Deliberative Systems: Deliberative Democracy at the Large Scale, edited by Jane Mansbridge and John Parkinson. 2012. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Review for Democratic Theory

Joseph Lacey

Not your run of the mill collection of essays, *Deliberative Systems: Deliberative Democracy at the Large Scale* represents a research statement by some of the leading deliberative democrats. The collection starts off with a piece by eight authors – including Jane Mansbridge, James Bohman and Simone Chambers – outlining a major research agenda for deliberative democrats. According to this piece, entitled 'A Systemic Approach to Deliberative Democracy', deliberative democracy has had a two-stage history to date. First of all, there was the initial and highly theoretical reflection on the nature of good deliberation by a range of leading political philosophers such as Jürgen Habermas, Joshua Cohen and David Estlund. The second stage, currently ongoing, has attempted to apply deliberative theory to empirical cases. Some have used deliberative theory to explain political decision-making, others to critique it, and others still have attempted to learn more about the conditions of sound decision-making by setting up various forms of deliberative forums such as mini-publics and focus groups.

A limitation of this second-stage, according to the authors, is that it almost universally focuses on particular instances or arenas of deliberation, whether it be a parliament, protest rally or mini-public. This, they believe, does not allow us to judge or help us in improving the quality of deliberation within society as a whole. The key insight they wish to impart is that the deliberative quality of decision-making within a society can be accurately assessed only when all instances of deliberation are viewed within a wider system of interaction, that is, a deliberative system. What this essentially entails is that there may be deliberative trade-offs, due to a division of labour, between different arenas within the system. For example, the lack of rational discourse at a protest may be made up for by the way in which political institutions deliberate over the demands made by the protest, while the failure of parliament to take into account the legitimate values of a minority group can be corrected by the awareness-raising function of protest. In other words, a protest viewed on its own may be seen as deliberatively deficient, but when understood as part of a wider system it can be seen as playing a valuable deliberative role.

Deliberation, however, is not thought to cover all talk. The authors distinguish between four arenas within a deliberative system, all of which are characterised by their concern for specifically political questions of the form "what is to be done?" These arenas are the binding decisions of the state, arenas directly related to the preparation of those decisions, informal talk related to such decisions, and formal and informal talk on issues of common concern that are not intended for state decision-making. Recognition, equality and inclusion are identified as the main values to be instantiated within and between these arenas. From the systemic point of view, the central pathologies of which to be aware include the decoupling of deliberative arenas such that one does not affect the other, the undue domination of one arena over others and the domination of particular social interests across several arenas.

The remaining six high quality essays, all single-authored but one, are written with the deliberative system framework firmly in mind and serve as good examples of what future theoretical research on deliberative democracy might look like. Thomas Christiano's central point in 'Rational Deliberation among Experts and Citizens' is that handing over means-end reasoning to experts subject to high deliberative standards is legitimate so long as citizens are the ones setting the ends or basic aims of the society. Simone Chamber's 'Deliberation and

Mass Democracy' emphasises that a narrow definition of deliberation, such as that endorsed by Joshua Cohen as a form of decision-making based on mutually justifiable reasons, can lead us to focus too much on the arena of deliberation defined by state decision-making bodies. Instead, she advocates a broader understanding of deliberation that is more amenable to the systemic approach, namely as any form of discourse systemically connected to the making of common decisions in a society.

In 'Representation in the Deliberative System', James Bohman provides a useful and very Habermasian articulation concerning the appropriate flow of communication in deliberative systems. In his language, communicative freedom is the exercise of communicative status (granted by the political recognition of citizens as free and equal), which becomes transformed into communicative power by its bearing on institutionalised decision-making processes. 'Two Trust-based uses of Mini-publics in Democratic Systems' is Michael K. MacKenzie and Mark E. Warren's attempt to demonstrate that mini-publics can play the positive deliberative function of acting as trusted proxies to guide both policy-makers and the wider political judgment of citizens on important issues.

'On the Embeddedness of Deliberative Systems: Why Elitist Innovations Matter More' is an attempt by Yannis Papadopoulos to explore the potential for the emphasis on deliberation to produce non-democratic situations where technocratic, bureaucratic and judicial deliberative formations operate in isolation from popular participation and control. The final essay, 'Democratizing Deliberative Systems' by John Parkinson, follows Papadopoulos in picking up on this tension between democracy and deliberation, scouting the contributions within the volume and the wider literature for (not always complementary) ways in which the tension might be minimised. Parkinson concludes with a cautious optimism concerning the new research agenda, calling for further refinement of the analytic framework developed in the first chapter in addition to the development of empirical research designs with the systems perspective in mind.

Full of rich papers written in a crystalline fashion, this book is an essential read for all those favourable towards or frustrated by deliberative democracy, whether as a mode of analysis or as a normative ideal. Detractors may find particularly refreshing the self-awareness of these contributions, particularly reflections in the later essays on the often overlooked fact that good deliberation is not always compatible with democratic values.

A drawback from this reviewer's perspective is the under appreciation of the role that different kinds of voting play – whether electoral or direct democratic – in legitimising and structuring public discourse. While focusing on mini-publics, protests, expert forums, etc. the contributors do not sufficiently acknowledge the deliberative potential embedded in the numerous vote-based opportunity structures available to modern democratic societies. For those interested in deliberation "at the large scale", the ability for different forms of voting to mobilise mass deliberation in different ways merits further exploration. In an earlier paper, co-authored by several contributors to this volume and others (Mansbridge et al. 2010), there is a brief reflection on this theme that could serve as the basis of a much more elaborated analysis.

Reference

Mansbridge, Jane, James Bohman, Simone Chambers, David Estlund, Andreas Follesdal, Archon Fung, Christina Lafont, Bernard Manin and Jose Luis Marti. 2010. The Place of Self-interest and the Role of Power in Deliberative Democracy. *Journal of Political Philosophy* 18 (1): 64-100.