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Radical Democracy

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The Radical-Democratic Project

Over the past generation, radical-democratic ideas have reemerged as an important intellectual and political force. This reemergence reflects a combination of skepticism about the regulatory capacities of national governments and concerns about the capacity of conventional democracies to engage the energies of ordinary citizens. By "conventional democracies," we mean systems of competitive representation, in which citizens are endowed with political rights, including the rights of speech, association, and suffrage; citizens advance their interests by exercising their political rights, in particular by voting for representatives in regular elections; elections are organized by competing political parties; and electoral victory means control of government, which gives winning candidates the authority to shape public policy through legislation and control over administration.

Arguably, any mass democracy must be organized at least in part as a system of competitive representation. Radical democrats acknowledge this basic fact of political life, but seek a fuller realization of democratic values than competitive representation itself can attain.

In particular, radical-democratic ideas join two strands of democratic thought. First, with Rousseau, radical democrats are committed to broader participation in public decision-making. Citizens should have greater direct roles in public choices or at least engage more deeply with substantive political issues and be assured

that officials will be responsive to their concerns and judgments. Second, radical democrats emphasize deliberation. Instead of a politics of power and interest, radical democrats favor a more deliberative democracy in which citizens address public problems by reasoning together about how best to solve them—in which no force is at work, as Jürgen Habermas (1975: 108) said, “except that of the better argument”.¹ The ambitious aim of a deliberative democracy, in short, is to shift from bargaining, interest aggregation, and power to the common reason of equal citizens as a dominant force in democratic life (Cohen 1989,1996; Cohen and Sabel 1997, 2003; Fung 2003, 2003a, 2003b, 2004; Fung and Wright 2003; Fung et al. 2000, 2001).

But while many radical democrats endorse participation and deliberation in a single breath, these two strands of the democratic project grow from different traditions and address distinct failures of competitive representation. Our aim here is to clarify the relationship of these different strands, explore the tensions between them, and sketch some possibilities for reconciliation. We start by showing how participation and deliberation might address three limitations of competitive representation.² Then we present some tensions between deliberation and participation, and offer two strategies for blunting these tensions. We conclude by outlining the unsolved difficulties that must be met in order to advance a radical-democratic project.

Before getting started, we should mention that some radical democrats argue that a more participatory and deliberative democracy would be better at solving practical problems than systems of competitive representation: better, because of advantages in identifying problems, collaborating in their resolution, testing solutions to see if they are well-tailored to local circumstance, and disciplining solutions by reference to solutions adopted elsewhere. Our focus here is on normative matters, but nothing we say is intended to dispute this proposition about practical advantages. Suffice to say that if a more radical democracy is not at least reasonably good at addressing regulatory problems, then its normative virtues are of limited interest.

Democratic Deficits of Competitive Representation

Radical-democratic criticisms of systems of competitive representation focus on three political values: responsibility, equality, and autonomy.

1. *Responsibility.* “As soon as public business ceases to be the citizens’ principal business, and they prefer to serve with their purse rather than with their person, the

¹ In this passage, Habermas is not describing an idealized democracy, but a hypothetical situation suited to the justification of norms.

² In reading the other contributions to this debate, we are reminded of the importance of distinguishing participation from deliberation. Other contributors seem to conflate the two, though Loïc Blondiaux rightly observes that there is an interesting question about the relationship between discussion of deliberative democracy—a topic in political theory for the past 15 years—and an older literature on participatory democracy.

state is already close to ruin".³ Here, Rousseau expresses the idea that the balance of reasons sometimes speaks strongly in favor of performing a task oneself rather than delegating it. For example, countries should fight wars with their own citizens rather than mercenaries or surrogates because the task is of great importance, its performance (both initiation and execution) demands judgment, and the consequences of misjudgment are so serious.

Similarly, radical democrats worry about relying excessively upon representatives to make consequential political choices. Competitive representation, to be sure, provides opportunities for citizens to judge for themselves the merits of alternative laws and policies and hold representatives accountable in light of those judgments. But because representation is a very limited tool for ensuring official accountability, citizens will be strongly tempted to leave the hard work of substantive policy judgment to professional politicians. The capacities of citizens may in turn atrophy. Lacking democratic skills and habits, they may refrain from judging public business except under dire circumstances, and then judge poorly.

2. *Equality.* A great achievement of modern representative democracy was to bring the idea that people should be treated as having equal importance in the processes of collective decision-making to bear on the political institutions of a modern state. One implication—formal political equality—is that suffrage rights, for example, should not depend on property qualifications, gender, race, or social status. But even with these conditions in place, social and economic inequalities shape opportunities for political influence within systems of competitive representation.

Economic advantage is one important source of political advantage. In addition, because it is easier to mobilize small groups of individuals than large ones, competitive representation tends to favor concentrated interests (in which few actors gain large benefits on some policy question) over diffuse one (where many actors gain small benefits). Finally, in newly-democratized countries with long histories of authoritarian government and hierarchical public culture, the new electoral vestments may merely reproduce and reauthorize the authoritarian past (Avritzer 2002).

Radical democrats have recommended participation and deliberation to increase political equality: deliberation, because it blunts the power of greater resources with the force of better arguments; participation, because shifting the basis of political contestation from organized money to organized people is the most promising antidote to the influence conferred by wealth. Similarly, expanding and deepening citizen participation may be the most promising strategy for challenging the inequalities that stem from asymmetric concentration of interests and from traditional social and political hierarchies.

3. *Political Autonomy.* A third objection is that systems of competitive representation fail to realize a central democratic ambition: to foster political autonomy by enabling

³ Rousseau, *Social Contract*, Book, III, chap. 15.

people to live by rules that they make for themselves. Although a pluralist democracy cannot hope to achieve political consensus, a kind of self-government remains possible, and competitive representation falls far short of it. In systems of competitive representation, political outcomes result from differential capacities to mobilize popular constituencies, from balances of interest backed by voters or money, from the complex deals of legislative law-making, or from narrow interests capturing the portions of government that most concern them. At its best, the process reflects fair bargaining among competing interests, not an ideal of self-government.

In a deliberative democracy, in contrast, laws and policies result from processes in which citizens defend solutions to common problems on the basis of what are generally acknowledged as relevant reasons. The reasons express such widely shared democratic values as fairness, liberty, equal opportunity, public safety, and the common good. To be sure, citizens will interpret the content of those considerations differently, and assign them different weights—and also, of course, disagree on matters of fact. In the allocation of scarce resources, different citizens might, for example, assign different importance to advantaging the least advantaged, advantaging those who would benefit most from the resources, and assuring equal chances for access to the resources; there will be disagreements over acceptable levels of risk, and about when assurances of freedom of expression are excessively damaging to the equal standing of citizens.

While deliberative democrats emphasize the importance of reasons, they do not expect self- and group-interest to disappear as political forces. Instead, they aim to ensure that political argument and appeals to interests are framed by considerations such as fairness, equality, and common advantage. When citizens take these political values seriously, political decisions are not simply a product of power and interest; even citizens whose views do not win out can see that the decisions are supported by good reasons.⁴ As a result, members can—despite disagreement—all regard their conduct as guided, in general terms, by their own reason. Establishing such

⁴ As should be evident from the text, our conception of deliberation is not the same as what Katharina Holzinger calls “arguing” in her contribution to this debate. For example, “contradicting” and “insisting” are, as she says, forms of arguing. But they do not involve giving reasons and are therefore not part of deliberation. That said, we agree with one thesis in Holzinger’s paper—namely, that when interests conflict, the resolution of the conflict typically will involve deliberation and bargaining, among other things. We do not, however, accept the stronger, instrumentalist thesis in her paper, that when interests conflict arguing serves as a means for bargaining. Deliberation might instead set the bounds for reasonable outcomes within which bargaining operates (deliberation might, for example, take us to a reasonable segment of the Pareto frontier, within which bargaining selects an outcome). Exploring this disagreement about the place and relative political importance of reason, interests, and power—a very old and deep disagreement in social science and in life—will require the kind of “programme de recherche” that Loïc Blondiaux sketches in his essay. For some efforts at such exploration, see Fung and Wright (2003).

political deliberation would realize an ideal of self-government under conditions of pluralism.

Tensions Between Participation and Deliberation

So democratic values arguably provide a case for a more participatory and deliberative democracy. But participation and deliberation are distinct ideas, and may even pull in opposite directions (Cp Ackermann & Fishkin 2004: 289-301).

1. Improving the quality of deliberation may come at a cost to public participation. Suppose, for example, that legislators, regulators, and judges embrace a deliberative form of decision-making. Instead of seeking to advance the interests of their constituents or maximize their prospects of re-election, for example, legislators would engage in reasonable discussion and argumentation about policies. Judges could, for example, require explicit attention to reasons in legislative and administrative decision-making. But doing so might require decision-makers to insulate themselves from less informed and less reasonable public sentiment.

2. Conversely, expanding participation—either numbers of people, or the range of issues under direct popular control—may diminish the quality of deliberation. Popular initiatives and referenda and devices such as the recall, for example, allow voters to exercise more direct and precisely targeted influence over legislation, policy questions, and even elected officials. But far from improving deliberation, such measures—by requiring a yes/no vote on a well-defined proposition—may discourage reasoned discussion in creating legislation (Papadopoulos 1995: 289-301; Ellis 2002). And even bringing people together to discuss specific laws and policies may—with the wrong mix of people, or lack of commitment to addressing a common problem—diminish deliberation, as discussion dissolves into posturing, recrimination, and manipulation.

3. More fundamentally, social complexity and scale limit the extent to which modern polities can be both deliberative and participatory. Deliberation depends on participants with sufficient knowledge and interest about the substantive issues under consideration. But on any issue, the number of individuals with such knowledge and interest is bound to be small (relative to the size of the polity), and so the quality of deliberation declines with the scope of participation. Of course, knowledge and interest are not fixed, and deliberation may improve both. Still, time and resource constraints make it undesirable for any particular area of public governance to be both fully deliberative and inclusively participatory. If everyone were capable of deliberating about economic policies on a par with the members of the Federal Reserve Board, surely other important areas of concern—education, environment, and foreign policy—would suffer

from inattention. Every community faces many dozens of pressing public issues, so participatory deliberation on any particular issue can at best include directly only a small fraction of the total polity.

Possibilities of Participatory Deliberation

Despite this fundamental constraint, public decision-making in liberal democracies could become both more participatory and deliberative. The degree to which deliberation and participation are combined or traded-off depends in part on institutional setting. The challenge facing radical democrats, then, is to devise reforms that can incorporate both. Radical democrats have two broad strategies for accommodating them. The first aims to broaden deliberative participation, but—concerned in part with the integrity of broad deliberation—leaves it with only attenuated effects on the exercise of power. The second aims to create high quality deliberative participation with more direct impact on the exercise of power, but leaves that participation with limited scope.

Mediated (Indirect) Society-Wide Deliberation

One strategy would foster widespread participation in deliberation on public issues. We might, for example, aim to join deliberation with mass democracy by promoting citizen deliberation on political matters in what Habermas calls the “informal public sphere,” constituted by “culturally mobilized publics” in “the associations of civil society.” (Habermas 1996: 301) Deliberations here are crucial to just and effective governance, for it is only in this public sphere that free, undistorted discussion about society’s values and goals can take place. Moreover, these deliberations are potentially fully participatory, for they take place through structures of numerous, open secondary associations and social movements: the essential ingredients are basic liberties, a diverse and independent media, vibrant, independent civil associations, and political parties that help to focus public debate.

This approach to joining participation and deliberation addresses the three limits of competitive representation. Individuals participate in public debates through associations, and so deliberate themselves, however informally, on the substance of political issues. Moreover, elevating the place of informal public discussion in political decision-making increases political equality because the public sphere—in contrast to the arenas of state and economy—is less vulnerable to the influence of monetary and other unequally-distributed, “non-communicative” sources of power. Finally, to the extent that free public reasoning shapes opinion and guides collective decisions, the deliberative public sphere increases self-government.

Public communicative power is, however, necessarily indirect in its political impact. Much of the attractiveness of this view, then, hinges first upon his characterization of discourse in the public sphere as deliberative and then upon the strength of the links between deliberations in the informal public sphere and the authoritative decisions of legislative bodies and administrative agencies. If public discussion itself is subject to the exercise of non-communicative power—money, status, and the like—then these discussions do little to address the problems of political inequality and absence of self-government in competitive representation. Moreover, because public deliberation and public policy are only loosely linked, participatory deliberation may have little impact on decisions by formal institutions. Citizen participation in the informal public sphere, then, may be of limited political relevance (Ackermann & Fishkin 2002: 129-152).⁵

Direct Participatory Deliberation

An alternative radical-democratic approach builds on the distinctive practical competence that citizens possess as users of public services, subjects of public policy and regulation, or residents who have contextual knowledge of their neighborhoods and ecosystems. The idea is to draw on these competencies by bringing ordinary citizens into deliberations over certain public issues.

Typically, such strategies create opportunities for limited numbers of citizens to deliberate with one another or with officials to improve the quality of some public decision, perhaps by injecting local knowledge, new perspectives, excluded interests, or enhancing public accountability.

One approach randomly selects small groups of citizens to deliberate on general political issues such as laws and public policies. Citizen juries in the United States and planning cells in Germany, for example, empanel small groups (12-40) of randomly selected citizens to discuss issues such as agriculture, health policy, and local development issues (Abelson et al 2003: 239-251; Crosby 1995: 157-174; Smith & Wales 1999: 295-308; Gastil 2000). James Fishkin and his colleagues at the Center for Deliberative Polling have sponsored larger gatherings of several hundred citizens to deliberate upon various issues such as the adoption of the Euro in Denmark, public utility policy in Texas, and U.S. foreign policy. Citizens Juries, Planning Cells, and Deliberative Polls function as advisory bodies whose impact—to the extent that they have impact—comes

⁵ Similar observations apply to Bruce Ackerman and James Fishkin's recent proposal for a "deliberation day" in the United States. Here, the deliberation is formalized, and in a way inclusive—they propose that everyone be invited to attend formal deliberative meetings held in advance of elections. Once more, the political impact of these deliberations is mediated through the structure of campaigns, elections, lawmaking, and administration.

from their ability to alter public opinion or change the minds of public officials.

Another strategy convenes groups of citizens to deliberate and develop solutions to particular problems of public concern. We have described such strategies elsewhere as Directly-Deliberative Polyarchy (DDP) and Empowered Participatory Governance (EPG), and will simply refer to them here as participatory-deliberative arrangements. Such arrangements differ from political juries in two main ways. Whereas political juries usually consider general issues such as economic, health care, or crime policy, these deliberations aim to address more specific problems such as the management of an ecosystem, the operation of a public school or school district, crime in a neighborhood, or a city's allocation of resources across projects and neighborhoods. Whereas political juries recruit impartial and disinterested citizens by randomly selecting them, participatory-deliberative arrangements recruit participants with strong interests in the problems under deliberation.

Because of the specificity of these arrangements, citizens may well enjoy advantages in knowledge and experience over officials. In Chicago, for example, residents deliberate regularly with police officers in each neighborhood to set priorities on addressing issues of public safety. And in Porto Alegre, Brazil citizens meet regularly at the neighborhood level to agree upon priorities for public investment (for example, street paving, sanitation, and housing); the capital portion of the city's budget is produced by aggregating the priorities that emerge from those deliberations (Baiocchi 2003: 47-76; De Sousa Santos 1998: 461-510; Abers 2000).

The proliferation of directly-deliberative institutions—in areas such as education, social services, ecosystems, community development, and health services—fosters political responsibility by creating opportunities for ordinary citizens to articulate directly their perspectives, needs, and judgments. Such opportunities, however, face two limits. Unlike classical forms of direct democracy, it is unimaginable that any deliberative arrangement would enable (i) every citizen to participate in any particular area of public governance, or (ii) any citizen to participate in every area of public governance. In Chicago, for example some 4,000 residents serve on Local School Councils at any given moment and ten percent of adults say they have participated in community policing meetings. A more feasible contemporary ideal is that democratic governments offer opportunities for any citizen to participate in direct deliberations, and at the same time that those who do participate are in networks with other citizens with whom they informally confer, even if those others are not directly involved in decision-making.

Participatory-deliberative arrangements contribute to political equality by increasing the role of popular mobilization and deliberation in political decision-making. In Chicago's community policing program, for example, participation

rates in low-income neighborhoods are much higher than those in wealthy neighborhoods. Similarly, poor people are substantially over-represented in both the budgeting institutions of Porto Alegre and local development and planning initiatives in Kerala, India. Directly-democratic arrangements that address problems of particular urgency to disadvantaged citizens can invert the usual participation bias that favors wealthy, well-educated, and high-status individuals/institutions. Such arrangements, however, also create large potential political inequalities. If systematic and enduring differences—in deliberative capabilities, disposable resources, or demographic factors—separate those who participate from those who do not, decisions generated by participatory-deliberative arrangements will likely serve the interests of participants at the expense of others.

Consider finally the value of self-government. Participatory-deliberative institutions foster self-government by subjecting the policies and actions of agencies such as these to a rule of common reason. When some policy or prior decision is judged in collective deliberation to be unreasonable or unwise, they change it. When that policy turns out to be reasonable upon reflection, its justification is made publicly manifest. These contributions to self-government are, however, limited by the scope of these institutions. Most participatory-deliberative governance efforts aim to solve local or administrative planning problems and do not extend to more general concerns such as wealth distribution, the scope of rights, or national political priorities.

Open Questions (and Ways Forward)

Achieving both participation and deliberation is complicated. In our view, participatory-deliberative arrangements represent the most promising path toward the ends of radical democracy. But two large challenges lie on that path.

The first concerns the relationship between competitive representation and participatory-deliberative arrangements (Magnette, unpublished). Participatory-deliberative arrangements make it possible to address practical problems that seem recalcitrant to treatment by conventional political institutions. But those arrangements are not a wholesale replacement of conventional political institutions: they have limited scope and limited numbers of direct participants. Does this observation leave us with the conclusion that radical democracy is simply competitive representation plus some participatory-deliberative arrangements?

No. Participatory-deliberative arrangements and competitive representation can be transformed and linked so that each strengthens the other. If such arrangements became a common form of local and administrative problem-solving, the role of legislatures and centralized public agencies would shift from

directly solving a range of social problems to supporting the efforts of many participatory deliberations, maintaining their democratic integrity, and ensuring their coordination. Conversely, those who participate directly in these new deliberative arrangements would form a highly informed, mobilized, and active base that would enhance the mandate and legitimacy of elected representatives and other officials.⁶

The second challenge is to extend the scope of radical democracy. Can participatory deliberation help democratize large-scale decisions—such as war and peace, health insurance, public pensions, and the distribution of wealth—that hinge on political values and public priorities? One way to address these larger questions is to connect the disciplined, practical, participatory deliberations about solving particular problems—say, efforts to reduce asthma rates in a low-income community—to the wider public sphere of debate and opinion formation—about the costs of health care, access to it, and the importance of health relative to other basic goods. Participants in direct deliberations are informed by the dispersed discussions in the informal public sphere, and those more focused deliberations in turn invest public discussion with a practicality it might otherwise lack. The ambitious hope is that citizens who participate in constructing solutions to concrete problems in local public life may in turn engage more deeply in informal deliberation in the wider public sphere and in formal political institutions as well.⁷

In the end, then, radical democracy has the possibility promise of being a distinctive form of democracy, in which the informal public sphere and the formal system of competitive representation are transformed by their connections with participatory-deliberative arrangements for solving problems. Whether it will deliver on that promise remains, of course, a very open question.

⁶ Christian Hunold's illuminating contribution to this symposium—focused on standards for siting hazardous waste facilities—is insufficiently attentive, in our view, to these issues about the relationship between particular local deliberations and the background political setting. We are skeptical about the project of setting out criteria of justice and democracy that local deliberations of particular policy issues need to meet, in abstraction from the larger social and political setting of those deliberations. That said, we agree with Hunold that the stakes in siting decisions are not purely locational.

⁷ Efforts along these lines might blur the distinction between formal and informal public discussion. For example, United States Senators Orrin Hatch and Ron Wyden have proposed creating and funding a national conversation around health care priorities—potentially involving thousands of community-level community forums, national televised town meetings, and electronic dialogue—as part of the “Health Care that Works for All Americans Act.” These community-level discussions around larger national questions might utilize methods such as citizen juries, electronic town meetings, and deliberative polls. See Senate Bill 581, 108th Congress, 1st Session. Short Title: “Health Care That Works for All Americans Act of 2003”

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Délibération et discussion

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La délibération collective ne se réduit pas à la discussion argumentée. Des individus peuvent discuter et argumenter entre eux sans que, pour autant, se déroule une délibération satisfaisante. Inversement, la délibération collective peut être favorisée par des discours tenus devant un auditoire ne discutant pas avec les orateurs. Telles sont les thèses que cet article se propose d'établir.

L'expérience montre que, parfois, des individus discutent et argumentent entre eux pour se former une opinion ou prendre une décision sur un sujet donné, sans que l'on observe dans les opinions ainsi formées les transformations désirables en général attendues de la délibération. Mais d'autres expériences montrent aussi qu'après une délibération collective, les individus changent leurs opinions dans un sens bénéfique, ces opinions devenant, en particulier, mieux informées. Dans ces expériences-ci, un animateur ordonne la discussion. Et la délibération inclut aussi la lecture de documents et l'audition de personnalités qualifiées, deux formes de communication qui ne relèvent pas de la discussion proprement dite, en ce qu'elles ne sont pas interactives.