



Introduction: Pragmatism and Deliberative Politics

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In the past decade, democratic theory has taken an unmistakable turn toward deliberative models of democratic legitimacy and practice. This deliberative turn is in part due to the frustrations that emerged out of the disputes concerning liberalism often misleadingly characterized as the “liberal-communitarian debate.”¹ Recall that the communitarian critique proposed that liberal political philosophy rested upon a viciously atomistic view of the individual and consequently could not countenance an adequately robust vision of democratic citizenship. That is, the critics of liberalism maintained that liberal politics could not eschew what Jane Mansbridge fittingly characterized as “adversary democracy” (Mansbridge, 1983). Explaining this style of democratic politics, Jürgen Habermas writes:

According to the “liberal” or Lockean view, the democratic process accomplishes the task of programming the government in the interest of society where the government is represented as an apparatus of public administration, and society as a market-structured network of interactions among private persons. (Habermas 1996, 21)

Habermas states that, according to the liberal view of democracy, political rights “such as voting rights and free speech” serve the purpose of providing citizens “the opportunity to assert their private interests in such a way that . . . these interests are finally aggregated into a political will that makes an impact on the administration” (22).²

The communitarian case was bolstered by the growing concern over dwindling civic association and participation that received its most popular expression in Robert Putnam’s article “Bowling Alone” (1995) and related work.³ Michael Sandel succinctly captured the sting of the critique, writing that liberalism “cannot secure the liberty it promises,” because it “cannot inspire the sense of community and civic engagement that liberty requires” (Sandel 1996, 6). What liberals needed was a way to reunite the atomic individuals that resided at

the basis of their theory, to socialize the essentially asocial. Despite heroic attempts to meet the challenge, the prospects for liberalism seemed bleak.

Liberals defended themselves mostly by way of counterattack. The liberal critique of communitarianism took a Millian tack and raised concerns of community tyranny, conformity, and intolerance. In light of the communitarian call for a politics of settled identities and social allegiances, a community of shared values, and a morally non-neutral state, Stephen Holmes made the following observation:

[Communitarians] rhapsodize about neighborhoods, churches, school boards, and so forth; they never provide sufficient detail about the national political institutions they favor to allow us to compare the advantages and disadvantages of illiberal community with the vices and virtues of liberal society as we know. . . . Does moral revulsion at “radical separation” among citizens require making divorce and emigration illegal? What does a commitment to “solidarity” or “consensus” imply about the authority of majorities over dissident minorities? (Holmes 1993, 178)

Sandel’s reply to this kind of criticism that “intolerance flourishes most where forms of life are dislocated, roots unsettled, and traditions undone” (Sandel 1984, 27) was correctly taken as inadequate. Communitarians needed to devise a way in which essentially social and “encumbered” selves could adopt a self-critical stance that could weed out and correct the oppressive, intolerant, and homogenizing tendencies of community without evoking liberal notions of civil liberties and individual rights. In other words, they needed a conception of community that was at once binding *and* plastic, a politics that was both formative and fluid. Again, the prospects seemed bleak.

Enter the deliberative turn. That the literature on democratic deliberation admits of great crossover between otherwise divided theorists marks a decisive improvement over the liberal-communitarian impasse it displaced. It is my contention, however, that each camp has seized upon the idea of public deliberation, or, more generally, of deliberative democracy, as a reparative measure. Accordingly, deliberativism has yet to transform political theory; the fundamental liberal-communitarian problematic remains.

To see this, consider first the host of deliberative proposals associated with John Rawls’s political liberalism. Central to liberal deliberativism is the “ideal of democratic citizenship” (Rawls 1996, 217) in which citizens come together in a “public political forum” (Rawls 1999, 133). This is a realm, according to Joshua Cohen, in which “free public reason among equals” (Cohen 1996, 412) operates. Within this realm,

Participants regard one another as equals; they aim to defend and criticize institutions and programs in terms of considerations that others have reason to

accept, given the fact of reasonable pluralism and the assumption that those others are reasonable; and they are prepared to cooperate in accordance with the results of such discussion, treating those results as authoritative. (413)

Cohen's invocation of pluralism is important. It is a fundamental feature of liberal deliberation theories that public reason be engaged under a specific set of restrictions. Particularly, liberal theorists of deliberative democracy tend to assert that pluralism constrains public discourse with respect to the *kinds* of reasons that can be employed in public debate; according to the liberal view, one must avoid introducing reasons that presuppose or draw from one's own comprehensive doctrine. When deliberating, citizens must confine themselves to "considerations that others have reason to accept"; reasons that derive from a particular comprehensive doctrine cannot win general acceptance in public debate, and are therefore inadmissible.

On the liberal view, then, citizens must conduct public debate in strictly Rawlsian, "political not metaphysical" terms. Consequently, the liberal places restrictions not only upon the *kinds of reasons* citizens can employ, but also upon the *kinds of questions* that are suitable for deliberation. Issues that cannot be debated in "political" terms are removed from the agenda. Rawls writes, "a liberal view removes from the political agenda the most divisive issues, serious contention about which must undermine the bases of social cooperation" (Rawls 1996, 157). Thomas Nagel concurs,

Where no common standpoint is available at any level to authorize the collective determination by democratic procedures of policies about which individuals find themselves in radical disagreement because of incompatible values, it is best, if possible, to remove those subjects from the reach of political action. (Nagel 1991, 166)

Liberal democratic deliberation is hence subject to what Bruce Ackerman calls "conversational restraints":

When you and I learn that we disagree about one or another dimension of the moral truth, we should not search for some common value that will trump this disagreement. . . . We should simply say nothing at all about this disagreement and try to solve our problem by invoking premises that we do agree upon. In restraining ourselves in this way, we need not lose the chance to talk to one another about our deepest moral disagreements in countless other, more private contexts. (Ackerman 1989, 16–17)

Liberals advocate public discussion and debate, but nonetheless place the basic commitments and principles of liberalism beyond the reach of political deliberation (Fish 1999, 90–91). Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson are explicit on this point: "Even in deliberative democracy, deliberation does not have

priority over liberty and opportunity” (Gutmann and Thompson 1996, 17). On their view, basic liberty and fair opportunity are “constraints on what counts as a morally legitimate resolution of disagreement” (17). Indeed, they are “partly independent” values (366 n. 18).

What is troubling about this conception is that the constraints placed upon deliberation are themselves not generated by the kind of open deliberative processes the liberals advocate (cf. Knight 1999). This feature of the liberal theories invites the objection that liberal deliberative democracy is “fixed” so as to favor liberal outcomes. Some theorists, such as Iris Young (2000; 2003) and Chantal Mouffe (2000), argue that liberal deliberativism is in fact exclusionary, silencing more radical forms of democratic communication.

We need not turn to radical democrats to see this objection realized. Consider the abortion controversy. Many oppose abortion on the basis of a doctrine according to which human life begins at conception. On a liberal view of public reason, one may not appeal to such a doctrine in public debate; reasons that are couched in a comprehensive doctrine are *ipso facto* nonpublic and inadmissible. If one is to make a public case against abortion, one must avoid appealing to theories of when human life begins and instead demonstrate that the political values embedded within our shared political tradition count against abortion. However, to require of citizens that their public discussion of important matters be conducted in this attenuated mode is to beg the very questions that opponents of abortion are often trying to engage. The question regarding abortion rights is as much about how political and nonpolitical values should be prioritized as it is about personhood. Therefore, to introduce into the very conception of public reason a restriction favoring political values over other values is to program public deliberation to favor certain outcomes. The liberal constraints on public reason thus seem unfair to those who believe that certain values—respect for human life, for instance—should outweigh political values.⁴

Hence liberal theorists of deliberative democracy have retained precisely the element that rendered liberalism problematic, namely, the view that citizens come into the political arena as distinct, independent entities with irreconcilable and incommensurable fixed interests, whose fundamental commitments are always separable from who they are. The prior restraints liberals impose on public debate establish an allegedly “reasonable” framework within which otherwise divided citizens can find common ground; however, liberals cannot give citizens non-question-begging reasons to accept those prior constraints on their public discourse. To echo a concern raised by James Johnson, why should, for example, a Catholic opponent of abortion accept a conception of public debate that explicitly disqualifies her way of framing the issue? Why should she agree to participate in a deliberative procedure requiring as a condition of participation that she leave her true reasons for opposing abortion unexpressed (Johnson 1998, 167; cf. George 1999, 187ff.)? William Galston puts the point nicely:

It is difficult to imagine that any liberal democracy can sustain conscientious support if it tells millions of its citizens that they cannot rightly say what they believe as part of democratic public dialogue. (Galston 1999, 43)

We cannot determine a priori which of our disagreements stem from irreconcilable differences; accordingly, we cannot establish a priori “precepts of reasonable discussion” (Rawls 1989, 478). As Sandel has argued, “[w]hether it is possible to reason our way to agreement on any given moral or political controversy is not something we can know until we try” (Sandel 1998, 210–11). Insofar as liberals maintain such precommitments, they retain those very elements that made liberalism problematic in the first place.

Next, consider communitarian conceptions of deliberation. Whereas liberals attempt to avoid moral controversy, communitarians seem obsessed with morality. According to communitarians, shared moral discourse among citizens is the means by which a fragmented community may “recover its civic voice” (Sandel 1996, 324) and transfer “*me* language” into “*we* language” (Barber 1998b, 13). That is, shared “moral dialogue” *restores* community by appealing to “overarching values” implicitly shared; through dialogue, citizens come “to affirm new, renewed, or some other set of values” (Etzioni 1998, 186–90). Benjamin Barber explains:

A public voice expressing the civility of a cooperative civil society speaks in terms that reveal and elicit common ground, cooperative strategies, overlapping interests, and a sense of the public weal. (Barber 1998a, 116)

The communitarians are confident that commonality, shared purposes, and overlapping interests underlie all or most political disagreement. Public deliberation is the process by which this deep agreement, suppressed by the deracinating tendencies of liberal politics, can surface and come to flourish. The value of deliberation hence lies in its power to realize the immanent sense of community among seemingly divided persons.

There are problems with this conception of deliberation. Communitarian accounts of public discourse *presuppose* that fundamental agreement at deep levels *already exists* among persons who *merely seem* to be divided. Thus, deliberation is not a process by which persons confront *real* differences and try to forge common ground; on the communitarian view, all differences are merely apparent, and common ground will always be *found*. This confidence in commonalities reinforces liberal worries of community tyranny and oppression of individuality (Cohen 1998, 222–24).

Perhaps more important, as they believe that the materials necessary for harmonious community lie dormant within citizens, communitarians see deliberation as a *prelude* to politics, a process by which the latent Common Will comes to realize itself in the form of shared purposes, commitments, and ideals.

But where there is widespread agreement and a shared moral vision, there is no need for deliberation! Deliberation is thus merely of instrumental, temporary value; once a truly *political* community is achieved through deliberation, deliberative processes may be discarded. This Rousseauian fantasy offers little by way of guidance to citizens who every day confront *real* disagreement in the public arena. When the promise of a politics of communal “we language” fails, as it surely will, the question remains: what shall citizens do?

So whereas liberals offer a theory of deliberation that restricts vocabularies and agendas to such a degree that there is ultimately precious little to deliberate *about*, the communitarians promote a view according to which deliberation, understood as the process of excavating a shared political will, is ultimately unnecessary. Neither is satisfactory. Consequently the deliberative turn in contemporary democratic theory is as yet incomplete. What is missing is a freestanding deliberativism, that is, a view of democratic deliberation that is not precommitted to the aims and principles of an antecedent political theory.

We may view the debate over deliberation as a rehearsal of a more fundamental and familiar dispute between Kant and Hegel: Liberals are Kantian deliberative formalists and communitarians promote a Hegelian deliberative eschatology. Both historically and doctrinally, pragmatism is an attempt to navigate between Kant and Hegel, and for this reason pragmatism may be of use in developing a freestanding deliberative account of democracy.

In this special issue of *Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, several distinguished political philosophers attempt to put pragmatism to work in the deliberative democracy debates. The approaches are diverse, ranging from Cheryl Misak’s Peircean epistemic view of political justification, to James Bohman’s Deweyan view of social facts, to Judith Green’s and Noëlle McAfee’s varying conceptions of political participation. These efforts are brought under the critical eye of John Dryzek in the closing essay of the volume. Collectively, these essays point to ways in which those working in the pragmatist idiom may contribute to fundamental debates in contemporary political theory; more important, they are reminders that the democratic task—which is a task of both theory and practice—is still in progress.

Notes

- 1.Characterizing the debate in this way is misleading because the most sophisticated critics of liberalism did not share a common positive political vision, and in any case rejected the term “communitarianism” fairly early in the dispute; however, the linguistic habit of using the term prevails.
- 2.Similar characterizations are found throughout the literature; see for example, Dryzek (2000, chap. 1); Young (2000, chap. 1); Bohman (1996, 1–3); Nino (1996, chap. 4); Cohen (1998, 411–12); and Gould (1988, 97).
- 3.See Bellah et al. (1985); Dionne (1991); Elshtain (1995); Etzioni (1993); Iyengar (1991); Janowitz (1983); Page (1996); and Phaar and Putnam (2000).
4. That “political values” should “override all other values that come into conflict with them” is a premise of Rawls’s view (Rawls 1989, 483).

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