

Communication, Reason, and Deliberative Democracy

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Deliberative Democracy: Essays on Reason and Politics. Edited by James Bohman and William Rehg. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997. xxx + 447 pp. \$25.00 (soft).

Deliberative Democracy. Edited by Jon Elster. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998. xi + 282 pp. \$59.95 (hard), \$18.95 (soft).

Democracy and Disagreement. By Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996. viii + 422 pp. \$27.95 (hard)

Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy. By Jürgen Habermas. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996. xliii + 631 pp. \$45.00 (hard), \$25.00 (soft).

Avoiding Politics: How Americans Produce Apathy in Everyday Life. By Nina Eliasoph. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998. x + 330 pp. \$64.95 (hard).

The Good Citizen: A History of American Civic Life. By Michael Schudson. New York: Free Press, 1998. 390 pp. \$27.50 (hard).

Democracy is an ideal. Rousseau was convinced that “no true democracy has ever existed nor ever will” (in Bobbio, 1987, p. 43) because it presupposed a number of conditions unlikely to be available in the real world. As many political scientists implicitly acknowledge, the modern democracy is based on the recognition of the impossibility of “well-informed and actively participating” citizens.

True, a perfect participatory democracy may be an unattainable dream, but it is also true that we can improve what we have. An approximation to an ideal, however, would require a shared consensus on “what we want” and “how to achieve it.” Seeking an approximated ideal model of democracy, many political theorists have recently set their hopes on deliberative democracy. These books represent some of the significant achievements in the recent development of theories on deliberative democracy.

Bohman and Rehg’s edited volume, *Deliberative Democracy: Essays on Reason and Politics*, is a reliable usher to the fundamental issues and perplexing questions of deliberative democracy. This volume consists of two parts. The first part is

a collection of more influential essays by Elster, Habermas, Cohen, and Rawls (these four essays are reprints from the authors' previous works). The second part carries nine essays that were presented by leading political theorists at a conference at Saint Louis University in April 1996.

Rawls focuses on "substantial requirements," rather than abstract assumptions, of public deliberation. For example, participants should base their arguments on widely accepted "plain truth" and on shared political values. Cohen attempts to specify the institutional preconditions for deliberative decision-making with the concept of the "ideal deliberative procedure" (pp. 74–75). Ideal deliberation is free and reasoned; its parties are both formally and substantively equal. It aims to arrive at a rationally motivated consensus.

Cohen's model presupposes a "background consensus" and a "wide view of public reason," and so do Elster's and Rawls's arguments. Habermas, however, does not presuppose the conditions of deliberation, such as rationality and general consensus on common good, but considers them as products emerging out of communicative actions. For Habermas, public reason is not something "pregiven," but embedded in structures of communicative action by those who are able to accept or reject the validity claims of mutual speech acts.

The main concern cutting across the essays in the second part is this: how to achieve reasoned agreement among free and equal citizens through public discourse. More specifically they ask how to specify a legitimate goal of deliberative decision-making, especially given the diverse and complex issues that contemporary society faces; what a legitimate process (methods or institutional devices) for deliberation would be; and how to define and achieve the preconditions of deliberation such as freedom, equality, and rationality of citizens.

The dilemma is that the prerequisites (goals, procedures, and principles) of deliberation are not given a priori or exteriorly to the system; they must be produced by deliberation itself. Democracy must provide its own rules. Recognizing the dilemma of the "self-reference imperatives" of democracy, Michelman urges us to commit to "deep democracy," where political decision-making is sufficiently self-critical and participants are ready to revise their practices of self-determination.

Christiano and Gaus warn that deliberative procedure itself cannot guarantee political justification due to the "social fact of deep disagreement." They emphasize the importance of the external moral standard (e.g., political equality) with which we should evaluate the process of deliberation. As for Christiano and Gaus, deliberation is less about informed, epistemic, instrumental, or legitimate decision-making, and more about the intrinsic standard of morality.

Young argues that difference, especially among "identity groups," is a necessary resource for a "discussion-based politics in which participants aim to cooperate, reach understanding, and do justice" (p. 385). She refuses to view democratic process as an "adversarial process of competition among self-regarding interests." Instead, democracy should be conceived as a "process of discussion, debate, and criticism that aims to solve collective problems" arising from differences (p. 400).

In his essay, "The Market and the Forum," Elster proposes two basic understandings of politics. One is "the market view," proposed by scholars like

Schumpeter and Downs as “the economic theory of democracy,” which underlies most social choice theories. The other is “the forum view,” proposed by scholars like John Stuart Mill and Habermas, who emphasize that politics should be about rational and moral agreement rather than instrumental compromise. Elster’s argument is that the most attractive place for politics can be found between these two views. He sums up his view as “politics as public in nature and instrumental in purpose” (p. 26).

Elster maintains that the best way of combining the market and the forum is deliberation. He develops this idea in the introductory and contributing chapters to his edited volume, *Deliberative Democracy*. But it seems to me that what Elster is really trying to do here is not an exploration seeking a third view, but an ornamental modification of his market view (the rational choice perspective) with a touch of deliberative democracy. Acknowledging that the forum should differ from the market in its mode of functioning, he nevertheless maintains that the essence of politics is to make decisions that ultimately deal with economic matters. Elster firmly believes that all political decisions are to be reduced to economic matters.

The contributors to this volume, except Cohen, implicitly or explicitly share their editor’s instrumental view of deliberative democracy, assuming that the ultimate goal of democracy is to make legitimate and efficient political decisions. They define deliberative democracy as collective decision-making through discussion among free, equal, and rational individuals. As the editor himself points out, most of the chapters, first presented at a conference at the University of Chicago in April 1995, assume that deliberation is mainly about “instrumental beliefs and induced preferences” regarding making decisions (p. 9). For example, Gambetta defines deliberation as a conversation “before making a collective decision,” which falls somewhere between bargaining and arguing (p. 19); Fearon focuses on the question of the value of discussing things “before making political decisions” (p. 44); Stokes believes that deliberation would “improve the quality of decisions” (p. 123); Gargarella attempts to answer the question of how to “organize political systems in order to obtain impartial decision” (p. 260); Przeworski understands that deliberation is a form of discussion intended to change people’s “preferences” (p. 140); and Mackie’s essay, within a framework of rational choice, criticizes an extreme rational choice approach that argues that democratic voting is inaccurate and deliberation is meaningless.

According to Elster, deliberation is not the only possible method of collective decision-making. There are other modes, but deliberation is better than others in terms of “efficiency, equity, or intrinsic appropriateness” (p. 5). This conceptualization—what we may call an “instrumental view of deliberative democracy”—focuses on the deliberative setting as a set of institutional conditions that promote impartiality, such as normative suggestions for “pure procedural justice” (pp. 116–117).

Gutmann and Thompson’s *Democracy and Disagreement* is a rather ambitious attempt in that the authors propose a set of universal principles that should regulate the substance as well as the process of deliberation. They share Elster’s instrumental assumption that the essence of deliberative democracy is to resolve social

and moral disagreement and to make legitimate decisions. Citing David Hume's concept of "limited generosity" and "the lure of self-interest," Gutmann and Thompson argue that moral disagreement is an inevitable human condition, and that deliberation is "the most appropriate way for citizens collectively to resolve their moral disagreements" (p. 4). To be successful, however, deliberation should follow the authors' six principles.

The first three principles that regulate the decision-making procedures are "reciprocity," "publicity," and "accountability." Reciprocity is the most important leading principle because it shapes the meaning of other principles. It refers to citizens' capacity of "reasoning beyond their narrow self-interests" (p. 52). Reciprocity, of which nature is mutually acceptable deliberation, stands between "prudence" (mutually advantageous bargaining) and "impartiality" (universally justifiable demonstration; p. 53). Publicity demands that the reasons citizens and officials give should be public in order to secure the reciprocity principle and to realize "the independent moral value of openness in government" (p. 95). Accountability means that everyone should be able and willing to give an account to everyone else. This principle echoes Rawls's idea of "public reason," which asks citizens to "be able to explain their vote to one another in terms of reasonable balance of public political values" (Rawls in Bohman & Rehg, p. 116). Gutmann and Thompson also maintain that representatives must be accountable not only to their electoral constituents, but also to their "moral constituents" (p. 144), who include citizens of other countries and "those who will live in the future" (p. 155).

The remaining three principles are to regulate the substance of deliberation: The "basic liberty," embracing arguments from moralism and paternalism, suggests that government should intervene to protect liberty with policies that enhance personal integrity; the "basic opportunity" principle is to secure citizens an adequate level of basic opportunity goods, such as health care, education, security, income, and work (p. 272); and the "fair opportunity" principle holds that government should ensure that each citizen has a fair chance to secure opportunity goods (such as advanced education and skilled employment) on the basis of qualifications (p. 307).

The instrumental view of deliberative democracy, including Gutmann and Thompson's principles for deliberation and Elster and his colleagues' decision-making-oriented conceptualization, is based on some optimistic but dubious assumptions: Common good should be clear to every reasonable citizen; moral disagreements can be resolved through deliberation, even though the disagreements may be rooted in sociocultural differences; and people know, before starting deliberation, what they want, what their interests (preferences) are, what others want, what is reasonable, what is justifiable, and what fits the common good. Of course, behind all these assumptions, there is the self, or the subjective consciousness, who presumably prefers, decides, and votes.

However, many communication theories, including symbolic interactionism and social constructivism, point out the primacy of communication over the self. For example, Pearce and Cronen's (1980) concept of "persons-in-conversation" suggests that communication, hence deliberation, is the process where the self is conceived and constructed. The concept of "me" (the "generalized other") is the

product of social interactions with other members of the society. It is on Mead's idea of symbolic interactionism, among other things, that Habermas relies for his theory of communicative action (1984).

We may say that Habermas's *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy* is a result of an application of the communicative action theory to his even earlier concept of the public sphere (1962/1989). One of the main questions of this book is how law can achieve legitimacy (instead of the traditional question of how legitimacy can be achieved through legality). Rejecting the traditional answers provided by philosophy of natural rights and social contracts, Habermas turns to his concepts of validity claims, communicative reason, and deliberative politics in the public sphere. In his approach to "deliberative politics," Habermas shows some stark differences from other theorists, especially with the instrumentalists.

First, criticizing rational choice theories, including Elster's, Habermas argues that the nature of public deliberation is communicative rather than strategic or purposive (pp. 336–341). According to him, communicative action is "oriented to achieving, sustaining, and renewing consensus—and indeed a consensus that rests on the intersubjective recognition of criticizable validity claims" (1984, p. 17).

Second, Habermas argues that the nature of reason is not metaphysics nor subjective consciousness, but sociological and communicative interactions. Rationality is not based on the solitary thinker, or subjective consciousness, but on intersubjective interaction, or more precisely, interactive speech acts and language use. Thus, public reason, including the moral principles for deliberation, is not something that can be pre-given or pre-set a priori, but is continuously being produced and reproduced through communicative interactions. Deliberation is the process not only of arguing and bargaining, applying reason to decision making, but also of producing communicative reason.

Third, while most instrumentalists are exclusively concerned with deliberation processes within the government, Habermas extends the scope of deliberative democracy beyond the political system (government) and to the public sphere. Habermas defines the public sphere as "a communication structure rooted in the lifeworld through the associational network of civil society" (p. 359). The public sphere refers to the spatiotemporal conditions where citizens can get together freely and have open political conversations. The public sphere is a unique form of the lifeworld. "Like the lifeworld as a whole, so, too, the public sphere is reproduced through communicative action" (p. 360).

Fourth, for the instrumentalists, public opinion is not an important element for deliberative democracy; only public reason matters. Habermas, however, views public opinion as an important key that links the public sphere and the political system. As for him, the public deliberation is the "discursively structured opinion- and will-formation" process (p. 170). In deliberative democracy, the political system is expected to be sensitive to the public sphere. Habermas points out, "The political system, which must remain sensitive to the influence of public opinion, is intertwined with the public sphere and civil society through the activity of political parties and general elections" (p. 368).

Last, and probably most importantly, Habermas considers casual conversations

in the private sphere as an important element of deliberative democracy, referring to the “co-originality of civic and private autonomy” (p. 127). Habermas’s public sphere is conceptually located between the political system and the private sphere. People enter the public sphere as private persons and participate in public deliberations without any obligation, predetermined choices, or specific agenda for decisions. In this sense, the basic format of public deliberation is “non-purposive” and “non-goal-directed” private conversation. Since the public sphere does not refer to any single physical space, but to the “social space” produced by communication actions, any place—shopping malls, restaurants, churches, streets, workplaces, civic organizations, living rooms, and even private bedrooms—can function as the public sphere only if people freely get together and talk about public issues.

Eliasoph’s *Avoiding Politics: How Americans Produce Apathy in Everyday Life* vividly shows that people do talk politics in the private sphere and (surprise!) only in the private sphere. In fact, this book is less about “avoiding politics,” but more about talking politics in the closet. Assuming that “only plain talk, between citizens, can knit the bonds necessary for a more human society” (p. 11), Eliasoph attempts to discover in what contexts people actually talk politics.

Through ethnographic fieldwork with suburban volunteers, activists, and recreation club members for 2-1/2 years, Eliasoph finds a very interesting phenomenon: People “mysteriously shrink” their political concerns when they speak out “on the stage.” For example, they tend to speak out only about their own personal concerns and interests when the press interviews them, but they talk about political aspects of the issues as soon as the cameras and microphones go away. In other words, people try to portray themselves as private persons advocating their own interests in the public sphere, but they feel free to talk about broader political issues when they “whisper” in “intimate, late night, moonlit conversation” (p. 7). As a result, Eliasoph heard “public-spirited conversation only backstage, in hushed tones” (p. 16).

The activists that Eliasoph interviewed were actively silencing their “public-spirited political conversation” and working hard to keep political conversation backstage, because that was their “political etiquette” and their way of “looking out for the common good” (p. 63). Her finding contradicts the widely held belief that backstage talk is substandard and less relevant to political life. On the contrary, Eliasoph found that people actually sounded better backstage than frontstage.

Eliasoph laments that citizens’ construction of the “unspoken political etiquette,” where they delicately but very firmly establish “a sense of what the public sphere is” (p. 230), paradoxically evaporates political conversations from the public sphere. What Eliasoph calls the public sphere (the frontstage), however, is actually the public forum. What she calls “the backstage,” where citizens feel free to talk politics, is an essential part of the public sphere. It may not be her original intention, but Eliasoph nevertheless demonstrates the private and domestic sphere (backstage) is indeed a part of the public sphere where people actively engage in communicative actions.

An ideal citizen for deliberative democracy would be an informed, rational, and impartial citizen who would spontaneously engage in political conversation

and participation. Would that be possible? Have we ever had such citizens in our history? Ultimately, history may be the only way of examining the feasibility of the ideal of deliberative democracy.

In *The Good Citizen: A History of American Civic Life*, Schudson assesses the entire history of American political life through an insightful framework of the “changing concept of citizen”—from “Founding Father’s era,” to “Informed Citizen,” to “Right Conscious Citizen.” Schudson concludes that American democracy has neither simply degenerated (there was no such thing as the Golden Age of democracy) nor satisfyingly improved, but some aspects are getting better, others worse. He contends, however, that the important question is what should be the “good citizen” for a better democracy in the future.

Schudson proposes that the “monitorial citizen” is probably the best possible model for democracy. The monitorial citizen is obliged to scan and monitor the political world rather than to learn and “get informed” of all the details about public affairs. Monitorial citizens would engage in more “environmental surveillance than information-gathering.” As such, Schudson supports the idea of politics by professional politicians based on “expertise and institutions”: “Why do we expect,” he asks, “people to be political backpackers?” (p. 311). The concept of the monitorial citizens will probably be welcomed by political scientists like John Zaller (1992), Samuel Popkin (1991), and Russell Neuman (1986) because the concept well fits the theory of heuristics in mass opinions and of “low-information rationality.”

The concept of the monitorial citizen, though, will face criticism as well, especially from communication scholars who are sensitive to the mass media’s power in the construction of reality, since “monitoring without being proactive” could mean viewing the political world through the news media without interacting with other citizens—which is the most vulnerable form of audience, vis-à-vis media’s agenda-setting and framing function.

Criticism probably will also come from those who believe that democratic citizens should not remain as spectators, but must be active participants on the playing field. Perhaps, we should try to get rid of the invisible wall separating the stage (or the playing field) from the audience floor (or the stands), instead of accepting, much less justifying, it. I believe “politics by amateurs” should be the desirable and attainable democracy model that we should pursue. Administration should be run by technical (policy) experts, but general political processes should be open to amateur citizens as well as professional politicians. Both Habermas’s theory of communicative reason, emphasizing the significance of casual conversations in the public sphere, and Eliasoph’s findings support the idea of politics by amateurs.

There seem to be as many understandings of deliberative democracy as the number of theorists, but we may define deliberative democracy as a political system and culture based on citizens’ voluntary and free discussions of public issues. It refers to a discursive process where citizens share relevant information, talk about (converse, discuss, argue, and deliberate) public affairs, form opinions, and participate in the political process. The whole system is “discursive,” in as much as each component of it—sharing information, talking about it, forming

opinions, and participating—has the characteristics of discourse and communicative action.

We may take the current surge of interest in deliberative democracy as an indication of another paradigm shift in political science from the rational choice paradigm to the “communication paradigm,” followed by the previous shift from behaviorism (political psychology based on the stimulus-response model) to the rational choice perspective (game theories and economic interpretation of political behaviors). As communication emerges at the center of the discussion, the communication field should pay closer attention to the issues of deliberative democracy.

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