

Review - Democratic Deliberation in the Modern World

Written by Jonathan Kuyper

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JONATHAN KUYPER, DEC 12 2013

Democratic Deliberation in the Modern World

Edited by Paul Gunn

Oxford: Taylor & Francis Group, 2014

Deliberative democracy is a multi-faceted ideal. At its core, proponents maintain that inclusive, non-coercive, and reciprocal discussion should shape individual preferences and inform public policy. The reviewed book offers an intervention in the deliberative literature, and will be of interest to anyone interested in the theory and practice of deliberative democracy. Although the book is, on balance, highly critical of the deliberative democracy project, the inclusion of different viewpoints in the academic debate is welcome. This review gives a brief summary of different themes in the book, and highlights two limitations that may provide a defense of deliberative democracy in the face of strong criticisms.

This book is an edited volume comprising seven chapters which, with the exception of a new introduction written by editor Paul Gunn, were previously published as a special issue of *Critical Review* in 2010. Gunn does an admirable job contextualizing deliberative democracy within the field of political philosophy, outlining 'liberal' and 'critical' variants of deliberative theory, and structuring the remainder of the book. Gunn's main argument, from which much of the book departs, is that the practice of deliberative democracy must identify appropriate and feasible means to realize deliberatively chosen ends. The bulk of the chapters suggest that deliberative procedures will not – and perhaps cannot – bridge the gap between means and ends.

One likely source of distortion between theory and practice, identified by several of the authors, is due to the complexity of modern society. Mark Pennington (ch. 3) argues that the deliberative goal of enhanced epistemic and ethical reasoning runs counter the limits of citizen learning. As such, the means of deliberation are likely to generate counter-productive pathologies. This is an argument echoed by Manfred Prisching (ch. 4) who avers that modern and post-modern complexity make authentic deliberation by lay-citizens impossible. Ilya Somin (ch. 6) follows this strong line of critique by noting that the large scale of society makes it irrational for citizens to attempt to grasp social problems or attempt to influence state authority.

Although still critical, other chapters are more constructive. Russell Muirhead (ch. 1) suggests that, because all democracies entail political parties, the nature of partisanship will constantly undermine the consensual foundation needed for deliberative reasoning. David Schkade, Cass Sunstein, and Reid Hastie's empirical work (ch. 5) on group polarization argues that homogenous groups will tend toward ideological extremes, rather than promoting the inclusion of new ideas. This finding, though, is framed as a hurdle and not an insurmountable obstacle. Robert Talisse (ch. 7) and Geoffrey Vaughan (ch. 8) are cautiously optimistic. Talisse questions whether folk-epistemology might induce citizens into dialectic truth-seeking. Vaughan's perceptive chapter holds that esotericism – which highlights that all people respond differently to the same communication – means that large-scale public deliberation may not uphold the same ideal that small-scale, private deliberation can.

These chapters raise varied and important issues about whether deliberative procedures can come to fruition, and whether deliberatively selected goals can be secured. On a deeper level, unless truly *deliberative* means are possible, then we can question whether agreed ends are likely to be morally or politically justified. But the book is not

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without shortcomings, and I focus on two issues that help defend the deliberative project. First, despite its title, *Deliberative Democracy in the Modern World* is myopically focused on the United States. To be sure, the US – due to its size and complexity – is a difficult case for deliberative democrats. However, these authors might be accused of cherry-picking a poor case that fails to uphold deliberative ideals for other reasons (a point Vaughan tacitly acknowledges on p. 192). Moreover, much of the promise of deliberative democracy comes to the fore beyond the state. Regional and global governance are core aspects of the modern world, and pockets of deliberative democratization have been established at both levels (Eriksen and Fossum 2004; Dryzek 2006). The ways in which deliberative procedures can be secured and maintained in alternate fora requires a more sustained treatment.

However, the most direct rejoinder is that many of the criticisms raised in the book have been addressed, directly or indirectly, by the recent ‘systemic turn’ in deliberative theory. This new programme, endorsed by almost all major deliberative democrats working today, seeks to make the means and ends of deliberation more tractable in the modern world.[1] The basic premise is that no single institution – no matter how perfectly designed – can uphold all deliberative ideals simultaneously. Rather, a loose set of inter-connected institutions forming a discrete system can produce a ‘division of labor’ that upholds different deliberative ideals at different moments.

Through this lens, deliberative democrats such as John Parkinson and Jane Mansbridge have argued that partisanship – which provides an outlet for specific viewpoints – is systemically desirable. In a similar vein, although deliberative democracy prizes inclusion, group polarization may help minorities form strong views to counter hegemonic power at the systemic level. In contrast to Somin’s analysis, information shortcuts can have deliberative virtues by enabling citizens to form opinions on a wide range of issues. Polarization and shortcuts are only problematic if the deliberative quality of the system suffers. Against Vaughan’s worry that esotericism limits meaningful deliberation to the micro-level, both Jürgen Habermas and Jane Mansbridge have stressed the possibility of transmitting conversation in the public sphere to empowered sites of a deliberative system. Systemic analysis enables the compartmentalization of complexity to make deliberative means more realizable.

In 2010, the systemic turn was peripheral in deliberative democracy. By 2013, through this emergent paradigm, many of the critical strands of this book have been tackled. This emphasizes that, while the criticisms raised in the book are on the right track, the literature on deliberative democracy is capable of undergoing reflexive change in the face of new arguments.

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[1] See the edited collection by John Parkinson and Jane Mansbridge, Eds. (2012) *Deliberative Systems: Deliberative Democracy at the Large Scale*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.