mystifier. As we shall explore now, a compositionist approach helps realize disability as an emergent critique from *within*. Denaturalization and reflexivity, then, are both practical problems and emergent critiques (see Latour n.d. for a 'critique' of the idea of critical distance).

With a compositionist approach, then, critique is not performed as a conceptual outside but emerges through engaging empirical matters and concerns. Following STS-scholar Helen Verran, infra-critique is a process, which involves 'working with those who think

otherwise' (2014). Infra-critique is about moments where empirical matters resonate in productive ways with analytic concerns. Here, we do not engage with disabled people, exploring how they might help us think otherwise, but we do seek to counter ideas about the normalcy of Danish electoral processes by thinking through frictions involving disability *in the case at hand*. Preben's story exemplifies to us, not the failure of an electoral process, but rather how this process is simultaneously robust and fragile, in the sense that it may easily breakup from within. In the following, we explore three interrelated breakups of the voting composition, using Preben's story as an invitation to elicit its heterogeneity.

Breakup 1: precarious procedures of attachment and detachment

Our first step is to analyze the organization of the polling process as a series of attachments and detachments. These are aimed at getting citizen-bodies-cum-voters through the process in a way that ensures the enactment of the democratic principles of 'one person, one vote' and the secret ballot. Composing voting, as we will argue, involves associating citizen-bodies with polling cards to meet the first principle of identifying each voter as an individual *as well as* cutting that relation after the vote has been cast, in order to enact the second principle, which ensures the individuation and separation. This series of attachments and detachments is important to extrapolate when engaging with Preben's incident at the polling station. This incident, we will argue, brings to the front the fragility of the composition, the momentary associations between human helpers and non-human polling booths.

In practice, the process is as follows. When entering a Danish polling place, all voters carry a polling card. Polling cards are mailed by post to each person in Denmark, who is registered in the National Civil Registry (Folkeregisteret) and eligible to vote at a given election (with a few exceptions every citizen who is 18 years of age and above). In this way, attachment of the citizen-body to a polling card is a condition for becoming an eligible voter at the polling station and for their engagement in the electoral process. If this attachment to the polling card has not occurred (e.g. the card could be lost in the mail), it is possible to assign a new polling card printed at the polling station. It is still needed to keep proper track of the citizen as a voter.

The next step in the procedure involves detachment of the voter from the polling card. A polling official collects the card and registers the voter in a protocol. In return the voter is now attached to a ballot paper instead. The ballot paper will allow the voter to enter a polling booth – an enclosed space with a curtain which shields the voter from the eyes of others in order to mark the ballot in private. The voter then leaves the booth and drops the ballot into a ballot box, ideally without showing anyone how they marked the ballot. As the ballot is added to the pile of many other ballots in the box (they are identical except for how they are marked), the ballot can no longer be identified as anyone's vote in particular. The voter is thus detached from the ballot paper and the vote it represents. After the end of the polling, the polling officials (a mix of volunteering citizens, grassroots members of the parties and municipal employees) will then sort and tally the marked ballots in ways that attach the ballot paper to the candidates or parties voted for.

Electoral law requires that this series of attachments and detachments occurs in order for the ballot to be valid. For instance, if a ballot can be uniquely identified, when the votes are counted (if it has been marked in a special way), the ballot must, according to protocol, be declared invalid. Detachment, including irreversible forms of detachment,⁴ is crucial to the voting process because voters, if they could prove how they voted, would be able to sell their vote or be subject to coercion or other forms of pressure.

The detachments ensure that the citizen-body is temporarily disconnected in the polling booth from all their social relationships and affiliations (to kin, religious groups, business interests, etc.). This is how voters are enacted as autonomous subjects and equal citizen-bodies making free political choices. The performed separation of the voter from personal or social relations is critical since relations might affect how voters vote, no matter whether they are imposed or voluntary. Indeed, it is no coincidence that the voting booth is called *l'isoloir* in French (Bertrand *et al.* 2007). This highlights how citizens entitled to vote are performed as free and independent subjects, exactly through the isolation created by the booth, which temporarily detaches them from social obligations – except for the relation to the state (Bertrand *et al.* 2007). As a technology or technique the voting booth both presupposes and reproduces the normal, educated, literate and well-functioning citizen-body, while failure to comply with the conditions of this socio-material procedure produces disability (or in other cases fraud or errors).

This polling setup involves significant coordination of efforts by polling officials, the municipal administrations and other organizations involved in communications or logistics, a number of technologies such as paper and pencil, polling booth, polling and identity cards, etc. This socio-material composition facilitates the movement of citizen-bodies through the polling process. It should be noted that polling is certainly just one slice of the electoral process whether from an administrative or citizen point of view and that any depiction thereof, like ours, also express an analytic cut.

It should also be noted here that the secrecy of the vote is not a given in the making of democracy. John Stuart Mill, for instance, argued against the secret ballot on the grounds that it would promote selfish behavior at the expense of the public good (Mill 1861), and Alexis de Tocqueville argued in 1835 that while the old European nations would benefit from the secret ballot because of their hierarchical structure, the USA could have true open ballots because they had a flat, free and open society (de Tocqueville 2000). Such examples make it evident how the practical production of democracy is historically contingent. At present the secrecy of the vote is crucial for most democracies, though. It is one of the criteria based on which political scientists diagnose the democratic status of nation-states (Elklit and Svensson 1997).

The compositionist production of the secret ballot exemplifies that an analysis of electoral processes cannot solely rely on a privileged notion of (democratic) engagement. Several detachments and attachments are integral to the procedure. Hence, Preben's incident at the polling station cannot be understood simply as *failure* to engage in and comply with normal procedures. Instead, it is better seen as a partial breakdown – a breakdown, moreover, that emerges in the *interaction* between the electoral procedure, the polling booth and the people involved. When properly aligned (cf. Latour 2013) these entities produce the 'proper' detachments and attachments. Preben's experience was, then, one in which he was not properly detached from social relations in the voting booth when the polling official loudly asked him to confirm, who he wanted to vote for. The polling booth failed to cut (in Strathern's [1996] sense) relations properly because participation in the process relies on discrete and *discreet* modes of bodily articulation. In Preben's incident, his choice as well as the disability of his body was articulated *too noisily*. The booth could not afford a successful procedure by itself since it only prevented intrusive vision, not extrusive sound. The noisy articulation of Preben's body shows then how the citizen-body is contingent upon a well-orchestrated, but fragile composition of actors engaged in a process of attachments and detachments.

Breakup 2: ambivalent legislation in the electoral management of disability

In the above analysis we have shown how polling relies on an orchestration of attachments and detachments produced by fragile and temporary alignments between humans and non-humans. However, the composition of polling is more than just that. Voting procedures are informed by law and international conventions, delegating specific obligations and rights to polling officials and citizen-bodies respectively. Preben's polling station incident also invites us to explore the procedural aspects of voting and to examine recent changes in the procedures for people with disabilities. This section displays how the contemporary potential for breakup and critique has gradually been introduced into the composition through the historical process of legislation.

In 2008, The Danish Parliament amended the section of the electoral law, which applies to disabled people during polling. According to the amended law, two people must now assist the disabled voter. At least one of the assistants must be a polling official, who in the Danish context represents the state, and not an independent electoral committee. This change is a consequence of the United Nations' *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*, ratified by Denmark in 2009.⁵ The Convention could be seen as an important critique of Denmark's (and other countries') failure to comply with their existing laws, which required all citizens be allowed to vote freely and secretly. The Convention obliges the signatories to make this possible and promotes it as a matter of universal rights and obligations.

The introduction of a discourse of universal rights and obligations in the management of disability during voting marks a historical disjuncture in Denmark. In 1901 the law on elections stated that

In case a voter announces to the election board that he is unable to carry out voting in the prescribed manner, and the election board finds that this is right, a dedicated member of the election board, or a dedicated voter appointed by the election board, will provide the assistance necessary for voting to proceed, which also means that the necessary accommodation of the prescribed procedure must be made. (Lovtidende 1901, §41)

Here the disability is handled by making exceptions to standard protocol and procedures. When, and how to do so, relies on the discretion of the polling official. This law remained in force until 2008, with one important exception. In 1920 (for municipal elections) and 1948 (for national parliamentary elections) a sentence was added to the above paragraph, which bestowed upon blind and visionimpaired people the option to choose for themselves who would help them mark their ballot. In 1948 this was introduced with almost no discussion in parliament as they saw it as a purely 'practical' rather than principal matter (Lovtidende 1948).

Interestingly, the law of 1901 did not specify what 'necessary accommodation' should entail. The election official is delegated the power to recognize the claim of disability or reject it. One could argue that the former law recognized that officials co-constitute disability. Compare this with the excerpt below from the law of 2008 on how to handle disability as exception:

Voters who due to lack of mobility, bad health or the like cannot access the polling station or polling booth or for other reasons are not able to vote in the prescribed manner, [...], have the right to request the necessary assistance [...]. Thus the

necessary easing of the prescribed procedure may be made, including granting access to voting immediately outside the polling station.

Stk. 2. Help is provided by two polling officials or appointed voters. Instead of one of the election committee members or delegates the voter can ask a person designated by the voter for help to vote.

Stk. 4. Help for marking the ballot can only be provided if the voter can indicate to those providing assistance, immediately and unambiguously, for which party or candidate the voter wants to vote. (Lovtidende 2008, §49)

It remains the responsibility of the polling official to enact or practically realize these relaxations of procedures. Crucially, however, paragraph 4 adds that this can only be done insofar as the citizen is able to *indicate immediately and unambiguously for whom they intend to vote*. One consequence of this is that the accommodation granted in 1920/1948 to allow blind and vision-impaired people to choose their own assistant is now removed. Again, consider how Preben's experience could be understood as mismanagement, in this case of the rule stated in paragraph 4. The rule would be seen as simply being taken too literally, violating other parts of the law, most importantly the principle of the secret ballot. In any case, the law change represents an effort to manage local practices in the polling place by enforcing new standardized procedures (see also Ross Winthereik and Jensen 2017). Instead of relying on the discretion of the polling official to make things work and enable the person with disabilities to vote, the polling official now figures as a kind of state manager delegated the task of checking compliance to a procedural logic. This is of course already part of the role of the polling official's job in regard to the election as a whole but in the case of disability it seems that the right to vote today is accompanied by more demands than what applies to the average citizen-body, even if this may jeopardize the secrecy of the vote. Yet, the former law was obviously not perfect either, since it was exactly up to election officials to recognize disability. To us this exemplifies an inherent ambiguity in the composition – the impossibility of permanently resolving different matters of concerns in the polling. While the new legislation was intended to avoid breakups, it created new potentials for exactly that.

The UN convention was a critique incorporated in the Danish law. However, this did not make problems with marginalized or stigmatized voters disappear. Rather, new 'overflows' occurred (Callon 1998). This is underlined by the fact that the implementation of the UN Convention involved a peculiar translation, since the Convention actually suggested that people with disabilities should be bestowed the right to be assisted by a person of their own choice when casting their vote (UN's convention article 29; cited in Center for Ligebehandling af Handicappede 2010, p. 4). Moreover, the administrative instructions for electoral officials specified that the language in which people are supposed to immediately and unambiguously voice their intentions must be Danish (Ministerialtidende 2009, p. 44). This further challenges people who may have the right to vote, but not the 'right voice' to do so. The translation of 'indication' to 'speech', from the UN convention to Danish law and from law to administrative instructions, is not neutral.

Whereas enabling disabled citizen-bodies to vote was in 1948 considered a *practical* matter, the new law, drawing on the discourse of universal rights and obligations, positions the problem as the implementation of a (universal) *principle*. New configurations of what is considered principle versus practical (Mol and Berg 1994), or what is of technical versus strategic political significance emerged in the discussions of the UN Convention in

Folketinget in 2008, where all the political parties praised the passing of the law while pointing out that the challenge would be its implementation in practice. Making laws is one thing, while making citizen-bodies and civil servants follow them is quite another. It is rather paradoxical then that the law itself – from the perspective of Preben – imposes several practical-procedural obstacles for accomplishing the secrecy of the vote. Hence, this is a breakup of election management that arises not only through a struggle of composition made up of attachments and detachments, but also because of the inevitably emergent and contingent consequences of legislative enactment.

Breakup 3: questioning authority

In this last analytical section, we explore how disability poses a critique of a culturally specific understanding and negotiation of ‘authority’ and the process of mutual co-authorization between citizens and the state. Critique here works by making visible the difficulty, if not impossibility, of reaching a conclusive settlement of what it means to be a capable citizen with the authority to vote.

The removal of the accommodation for blind and vision-impaired people mentioned above exemplifies the political commitment to universal rights. The former Minister of Welfare, Karen Jespersen, proposed the changes to the legislation announcing that

The special rules applying to blind people and persons with vision impairment, who had the right to be assisted by a helper of their choice without the participation of a representative of the state, are cancelled. In the future all voters, who need help with voting will have the same access to help casting their ballot. (Folketinget 2008b)

At stake here is how citizens grant the state legitimacy and authority as a sovereign body and vice versa. To be able to vote in Denmark, one must be what in Danish is called *myndig*, which according to the online Danish dictionary⁶ approximately means that one has the right to commit oneself to legally binding obligations. That is, being recognized as an adult who is capable of taking care of oneself and others in a responsible manner. As a citizen it means that one is independent, abled (if not able-bodied) and in our terms capable of ‘authorizing the state’ by granting one’s vote to a political candidate or party.

The meaning of the word *myndig* is worth exploring here to further explicate the management of elections: a *myndighed* is the Danish word for ‘authority’, while *myndighedsperson* (person of authority) is a public servant or state appointee.

In the spring of 2013 the government proposed legislation that would have permitted experiments with electronic voting. The organizations representing disabled people in Denmark saw this as an opportunity to petition for the development a non-disabling voting technology; a technology that would enable them to vote privately and unassisted by other human beings like everyone else. To the detriment of the organizations the bill did not get sufficient support to pass into law, but their support and aspirations clearly express an optimistic (even utopian) hope for a universal applicability of voting technology (cf. Ellcessor 2015).

In the wake of the failed attempt to introduce electronic voting, the disabled people’s organizations allied with one of the parties in Folketinget to criticize the changes made by the 2008 law, which had removed the right for blind and vision-impaired people to choose their own aides. The cause of their discontent was, as described, that the present law forces them to cast their ballot in the presence of at least one *myndighedsperson* as assistant and as witness. Margrethe Vestager, who had sponsored the failed bill on electronic voting, countered their argument by reasoning that:

The rule exists in order to protect voters, who need assistance, when they vote. They will

often be in a vulnerable situation [...] and [...] the idea is to create a space, which prevents pressure to put an x next to someone that the voter would not have voted for, or that the x is put in a place which is completely different from where the assistant has been asked to put it. The demand must also ensure the public trust in the electoral process. Trust in the electoral process goes beyond one's own casting of a ballot, and it is thus just as important that one as a voter can trust that the election has been free for other voters too. (Folketinget 2013)

Here we see disagreements about the conditions that can be granted to disabled people and the consequences these conditions may have for the making of the democratic, vote-casting citizen. The choice seems to be between a generalized trust, confidence and security (where a polling official is required) and the right of the disabled to experience the performance of free choice (which includes selecting his/her own assistant).

Both the organizations for the disabled people, as well as politicians belonging to the opposition in Folketinget, expressed the view that valuing the trust in the integrity of the election higher than the attempts to protect the free choice of the disabled citizen would lead to *umyndiggørelse* – or, in other words, a 'de-authorization' of the disabled. This concept refers to a denial of someone's status as *myndig* and a declaration that they are incapable of managing their own affairs. They are in other words disempowered and denied full recognition of their citizenship. Echoing a libertarian critique of the role of the state, Simon Emil Ammitzbøll (from the party Liberal Alliance) said on behalf of his party that we have more confidence in people with disabilities than we have in public authorities, so we believe that people are capable of pointing out the person, they would like to have as a helper instead of letting the public authority appoint one. (Folketinget 2013)

Or in Preben's words:

As a physically disabled, who turn up at a polling station to perform his civil duties, one is in one's right mind, and therefore 100% capable of not being influenced, when the mark is placed. Quite simply, a helper is our arms and legs, and they are authorized to handle our bank affairs etc. – If one was not capable of making a choice, one would not be capable of acting as employer for one's helpers. (Nielsen 2013b)

What we have here is an interesting discrepancy between two enactments of *myndig*. On the one hand *myndig* may refer to being capable and independent as a citizen. On the other hand we have the authority that comes with being a government institution (*myndighed*), which by definition is deemed capable and managerial. Disability brings to the front these different enactments, both contained in the composition of voting. This was not an entirely new discussion. In 2008, in the parliamentary debate discussed above, the left-wing party Enhedslisten challenged the idea that a polling official carried authority simply by virtue of being appointed by the state (Folketinget 2008a). An official is a private person to the same extent as everyone else, they claimed. While public servants are seen as citizens and not just as state employees, polling officials are here a special case because they are usually citizens who volunteer for the task of overseeing the election through their membership of one of the local municipal chapters of a political party, but any eligible voter can agree to the task. Without necessarily being employees of the state (they might be), polling officials temporarily represent the authority of the state in the process of voting and counting votes.

The government wanted a figure of authority (a polling official) to supervise the casting of

ballots by disabled people, but in doing so the authority discredits the right and the capacity of the persons with disability to select their own trusted aide. The government reasoned that a disabled voter could be pressured by the helper to vote in a specific manner, or one could be pressured to select a specific helper (father, mother or another kinsperson) with whom one might disagree politically.

As described above, the principle behind the secret ballot is the performance of a temporary isolation of the voter from social attachments. The voting citizen is individualized when she or he is cut off from social influences and personal relationships at the moment the vote is cast. The law partly challenges this principle by stating that people with disabilities *must* be assisted – attached to particular persons who can be their ‘arms and legs’ as Preben voiced it above. Yet this breaks with the principle of the secret ballot. When the Danish government in 2008 changed the law, they stressed that the official (*myndighedspersonen*), who follows the disabled voter into the booth, is subject to confidentiality and sworn to rules of secrecy (Folketinget 2008a). Yet, bringing along an assistant problematizes the isolating capacity of the polling. The fiction of the voting booth as a free space breaks down, when assistants are brought along. This applies in the case that they are appointed as much as when they are privately selected. Publicly appointed assistants may in rural communities be an acquaintance of the disabled voter, and while they may be bound by confidentiality, they may also represent political interest (Center for Ligebehandling af Handicappede 2008, p. 13). Even if Preben thought that his helpers are the delegates of his arms and legs, they are also presumably *myndige* or else they could not be delegated the role at all. One might argue that the helper in Preben’s situation was delegated several roles at once, which not always, but in this particular case, produced friction. The helper had to both act as a *bureaucratic subject* surveilling the procedure, and as a *neutral facilitator* of the process. At the same time, several disabled people expressed fear that the helpers do not suddenly stop being citizens as a result of this delegation, even if acting in an allegedly bureaucratic and neutral role.

Privately selected assistants may furthermore threaten the integrity of the election by bringing into the booth social relationships that could involve vote-buying or intimidation of the voter. The polling official acting as assistant should prevent this, but he or she may not prevent agreements made between the disabled voter and the helper prior to entering the polling booth. The temporary isolation – with or without self-chosen or government appointed assistants – cannot stop intimidation or transactions that take place before or after an election. The secret ballot only prevents the provision of material proof of how the voter voted. This of course applies to abled bodies as well, which demonstrates that this discussion concerns both abled and disabled citizen-bodies, and that secrecy of the ballot is not an absolute, but an ideal type that cannot be realized as a fact, only approximately performed.⁷

The debates in Folketinget as well as the various conventions on disabilities thus pinpoint different views on how disabilities are defined and managed during polling. These differ in terms of what it takes to constitute the secrecy of the ballot (is an oath of confidentiality sufficient?) as much as the integrity of the election (how does isolation of the voter in need of assistance really take place?). The roles that voters, helpers and authorities play in elections are thus not settled. They are emergent and ambiguous. On a more fundamental level, disability makes visible the impossibility of resolving what it means to be a capable person.

Concluding remarks

Insofar as the state is concerned about its ability to manage elections, the problems faced

by people with disabilities might be dismissed as a minor issue. What does it matter that a few disabled persons feel that they are not fully recognized as citizens, when the state selects their assistants in order to ensure the integrity of the election as a whole? But, if one follows the argument that the legal disqualification of disabled citizens' ability to choose their assistants challenges the ideal of citizenship – as that which grounds the electoral legislation as authoritative and democratic in the first place – then it matters. Disabled citizens are considered subjects capable of making free and independent political choices, which is why they are allowed to vote in the first place.

Returning to Preben's experience of casting his ballot, we have demonstrated the way ideals of universally applicable voting procedures and techniques clash with particular citizen-bodies circumscribed by state-endorsed regulations for disability. As mentioned, participation in polling relies among other things on discreet modes of bodily articulation, but the loud articulation of the political preferences of the body in question created too much noise. It can certainly be challenging to establish engagement in the democratic process, and enable flow, but to perform equally important detachments may certainly also fail. As we have also argued, the potential to fail is not just a property of the *in-situ* composition of citizen-body, polling booth, pencil, paper, helper, etc., but also a property of legal processes and the ambivalence inherent in the idea of a 'capable person'.

Infra-critique highlights the practical fragility of the co-production and co-authorization of state and the citizen-bodies in voting, but also that (dis)ability – and its management – may be reconfigured in such processes. Disability is not a fixed condition, which is easily compensated for by electoral managers or rules. Indeed, disability seems to appear exactly when the co-authorization process *has to be done differently*, and hence at moments when one may realize that there are alternatives to the normalized procedures. Consequently, if disability is a 'transgressive category' that forces one to rethink the body and its boundaries (Shildrick and Price 1996), disability can simultaneously be considered a 'transgressive practice' that may challenge us to continually (re-)engage the performance of citizen-bodies in voting processes. As a 'misfit' (Stephens *et al.* 2015), disability challenges the common perception of Danish elections as unproblematic. It makes the process appear more fragile and ambiguous, but without suggesting that this state of affairs is wrong in a way that can be mended once and for all. Disability enables our thinking about the electoral process – often presented as controlled and ordered – as one that is overflowing with ambiguity and one that continually threatens to break down. It also *enables* our thinking about the need for elasticity in the practical management of emerging challenges in the electoral process.

In this sense disability as an empirical matter and concern generates *potentiality* for infra-critique, but not from a single point or in a unidirectional way. Rather infra-critique happens when the distinction between 'meta' and 'infra' collapses (Verran 2014, p. 8). What the blind and the vision-impaired criticize may be a benefit to people with other forms of disability, while what the UN sees as a critical intervention may be experienced as the opposite by Danish legislators. Our discussion shows the impossibility of settling once and for all what is the 'best' form of election management, and what a 'capable person' is. It also questions analytically the 'best' place from which to conduct critique by making us sensitive to the multiple places in which 'critique' is articulated and expressed. A compositionist approach allows one to follow immanent and emergent forms of critique. These forms of critique are not about debunking electoral practices from a self-authorized distanced outsider perspective, or for the matter a privileged insider position (Latour 2010). Rather, the recognition of the fragility of elections, and its own potential for infra-critique, is also the recognition of the mundane, practical and tedious work needed to

make elections work – including making the appropriate cuts as this is simultaneously entangled in emergent legal enactment.

In this view democracy is not only a principle, a way of governing or an idea; it is also a practical matter entangled in management, contingently performed and rooted in a composition without clear borders between inside and outside. We hope this kind of analysis will stimulate interest in paying careful attention to the practical aspects of voting, especially facing upcoming or potential changes. As such the case demonstrates how contemporary ideas of modernizing voting processes through digitalization must be considered with extreme care, since digitalization challenges the irreversibility of important detachments in the process while also re delegating authority from current actors in the process to experts in computer science (see Gad and Dalsgaard 2015; Dalsgaard and Gad n.d.). In this sense disability helps explicate issues of general importance to democratic processes, not only in relation to the very real challenges faced by people with disabilities when voting.

Notes

1. A Danish city of approximately 50,000 citizens.
2. All translations from Danish in this article are by the authors.
3. The principle of symmetry for social inquiry was originally developed in social constructivist studies of science and entailed that all knowledge, whether normally considered true or false, should be explained using the same sociological vocabulary (Bloor 1976). Actor-network theorist Michel Callon (along with Bruno Latour) later critiqued this idea (e.g. Callon 1988) because it contained its own asymmetry. It claimed that 'the social', or a sociological vocabulary, was the means for explaining everything. Callon and Latour instead suggested generalizing this principle of inquiry so as to use the same vocabulary to analyze all phenomena in a given composition, no matter whether they are usually considered social or natural.
4. A strong example of irreversibility later in the process is that all election materials are destroyed after a period allowing for complaints. Thus, the election result cannot be contested indefinitely.
5. See <http://www.un.org/disabilities/countries.asp?navid=17&pid=166>.
6. Ordnet.dk, published by Det Danske Sprog-og Litteraturselskab, accessed 13 May 2015.
7. In the autumn of 2016 a new bill (L9) that would allow disabled people to choose their own assistant and to make use of technological aids has been introduced in Folketinget. This was a response to the critique voiced by Dansk Handicapforbund but also a means for allowing experiments with the polling procedure. Interestingly, the bill does not define who would count as disabled (would anyone be able to claim it?) and there are no criteria for the technological aids (anything can be used – except electronic voting – as long as the relevant minister approves). This shows again that the electoral system cannot fully recognize or make recognizable how democracy is embedded in practical procedures and technologies. It also shows that the electoral procedure and democracy is still historically contingent and continually renegotiated. How this bill is negotiated and enacted in practice in the future (a partly analytical process) could significantly influence the polling process compelling and elaborating our own current analysis partly enacted here.

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