

John S. Dryzek

Foundations and Frontiers of Deliberative Governance.

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In *Foundations and Frontiers of Deliberative Governance* John Dryzek provides a cutting-edge discussion of the field of deliberative politics. Those who work on deliberative democratic politics will find that this book squarely and effectively addresses many of the recent challenges to deliberative politics and fruitfully pulls together much of recent research in this area. Those not familiar with deliberative democracy will find this a clear, though dense, introduction to the field.

The two main sections of the book focus on 1) the foundations of deliberative democracy (with two of those chapters co-written by Simon Niemeyer), and 2) the frontiers of deliberative politics. Part one is especially important for providing a thorough and well-reasoned discussion of many of the fundamental criticisms that have been levied against deliberative democracy and a defense against such criticisms. Part two provides a thorough overview of how deliberation occurs in governance networks (Chapter 6), how it can serve as a democratizing force in non-democratic societies and should be built up as a fundamental capacity in all democracies (Chapter 7), proves an overview of empirical work on mini-publics (Chapter 8), and discusses how deliberative governance can fill in the governance gap in global politics, where traditional mechanisms of liberal democracy are very limited (Chapter 9)

Given the breadth of the discussion in the book, this review will focus especially on a few kernel issues that Dryzek fruitfully address—the questions of legitimacy and of representation (dealt with in Chapters 2 and 3) and Dryzek’s treatment of the problem of scale, along with the questions of the role of contestation and rhetoric in deliberative politics.

Besides setting up the book for his own work by highlighting recent developments in deliberative democratic theory and practice, in Chapter 1 Dryzek lays out his view of the prerequisites of deliberative capacity, which he applies in numerous discussions throughout the book. Such capacity requires structures that ‘accommodate deliberation that *is authentic, inclusive, and consequential*’ (10). Specifying these terms, Dryzek notes that deliberation is authentic if it provides an opportunity to non-coercively influence reflection on preferences. It is inclusive if all those affected have a voice. It is consequential if those involved in the discourse are able to influence outcomes (10).

The question of legitimate governance is key to the book. Dryzek emphasizes that for a democratic system to be considered legitimate, it must not only be accepted but that its acceptance must also be uncoerced and informed. For legal systems, there is also a legal requirement that the system be constitutional or legal. Deliberative democrats in particular emphasize that legitimacy requires the deliberative participation of all affected by politics.

While many admit the value of such broad participation, such participation does give rise to what is known as the ‘problem of scale’. One part of this is captured in Oscar Wilde’s famous quip

that ‘the problem with socialism is that it takes too many evenings.’ In short, the question is how one generates the enthusiasm for and knowledge of the issues needed for good deliberative democratic governance. Another part of the problem of scale concerns how one manages coordination problems in large polities. Dryzek’s partial solutions to the problem of scale include, in the words of his subsection headings: (a) ‘limiting the times when deliberation is needed,’ (b) ‘limiting deliberation to a small number of representatives,’ and (c) ‘limiting deliberation to those best able to discern the public’s interest.’ Those solutions address especially the issue of deliberation in formal political fora. However, Dryzek’s view is that such formal representation is only one aspect of deliberative democracy. Perhaps equally important to these, in robust deliberative democracies the public contestation of discourses complements formal representation, serving as one of the ‘many non-electoral and nonvoting avenues of influence’ in democratic systems. These can shape the framing of issues in formal governmental bodies, doing much to ensure that policy is formed with an awareness of important social concerns.

The concerns of legitimacy flow into those of representation (see Chapter 3). Dryzek argues that in an increasingly global and technologically networked world, it is important to find new ways of representing those affected by a polity. One problem with current representative democracies is precisely that they fail to adequately represent more than geographical constituencies. For example, they do little to represent future generations, non-human nature, or non-citizens. In Dryzek’s view both informal and formal representation of such constituencies is possible in a ‘representation of discourses’ (43). Dryzek’s explanation of ‘discourses’ is rather technical. Discourses are fundamental ‘ways of comprehending the world’ (31) in diverse areas like the economy, the environment, or science. In the economic sphere fundamental discourses include market liberalism, state economic management models, and sustainable development models (32). Dryzek thinks that productive ‘chambers of discourses’ can be both formal and informal. For example, a government can establish formal business ethics panels with representatives of the discourses noted who are integrated into policy discussions; and we are all familiar with informal fora such as the World Economic Forum or the alternative World Social Forum, which affect the media’s framing of economic life, influence legislators, etc. If such chambers of discourses allow authentic and inclusive deliberation, they will increase the chances that the deliberation is consequential. Later chapters in the book—for example, Chapter 8 on mini-publics—specify what some such chambers of discourse look like.

Deliberation in the public sphere is vital to the model of democratic politics that Dryzek outlines. His various discussions of the public sphere here (see especially Chapters 2, 4 and 5) not only specify the types of interaction occurring in that sphere at local, regional, national and international levels; they also address other fundamental criticisms of especially Habermasian varieties of deliberative democratic theory—namely that the deliberative model overemphasizes consensus and ‘rational’ dialogue, and that it unrealistically excludes the role both of contestation and of rhetoric and emotional discourse.

Dryzek has long argued that both of these criticisms fail to account for developments in deliberative democratic theory. His main point is that both pluralism and rhetoric are important. However, conflicts that arise in a pluralistic public sphere need to occur against the background of a meta-consensus that creates the conditions for public disagreements. Such metaconsensus will rule out ‘crackpot science, Nazi values, or preferences for the suffering of others’ for example (101). More concretely, meta-consensus will include normative meta –consensus about what values

are admissible, epistemic meta-consensus about what sets of beliefs in society are deemed worthy of consideration, and preference meta-consensus about the range of alternatives that are possible and the ways that choices among preferences can be structured (99). Generally, deliberation in the public sphere will itself be conducive to generating meta-consensus.

Against strong agonists like Chantal Mouffe or William Connolly, Dryzek argues that ‘all pluralists...must in the end appeal to some kind of meta-consensus to regulate pluralism’ (113). He challenges those agonists who may be more comfortable viewing even such a meta-consensus as provisional to specify what meta-consensus they accept that differs from the meta-consensus proposed by deliberative democrats. Unlike Habermas, who famously attempts to ground deliberative capacity in a broad view of rationality, Dryzek’s does not criticize radical agonists as irrational. Rather, he merely argues that the development of deliberative capacity, against a background meta-consensus, is necessary for full democracy and that those who ‘celebrate only disruption’ show themselves to be of decreasing relevance to democratic theory and practice (113).

Dryzek’s argument about the limits of rhetoric is similar to his argument about conflict in democratic politics: Rhetoric is more important than the early Habermasian model recognized, as Dryzek, James Bohman, and Iris Young have all argued and as should be clear from those who have engaged in social movements, from Gandhi to Martin Luther King, Jr. However, rhetoric also has its limits. Rhetoric ought to be ‘(a) capable of inducing reflection, (b) noncoercive, and (c) capable of connecting the particular experience of an individual, group, or category with some more general principle’ (24). This will rule out racist as well as strong nationalist rhetoric. The criteria that Dryzek here elaborates are important for various issues that he discusses throughout the book; for example, he appeals to the same criteria in his evaluation of governance networks (125). Indeed, these criteria, as well as the criteria of authentic, inclusive, and consequential deliberation noted in Chapter 1, might be applied for examining deliberation in multiple areas of a network society, from governmental bodies to civil society organizations and businesses.

Foundations and Frontiers of Deliberative Governance includes many further arguments on fine points in deliberative democratic theory and practice that will be of value to experts and initiates to deliberative democratic politics alike. Overall, the book provides a state-of-the-art presentation of the stance of deliberative democratic politics. It offers excellent discussions of the problems associated with it and extremely clear and comprehensive summaries of recent work.

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