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Review

Deliberative Democracy: Issues and Cases

Stephen Elstub and Peter McLaverty (eds). Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014. 256pp.

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Deliberative democracy, a theory of political legitimacy, argues citizens should be given a more central role in political processes, contending that collective decisions are legitimate to the extent that those subject to them have the right, opportunity and capacity to contribute to deliberations on them. It has been at the forefront of political theory in recent decades and has evolved theoretically, empirically and in praxis overtime.

As outlined in this edited volume by Elstub and McLaverty, we are now experiencing the “third generation” of deliberative democracy. The first generation focused on the normative theoretical aspects of deliberation while the second generation placed greater emphasis on empirical analyses of deliberation. The latest wave of deliberative democratic study, the third generation, is concerned with deliberation in praxis that is the form and nature of the institutions required to achieve deliberation in practice. In particular, it involves an analysis and discussion of the concept of the deliberative system that addresses the “relationship between the various sites of deliberation and the functioning of the system as a whole rather than focusing on isolated and discrete instances of deliberation” (Bachtiger and Wegmann: 133).

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Harris has made expert contributions to deliberative processes nationally and internationally. She was a member of the Irish Constitutional Convention’s Academic and Legal Advisory Group (2012–14). She also served on the International Scientific Advisory board of “We the Citizens,” which held Ireland’s first Citizens’ Assembly (2011) and on the International observer committee of Belgium’s G1000 Citizens’ Summit (2011). She currently sits on the Advisory Board of the Citizens’ Assemblies project (UK).

It is on this third generation of deliberative democracy that this timely edited volume concentrates. Over a series of discrete yet well intertwined chapters, distinguished academics in the field outline and critically assess the issues and challenges that deliberative democracy faces in practice, some of them offering pragmatic solutions to overcome them.

The core issues addressed by the authors include the challenge of: “scaling up deliberation” (Bachtiger and Wegmann); achieving deliberative democracy in modern societies where asymmetries of wealth, power, education, for example, produce large scale inequalities in terms of presence, voice and influence (McLaverty); citizen competence and democratic deliberation (Rosenberg); public openness within the deliberative democratic system (Steiner); enclave deliberation, that is, deliberation amongst like-minded/situated groups (Setala); and operationalizing deliberative democracy in “mini-publics” (Elstub).

Many of these themes have been the focus of other scholars elsewhere. However, they receive “new treatment” by the eminent contributors to this edited volume. For their part, Bachtiger and Wegmann consider the “scaling up” of deliberation beyond the nation state to institutions of supranational and global governance with specific reference to the role for the systemic approach to deliberation. Setala’s work considers the deliberative democratic potential of enclave deliberation noting that it can be a means through which minority or traditionally marginalized groups achieve inclusion and equality in deliberative democratic processes. Rosenberg’s examination of citizen competence presents some troubling findings [from a deliberative democrat’s perspective] in terms of citizen capacities to meet the deliberative democratic demands required of them. However, he presents a series of clear, practical suggestions to overcome these deficiencies, placing particular emphasis on democratic pedagogy. In his chapter, Steiner makes the case for sequencing deliberative democracy to promote public openness, arguing that not all activities within a deliberative system need to be public. The penultimate chapter by Elstub, which presents a typology of mini-publics as well as the DePER framework, neatly analyses the issues presented by the authors of the previous chapter in terms of mini-publics making the case for sequencing them with other institutions in the policy process.

A number of the contributors address under-explored issues in the literature on deliberative democracy. Brown’s assessment of the role expertise plays in democratic

theory and practice is a very welcome contribution to an often under-researched area in the field. Considering the key part played by “experts” within mini-publics in particular this chapter address the influence they may exert in terms of framing the topic of deliberation and the different roles they may play as experts. It concludes by offering some strategies to deal with the societal contexts of expert advice. Conflict and deliberative democracy is examined in three of the chapters. Blakely, using a social movement (Spain’s 15-M movement), examines the issue in terms of the tension between liberal democracy and capitalism. For their part Cinalli and O’Flynn are more concerned with “deliberation across divides” that is conflict in terms of ethnic and cultural differences which they examine with a focus on the challenge value pluralism presents for deliberative democracy. Halpin and Cintula explore possible “conflict” (tensions) between what they term deliberative events (such as mini-publics), interest groups and the wider community in the public policy process and argue for greater engagement between the scholars of deliberative democracy and their public policy colleagues.

In summary, this volume provides a comprehensive, structured and insightful discussion of the key issues and challenges facing deliberative democracy as it enters its third generation and is to be welcomed as a significant contribution to the literature in this field. It’s only weakness (and it is a minor one at that) is the dearth of specific cases discussed. The chapters by Blakely, Cinalli and O’Flynn, and Elstub are notable exceptions. Some additional cases would have been welcome, particularly in a book that addresses deliberative democracy in practice. In light of this, it might be suggested that the book would have been better titled *Deliberative Democracy: Issues and Challenges*.

Finally, this reviewer echoes Elstub’s call for more comparative institutional analysis if “we are to scale up mini-publics, connect them effectively with the public sphere, and sequence them more appropriately in the policy process” (188). This volume provides a strong starting point for this work, laying, as it does, the groundwork for such an analysis.