

Fellowships on the
The Future of Democracy

Applications Welcome!

For more than a decade, the future of democracy has been severely called into question; it has often been claimed to be “in crisis”. In many countries, distrust in public institutions and elites is on the rise and we can observe increasing support for and electoral success of populist, nationalist, and authoritarian leaders, who further attack and undermine democratic institutions and procedures. The support they experience is indicative of the level of alienation from basic democratic values, procedures, and institutions.

Many of today’s governing institutions and procedures were established decades, if not centuries, ago – under fundamentally different conditions and circumstances. Yet, in many places, their leadership seems to have neglected growing signs of distrust as well as declining electoral turnouts. Many seem to have missed opportunities for an institutional renewal: to adjust both institutions as well as procedures to a context, which was fundamentally changed by social, cultural, and technological transformations. Against this backdrop, the legitimation and effectiveness of democracies and their institutions, as well as the role and function of transnational organisations in decision-making processes have been seriously challenged. Is democracy really too slow to respond to a state of crisis, too much built on consensus mechanisms, and too dependent on dominant media or pressure groups? Is it capable to adapt to great transformations and handle the challenges it is currently faced with?

With this call, THE NEW INSTITUTE attends to both the current state and the future of democracy. Over the centuries, democracy has been reinvented many times and taken different forms; it is now once again time to think about how to adapt democratic systems and decision-making processes to make them “fit for the future”: more responsive to contexts, more equitable, and more sustainable. How can

we strengthen democratic communities, encourage participation, and modernize democratic institutions? How can we redefine existing political structures and configurations so that they are compatible with a commitment to social justice and environmental protection?

At THE NEW INSTITUTE, we aim to bring together creative minds working on these questions. More specifically, according to our general approach, we want to set up an interdisciplinary and transectoral group of fellows from a variety of backgrounds, such as academia, politics, media, the arts, as well as technologists and entrepreneurs, to jointly develop visionary ideas for a democratic overhaul, bearing in mind societies' long-term welfare and sustainability. How can we envisage the future development of public participation, the legitimation of political institutions, and the efficacy of public action? What kind of social imaginaries could we develop for this domain?

Central Themes

We identified four central themes for The New Institute's first cohort of fellows in this programme and invite fellowship applications that clearly address one of them:

1. Strengthening Deliberative Democracy

For democratic systems to thrive, it is vital to incorporate a wide variety of innovative forms of deliberation and active citizen participation. As the COVID-19-pandemic has illustrated, states of emergency seem to have an inherent tendency to strengthen the dominant political power; moreover, they can considerably increase the vulnerability of liberal democracies to being exploited by their leadership and political authorities, sometimes acting in their personal interests. It is, therefore, urgent to develop new forms of institutionalized debating and advisory structures that are future-oriented, such as citizen assemblies, civic councils, and arenas for democratic contestation. How can we revitalize the eroding support bases of parties and movements that are committed to addressing the most pressing social, economic, and political challenges of the 21st century? What does it take to revitalize the virtues of accuracy and fairness in controversial debates? And what are the ways in which high quality media can contribute to fact-based information policies?

2. Reconfiguring the Use of Social Media and Online Communication

Anonymity, confirmation bias, algorithmic content, and social bots deluding interaction severely influence exchange of information and

debates. Rather than by facts, which often seem to fail in having any impact, social media and online communication are dominated by politics of emotions and outrage, as very recently illustrated by the increase in support of conspiracy theorists during the COVID-19-pandemic. On the one hand, questions arise as to how these online platforms lead us to consume content designed to confirm our biases, and thus to shape our behaviour. On the other hand, social media could also give rise to digitally mediated opportunities for institutionalizing participatory civil society solutions and the creation of new combinations of people, information technology, and relevant data. This could take the form of, for example, hackathon-based knowledge communities that support parliamentary as well as governmental decision-making processes. What are the best ways to implement IT-based solutions to facilitate such interactive deliberations and negotiations? What can be done to counteract social media's contribution to polarization and misinformation? How can we institutionalise cross-sectoral political communication and mobilization to achieve considerable impact on the future well-being of our societies?

3. Enhancing Decision-Making and the Role of AI and Big Data

Besides including citizens' voices in public debates as well as political decision-making and, thus, making use of their collective knowledge, it is crucial to take a close look at the governance structures as well as associated modes of operation commonly featured in democratic institutions. As complex problems such as climate change and rising social inequality are characterized by a high degree of uncertainty and interdependence, questions arise as to how to improve advisory structures, create platforms for open government, and encourage innovative approaches to the co-creation of new solutions to prevailing problems and severe conflicts of interest. How can the relationship between national, regional, and local governments be set up as they confront new challenges? What kind of experiments could be conducted to showcase new opportunities for institutional reflexivity and subsequent reforms? What is the role that AI and Big Data can play in this context?

4. The Future of Political Representation

Every political organization, even if it is not democratic, claims to represent the political community it governs. While the idea of a representative democratic government is to organize contestation within representative bodies, their ability to represent has itself become more and more contested. Individualisation of personal convictions, polarization, and the rise of issues that do not correspond to classical political cleavages have made the claim to political representation precarious. In addition, not all social groups are equally represented in political settings, while electoral systems sometimes produce inflated

parliaments or even ignore democratic majorities. Moreover, growing distrust in political representation and compromise-oriented negotiations among and between political parties seems to further weaken its reputation. All this indicates that we need a deep reflection on the organization of democratic representation. The questions invite approaches that combine the fundamental with the technical: Starting from basic principles like democratic equality, they have to connect issues of social identities with technical problems of electoral procedure. How can established parties be reformed and establish connections to voters at a time when traditional avenues of mobilization are in decline? What institutional reforms are necessary to make the respective parties and parliaments more representative of voters?

Focusing on these four themes, THE NEW INSTITUTE encourages a thorough reflection of the democratic status quo as well as the development of visionary alternatives to the current set-ups. We do so by bringing together actors from different fields: researchers from the humanities and social sciences addressing these issues in their work as well as those directly involved in political processes, practitioners from politics and the media, artists, technologists, and entrepreneurs. They need to be united in their interest in contributing to the development of democratic innovations.

Fellowship Opportunities

In line with THE NEW INSTITUTE's general approach, this programme offers different fellowship opportunities to enable not only interdisciplinary, but also transectoral collaboration:

- **Early- to mid-career researchers** (post-PhD or at least three years of equivalent professional research experience; the PhD has to be completed prior to submission) from any discipline within the **social sciences and humanities** can apply for fellowships for a duration of **two years**; these may be renewed for one additional year, depending on the project and progress. The starting date for these fellowships is in the fall of 2021.
- **Practitioners from political institutions and administration** can apply for fellowships, which could, for example, take the form of secondments (to be negotiated with the employer) or (consecutive) visits of one to six months. Starting dates for these fellowships may vary and may be suggested by the applicant.
- **People with a media or arts background, technologists, or entrepreneurs** with a strong interest in democratic representation,

structure, and processes can apply for fellowships for a duration of one to six months; these could also take the form of consecutive visits. Starting dates for these fellowships may vary from the fall of 2021 to spring of 2023 and may be suggested by the applicant.

What do we offer?

Fellowships at THE NEW INSTITUTE include accommodation, common meals, funds for research and travelling, and financial compensation intended to cover living costs during the stay in Hamburg. This compensation takes the form of a stipend and depends on the successful candidate's personal and professional situation. The costs for health insurance will also be subsidized. There will be additional financial support for those accompanied by their family. Fellows also receive access to offices, libraries, collaborative working environments, as well as to other resources, such as information technology and administrative services.

What do we expect?

Fellows will be **resident at THE NEW INSTITUTE** in Hamburg. They are expected to be physically present for the full term of their fellowship, to actively contribute to the overall work of TNI, and to establish collaboration with other fellows and the broader community at the Institute and beyond.

Whom are we looking for?

In this programme, we are looking for candidates who identify with the Institute's mission and aspiration to contribute to social, economic, and ecological transformation. They should have an ability to bring transformative ideas to TNI's work, strive to advance knowledge, and to turn research results into pathways for practical solutions. Ideally, candidates have already engaged with networks beyond their expertise (e.g. academics beyond academia, using creative formats to achieve public impact). Applicants must be highly willing to work in interdisciplinary and transectoral settings. Good knowledge of English is essential.

How to apply?

Applications must be submitted via our [online application form](#) by **January 6th, 2021 (1 p.m. CET)**.

Applications submitted by **early to mid-career researchers** must contain the following:

- Motivational cover letter (highlighting, in particular, what you can bring to, and expect of a fellowship at THE NEW INSTITUTE and

why THE NEW INSTITUTE is the best place for your project, up to 5,000 characters, including spaces and references);

- CV and (selected) publication list (max. of 8 pages; min. font size 11pt);
- Project description responding to one of the four sets of overarching questions, clearly indicating which one (1), 2), 3) or 4), up to 20,000 characters, including spaces);
- Work plan and timeline for the project;
- A video of up to two minutes, clearly communicating and creatively presenting your research idea to a non-academic audience.

Applications submitted **by practitioners from political institutions** must contain the following:

- Motivational cover letter (highlighting, in particular, what you can bring to, and expect of a fellowship at THE NEW INSTITUTE and why THE NEW INSTITUTE is the best place for your project; desired duration and start date of the fellowship, up to 5,000 characters, including spaces);
- CV (and, if applicable, publication list; max. of 8 pages; min. font size 11pt);
- Description of how you would like to contribute to one of the four themes, clearly indicating which one (1), 2), 3) or 4), up to 10,000 characters, including spaces and references);
- Work plan and timeline.

Applications submitted **by artists, journalists, technologists, and entrepreneurs** must contain the following:

- Motivational cover letter (highlighting, in particular, what you can bring to, and expect of a fellowship at THE NEW INSTITUTE and why THE NEW INSTITUTE is the best place for your project; desired duration and start date of the fellowship, up to 5,000 characters, including spaces and references);
- CV (max. of 8 pages; min. font size 11pt);
- Overview of most important pieces of work;
- Project description responding to one of the four themes, clearly indicating which one (1), 2), 3) or 4); up to 10,000 characters, including spaces; this could also include visual material or a video of up to two minutes);
- Work plan and timeline for the project.

All documents must be submitted in English and as pdf-files, apart from the video-file. Please note that when submitting your application electronically, you will also be asked to fill in an online application form, including a summary of your project (of up to 300 characters, including spaces).

Incomplete applications or applications not responding to the research questions listed above will not be accepted.

Selection Process

The application process is organised in two stages: the written applications and a selection workshop. The workshop will be held in Germany in the spring of 2021 (details will be communicated as soon as travel and meeting options are foreseeable) . Applicants not invited to the workshop will be informed accordingly.

The workshop provides an opportunity to get to know THE NEW INSTITUTE, existing fellows, and other candidates. There will be ample time getting to know potential collaborators and to discuss as well as to further develop project ideas. In addition to formats such as impulse presentations and panel discussions, there will be interviews with the applicants. In the selection of fellows, TNI will be supported by a panel consisting of established experts in the field. Final results of this selection procedure will be communicated shortly after the event. THE NEW INSTITUTE covers the cost of travel and accommodation for the duration of the workshop.

If you have any questions on this call or the application process, please get in touch with our Fellow and Research Management team via

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