Radical Political Theory And Deliberative Democracy*

Camil-Alexandru Pârvu**

Abstract

What makes a radical theory, radical? This article attempts to assess the possible directions of answering this question by looking into the recent debates on the nature and substance of deliberative democracy. Identified by many of its proponents, and by some of its critics, as a radical democratic theory, while dismissed as too consensual by other theorists claiming their own strand of radicalism in political theory, deliberative democracy can be assessed as radical either from a substantive perspective – the capacity of its ideas to drastically depart from current conventional views of democracy – or from a conceptual-level perspective, focused on the possible epistemic radicalism displayed by core aspects of these theories

Keywords: deliberative democracy, radical theory, epistemic radicalism

One of the major developments in recent literature on democratic innovation has been the multiplication of the various accounts of deliberative democracy.[1] In the first part of this article, I describe a certain

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** Camil-Alexandru Pârvu, PhD, Faculty of Political Science, University of Bucharest. Contact: camil.parvu@gmail.com.

[1] James Bohman and William Rehg, *Deliberative Democracy: Essays on Reason and Politics*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997; Jon Elster, *Deliberative Democracy*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998; Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson, *Why Deliberative Democracy?* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004; Bruce A. Ackerman and James S. Fishkin, *Deliberation Day*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005.

theoretical structure of public deliberation that emerges from the main accounts of deliberative democracy. With an impressive and still growing number of theories under review, this task may seem destined to produce a series of *generalities*, instead of *generalizations*[2]: a set of indeterminate features that fail to distinguish deliberative democracy from alternative accounts, instead of a set of features that adequately pin the conceptual core with theoretical clarity. Yet theories of deliberative democracy seem to be, despite their large diversity, sharing indeed a certain analytical structure that is centered on the ideas of *public reason* and *reasonable pluralism*.

Deliberative democrats envisage their theories as reactions to the challenge of defining criteria for legitimate decision-making in face of the undisputable fact of reasonable disagreement among autonomous citizens. As theories of public political justification, therefore, these accounts aim to stipulate the normative standards that collective decisions have to satisfy. As contemporary societies are characterized by moral, political, religious pluralism, our task is, according to these authors, to formulate the terms of the circumstances in which respect for political diversity becomes compatible with finding the fair terms of cooperation, with setting up a shared basis for justifying political decisions. In defining the normative criteria for democratic decision-making, deliberative democrats mainly point to the need for citizens to *exchange reasons* before proceeding to collective decision-making.

> *"[W]e can define deliberative democracy as a form of government in which free and equal citizens (and their representatives), justify decisions in a process in which they give one another reasons that are mutually acceptable and generally accessible, with the aim of reaching conclusions that are binding in the present on all citizens but open to challenge in the future."*[3]

Deliberative democracy examines seriously the reasons that individuals have for their preferences, instead of just accepting these preferences as given. Public debate with free, equal and fair access should

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[2] Giovanni Sartori, "Concept Misformation in Comparative Politics," *The American Political Science Review*, no. 4, vol. 64, 1970, pp. 1033–1053.

[3] Gutmann and Thompson, *op.cit.*, p. 7.

thus precede actual voting and inform it. In their deliberations, citizens are supposed to formulate reasons for their options, and to assess the arguments put forward by the other participants. As defined by its public character – publicity, accessibility and reciprocity –, public reasoning is thus different from interest-based bargaining that constitutes the default understanding of politics.

Deliberative democrats point to a contrast between deliberative conceptions of democracy and what they identify as "aggregative" conceptions. The dichotomy refers to a fundamental, constitutive normative choice, one that informs the subsequent positions and theoretical developments. Aggregation refers to a series of methods conventionally used in political science to connect a given set of preference to a collective choice. In one of the oft-cited essays detailing this distinction, Jon Elster characterizes social choice theories as beginning "with a given set of agents, so that the issue of a normative justification of political boundaries does not arise". Questions of citizenship and cosmopolitanism are thus brushed over, yet the decisions and theories built on this series of presuppositions are not themselves neutral in effects. Then the agents are assumed "to confront a given set of alternatives, so that for instance the issue of agenda manipulation does not arise." (3) The agents' preferences are "not subject to change in the course of the political process. They are, moreover, assumed to be causally independent of the set of alternatives." Individuals are unable to express the intensity of their preferences, which "have the formal property of transitivity, so that preference for A over B and for B over C implies preference for A over C. Given this setting, the task of social choice theory is to arrive at a social preference ordering of the alternatives".[4]

The important critique of social choice theories of democracy is that these theories tend to assimilate citizens with consumers, and the act of voting with the act of purchasing. The sovereignty of the consumer in the marketplace has become the model of understanding the sovereignty of citizenry in a democratic political community. Mirroring Habermas's distinction

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[4] Jon Elster, "The Market and the Forum: Three Varieties of Political Theory", in Bohman and Rehg, *op.cit.*, p. 5.

between strategic and communicative action[5], Elster has introduced a distinction between the market and the forum: in face of moral and political conflict, of the "reasonable pluralism" among conceptions held by autonomous individuals as citizens, collective decisions should be based on reasoned deliberations in which citizens engage as free and equals.

This deliberative ideal aims to address another core problem for democratic thought: the risk of the tyranny of the majority. In an indirect answer to Tocqueville, deliberative democrats maintain that in public deliberative settings, collective decisions should not be based simply on what a majority of citizens happens to prefer, even if we manage to adequately aggregate their preferences into a collective one.[6] Public opinion, as long as this open deliberatory setting is absent, cannot in itself carry normative weight. Again, deliberative democrats insist that collective decisions need to be reached as part of a justificatory process in which the reasons for those preferences are discursively assessed. The "reason-giving requirement" applies to majorities as well, however large and determinate they may be. Instead of the force of numbers, legitimate decisions are reached when they are based on the force of the better arguments.[7]

The reasons that citizens are required to advance – and entitled to receive from others – should be, first and foremost, *public*. This means that citizens should formulate only those reasons that could be accepted by others, as "free and equal persons seeking fair terms of cooperation".[8] The requirement that others be able to accept the reasons we put forward for our preferences is, thus, a core feature of deliberative democratic theories. It is in this sense that public rational deliberation becomes different than

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[5] Jürgen Habermas, Thomas McCarthy, *The Theory of Communicative Action: Volume 2: Lifeword and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason*, Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1985; Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996.

[6] Kenneth Arrow, *Social Choice and Individual Values*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1963.

[7] Jürgen Habermas, "Three Normative Models of Democracy" *Constellations* vol. 1, no. 1, 1994, pp. 1–10; Jürgen Habermas, "Reconciliation Through the Public Use of Reason: Remarks on John Rawls's Political Liberalism," in *The Journal of Philosophy* vol. 92, no. 3, 1995, pp. 109–131.

[8] Gutmann and Thompson, *op.cit.,* p. 3.

mere bargaining or threats; in public deliberation individuals cannot press their own case by ignoring or dismissing the others, or by using their heavier negotiating power in order to enforce their preferences. Reason-giving in this sense discounts those preferences that are only "selfish" and cannot be stated with at least some contemplation of the common good.[9]

A second sense in which reasons are public refers to their accessibility. There are at least three ways in which deliberative democrats insist that reasons advanced by citizens be accessible. Reasons for preferences that refer to revealed truth are not accessible to others, and therefore cannot meet the publicity test[10]. Another sense in which the requirement of accessibility becomes fundamental is related to the contexts in which collective decisions are taken in absence of relevant information. Secrecy is the opposite of open, reasoned discussion that is the substance of public deliberation. Whenever deliberation is held up by secrecy, and in as much as some participants to the debate are able invoke knowledge of secret data, the reasons they advance are not available to others, and hence not public.[11]

Deliberative democrats also insist that public reasons are incompatible with the use of rhetoric. By choosing a rationalistic and – many have argued – over-moralizing description of public reason as the only adequate discursive means towards political justification, deliberative democrats have, implicitly or explicitly, re-enacted one of the oldest, most classical contradictions in political philosophy: that between philosophy and rhetoric. Obtaining public reasons and some form of rational consensus by necessarily eliminating any rhetorical elements from political discourse

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[9] Samuel Freeman, "Deliberative Democracy: A Sympathetic Comment," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 29, no. 4, 2000, pp. 371–418; Samuel Freeman, "Public Reason and Political Justifications," *Fordham Law Review,* no. 72, 2003, p. 2021.

[10] Dan Lazea, "Post-Secular Europe and the Role of Religion in Public and Political Sphere: Habermas Revisited", in *Analele Universităţii din Craiova, Seria filosofie*, vol. 27, no.1, 2011.

[11] Simone Chambers, "Behind Closed Doors: Publicity, Secrecy, and the Quality of Deliberation," *Journal of Political Philosophy,* vol. 12, no. 4, 2004, pp. 389–410; Jodi Dean, "Publicity's Secret" *Political Theory* vol. 29, no. 5, 2001, pp. 624–650; David Stasavage, "Polarization and Publicity: Rethinking the Benefits of Deliberative Democracy," *Journal of Politics*, vol. 69, no. 1, 2007, pp. 59–72.

constitutes an important part of deliberative democrats' normative ideal, but at the same time, it has been claimed, is the sign of a problematic conceptualization of the political.[12]

Gutmann and Thompson maintain that the opportunity for deliberation should not be restricted to "constitutional conventions, Supreme Court opinions, or their theoretical analogues"; rather, they should extend to what they call "middle democracy":

> *"It should extend throughout the political process – to what we call the land of middle democracy. The forums of deliberation in middle democracy embrace virtually any setting in which citizens come together on a regular basis to reach collective decisions about public issues – governmental as well as nongovernmental institutions. They include not only legislative sessions, court proceedings, and administrative hearings at all levels of government but also meetings of grass roots organizations, professional associations, shareholders meetings, and citizens' committees in hospitals and other similar institutions"*[13]

For Rawls, however, the use of public reason in deliberation is particularly restricted: on the one hand, the object of deliberation is limited to what he names as "constitutional essentials" and questions of basic justice, while, on the other hand, the privileged place where such deliberations should take place is not necessarily the society at large and its many associations, parties and groups; rather, this forum is the U.S. Supreme Court. According to Rawls, public reason should guide the deliberations of the members of the constitutional courts, as well as of those placed in a position to articulate and interpret the ultimate political principles of a political community. In "The Idea of Public Reason

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[12] Bryan Garsten, *Saving Persuasion: A Defense of Rhetoric and Judgment*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009; Simone Chambers, "Rhetoric and the Public Sphere: Has Deliberative Democracy Abandoned Mass Democracy?", *Political Theory* vol. 37, no. 3, 2009, pp. 323–350; John. S. Dryzek, "Rhetoric in Democracy: A Systemic Appreciation," *Political Theory* vol. 38, no. 3, 2010, pp. 319–339; Benedetto Fontana, Cary J. Nederman, and Gary Remer, *Talking Democracy: Historical Perspectives on Rhetoric and Democracy*, University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2004.

[13] Amy Gutmann, Dennis Thompson, *Democracy and Disagreement* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996, pp. 12–13.

Revisited", Rawls extends this understanding of political deliberation, and states that

> *"the ideal of public reason […] is realized, or satisfied, whenever judges, legislators, chief executives, and other government officials, as well as candidates for public office, act from and follow the idea of public reason and ex plain to other citizens their reasons for supporting fundamental political positions in terms of the political conception of justice they regard as the most reasonable"*.[14]

Radicalism and Political Theory

What is, then, radical in deliberative democracy? What does it mean, for a political theory, to be radical? One can start answering these questions by looking into the etymological sources to the term - the Latin word *radix* indicates that the theory will aim for identifying and then correcting the *roots* of the problems, and deal with them comprehensively, instead of just suggesting cosmetic changed at the margins. Radicalism is, then, the attitude that claims to identify the "root of all evil",[15] and promises to excise it or to change society in a dramatic way. This "root of all evil" may be understood, according to Frederic Jameson[16], either a matter of human nature, or a matter of structural institutional design. It finds itself, in other words, either within a particular configuration of human psychology and the consequences thereof, or within a particular historical social arrangement, what is neutral vis-à-vis any specific understanding of the human nature. Consequently, the purported changes are themselves either in relation to the transformation of those human features that are viewed as the causes of "the root of all evil" (such as, for instance, 'greed') or to the drastic modification of the various structures that maintain the perceived unjust or evil state of affairs.

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[14] John Rawls, "Idea of Public Reason Revisited," *University of Chicago Law Review*, no. 64, 1997, pp. 765–766.

[15] Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* London, UK: Verso Books, 2005.

[16] Fredric Jameson, "The Politics of Utopia", in *New Left Review*, no. 25, 2004, pp. 35-54.

But the question of this study is, what makes a certain theory radical? Is there anything beyond its content that gives it this nature? Is there, at the very theoretical level, a certain pattern of its conceptual configuration that makes it radical as opposed to, say, simply reformist or even conservative? Political philosophy is, after all, for many, the search for the perfect government. But is any argument for an ideal state of affairs, a radical argument? If authors describe in great detail the reasons and nature of a perfect or desirable regime, but say nothing about how the current crop of political institutions and social relations should be transformed to approximate that perfect regime, are these authors to be described as radicals?

The question may be separated, then, into two separate questions. One is whether, at the level of its content (principles, policy proposals), a theory can be assessed as radical. In order to do that, the ideas and arguments have to be compared to some 'conventional' state of affairs. The second question is, however, directed toward not the relative mismatch between a perceived status-quo and the proposed substantive changes, but toward the particular type of conceptual formation that takes place within that theory. This time, assessing the radicalism of a theory pertains to the type of methodological approach that defines the decontestation[17] at work. The answer to this second question is thus less relative to the distance from some given reality, but rather consists in pointing to a particular systematic choice in the process of decontestation and concept-formation that is central to the configuration of any political ideology.

Radicalism: participation-cum-deliberation

To be radical, a political theory must set to think globally about the world; to develop a major critique thereof; and to imagine a world in which the shortcomings of the present one have been resolved. In a nutshell, this is a characterization of a theory that usually goes further and specifies what precisely is wrong with the present state of affairs, why is it so

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[17] Michael Freeden, *Ideologies and Political Theory: A Conceptual Approach,* Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1998.

fundamentally wrong, which are the actors that should be involved in its drastic transformation, and how exactly are they going to do it. The 'what', 'why', 'who' and 'how' are thus typical classical components of any major radical theory.

For many decades, the term "radical" was deemed synonymous with the radical left. A radical critique of modern and contemporary capitalism, with its contradictions and growth of the forms of domination, would be usually followed by various propositions for revolutionary change and redemption from such evil. Yet in recent years we have witnessed a marked shift in the main battlefronts of political radicalism, determined by the gradual fading of earlier prominent avenues for radical theorizing. This means that we are faced and we need to assess a series of new and more fragmented radical responses within the recent radical literature. This means also that when investigating the latest avatars of a historical radical left, and the relatively novel accounts of deep ecology and radical environmentalism, we might be able to detect the main elements of the new landscape of radical politics, questioning its sources and nature.

To be radical, the transformations that are proposed have to depart significantly from the 'conventional' strategies for reform. But this creates a major difficulty for the student of radical theories: at the end of the day, many ideas that used to be considered as outrageous to the common sense, become – either slowly in time, or in an abrupt irruption into our collective imaginaries – quite close to the 'conventional' understanding. What used to be viewed as radical in the 1950s, looks today as very much mainstream. For instance, access of women to various publicly subsidized birth control methods tends nowadays to be a standard health policy, yet such a claim would have shocked many half a century ago. In the aftermath of the Second World War, the idea of the genetic manipulation of human nature would have been offensive and contemptible, today it seems every day closer to a being accepted as a legitimate endeavor. Conversely, what could have been considered as conventional then (mass strikes, substantial trade union membership) looks now as a very radical proposal.

In democratic theory also, this variation of the perception of radicalism affected the various theoretical innovations both in the academia and in the political caucuses. Democracy itself was understood for

centuries as a radical idea, only to have nowadays virtually all political leaders paying lip service to its basic generic principles. Is, then, deliberative democracy a radical type of democratic theory? Or is it rather part of a 'conventional' set of political ideas?

According to some of its most prominent advocates, there a clear sense in which deliberative democracy is radical: the juxtaposition of two major principles of democracy, i.e., participation and deliberation.

> *"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 […]said, 'except that of the better argument'"*[18].

This conception of democracy – that joins the ideal of deliberation with the ideal of participation – is presented as radical when opposed to a 'conventional' conception of democracy, by which the authors 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."*[19]

In fact, neither the deliberatory nor the participatory dimensions of democracy are necessarily radical in themselves. Deliberation was supposed to be the primary advantage of parliaments in their 19th century

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[18] Joshua Cohen, Archon Fung, "Radical Democracy," in *Swiss Journal of Political Science* vol. 10, no. 4 2004, pp. 169–70.

[19] *Ibidem*, p. 169.

"golden age"[20], with political elites deemed sufficiently capable to independently and reasonably assess and decide upon the various fundamental political issues facing the nation. Participation, especially in the small republics, was also a constant concern for republican political thought. Yet what is 'ambitious' about the project of deliberative democracy is that it demands *both* a highly rationalist standard of public deliberation, *and* a 'strong democratic' standard of public participation. It strengthens the normative core of both ideals of rational deliberation and public participation, *and* attempts to bring them together.

If deliberation and participation were important and challenging democratic desiderata on their own, deliberative democrats move to up the ante and specify stronger requirements while refusing to compromise one in favor of the other in the proposed democratic settings. In doing so, they render the deliberative advantages of small assemblies irrelevant as they become now part of a mainstream public participatory democratic life.

In other words, what is radical in deliberative democracy is the claim of fundamentally challenging an apparent consensus among political scientists: the idea that political representation, for all its shortcomings, is the central element of contemporary democracies. As representative democracies, the focus of political science scholarship must be on elections, parties, elites, accountability, and the other major elements of political representation. Deliberative democrats impose deliberative standards on political representatives, but by raising the standards of deliberation and applying them to citizens' deliberations as well, these authors effectively remove the structural differences that existed in the 'conventional' view of democracy between represented and representatives.

Political representation becomes, therefore, not an inescapable feature and structural limit of modern democracies, but a modal feature, that may be used as an add-on to democratic public participation, and not as a substitute thereof. This is the radicalism of the deliberative democrats: joining two regulative standards that are articulated in their most demanding formulation.

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[20] Silvia Marton, "« Faction » ? « Coterie » ? « Parti » ? L'émergence des partis politiques roumains au XIXe siècle", in Silvia Marton, Anca Oroveanu, Florin Țurcanu (eds.), *L'Etat en France et en Roumanie aux XIXe et XXe siècles*, Bucharest: New Europe College, pp. 85-138.

Adding to the challenge – and hence, to the radicalism of the move – is that for many observers, the two ideals are notoriously difficult to reconcile. Besides the classical literature on this opposition, one other way in which this may happen is simply the discouraging effect that strong standards of deliberation impose on the prospective participants to the debate. Many individuals would avoid the prospect of being subjected to a public scrutiny and having to formulate and reformulate their preferences and reasons to a larger public entitled to reject them as not reasonable.

In an oft-quoted expression, Jon Elster has expressed hope in the "civilizing force of hypocrisy"[21]: the simple fact of being in an environment of publicity, visibility, and reciprocity, will make participating individuals translate their preferences into reasonable reasons; even if they initially are insincere and preserve their inner selfish preferences, in time this mode of defaulting social interaction on deliberation will progressively alter and transform the inner preferences as well.

The trouble with Elster's hope is that even to have the 'civilizing force of hypocrisy" at work, one needs to convince a sufficient number of participants to engage in such deliberations while other citizens do not (yet). This rapidly becomes an example of what Bonnie Honig called a "paradox of politics":

> "In order for there to be a people well-formed enough for good law-making, there must be good law for how else will the people be well-formed? The problem is: where would that good law come from absent an already well-formed, virtuous people?"[22]

The paradox is already present in Rousseau, and its significance for deliberative democracy is serious: it challenges the various authors that proclaim the standards for deliberation and participation, to offer the solution first to the "chicken-and-egg circle that presses us to begin the work of democratic politics *in medias res*"[23]; it makes sense for citizens to

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[21] Jon Elster, "Deliberation and Constitution Making", in Jon Elster (ed.), *Deliberative Democracy*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998, pp. 97–122.
[22] Bonnie Honig, "Between Decision and Deliberation: Political Paradox in Democratic Theory," in *American Political Science Review*, vol. 101, no. 1, 2007, p. 3.
[23] *Ibidem*, p. 2.

deliberate in a setting governed by a deliberative framework, but how can that framework be itself created, if deliberation is only its product? Deliberative democrats reluctantly face the prospects of a non-deliberative institution of a deliberative framework, but most of the time, they tend to take for granted that once the framework is in place, citizens have sufficient motivational and normative reasons to engage in public deliberation themselves. This paradox makes it clear that one sense in which participation and deliberation are at odds is that it is problematic to explain the reasons to participate to a deliberative framework without appealing to some non-deliberative moment of decision that established that framework.

A related difficulty resides in the motivational obstacles to public deliberation. Here, deliberatory standards are seen as incurring costs on the participants, and for such costs to be rational, a condition is again that most other citizens participate too. If the self-limitation (reason-giving requirements) presupposed by deliberation is not shared by other citizens – hence a problem of free riding – then engaging in deliberation fails the test of rational action, or at any rate, fails to provide a meaningful motivation for citizens to participate. A problem of coordination arises then, which again, may not be itself resolved deliberatively.

These examples point to the dynamic of deliberation as one in which, to ensure participation, a non-deliberative moment seems to be necessary. Either as a foundational, or as a motivational conundrum, a non-deliberative decision procedure needs to exist in order to constitute a deliberative public. Once constituted, the various requirements and assertions of deliberative democrats may start to operate. But these cannot produce themselves both a participating public and a deliberative framework at the same time.

A third sense in which participation and deliberation collide is one described by authors such as Cass Sunstein[24] and Diana Mutz[25]:

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[24] Cass R. Sunstein, "The Law of Group Polarization," *Journal of Political Philosophy* vol. 10, no. 2, 2002, pp. 175–195; Cass R. Sunstein, *Republic.com 2.0*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007; Cass R. Sunstein, *Going to Extremes: How Like Minds Unite and Divide*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2009.

[25] Diana Mutz, *Hearing the Other Side: Deliberative Versus Participatory Democracy*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

deliberation, even in its looser forms, takes usually place among groups of like-minded people. The greater the diversity, the lesser the propensity for deliberation is. Furthermore, according to Sunstein, the effects of deliberation within groups of like-minded individuals are, counter-intuitively, worse than absence of deliberation. When assessed on the basis of deliberative criteria, deliberation among such groups fails to promote the stated purposes. The logic of group polarization, in this context, is a syntagm used by Sunstein to describe a series of possible explanations for the polarizing effects of deliberation in groups constituted by individuals who share with varying intensity – moderate or extreme – opinions favorable to one side in a wider moral, political or social debate.

For Diana Mutz, evidence from social network studies suggests that "people tend to selectively expose themselves to people who do not challenge their view of the world".[26] Her thesis is that the most favorable social environments for either participatory democracy or deliberative democracy tend to undermine each other. The empirically informed argument leads to the conclusion that normal social aggregations work at the expense of diversity. We tend to avoid encounters with people that hold adverse views and seek the company of those that share our views. We prefer consensus to political disagreement. The importance, for the health of the deliberative democratic enterprise, of the "cross-cutting exposure"[27] that maintain diversity, is uncontroversial. Yet in practice, we have less and less occasions for change encounters, for serendipity in our social interactions. As Sunstein also emphasizes, we have less and less opportunities to meet in the street the other fellow citizens, to be exposed to their different views and to experience alterity as a key ingredient in the critical formation of our own ideas. The internet, the crisis of printed generalist newspapers, the shape of modern cities that reduces sideways and public squares, the changing forms of political mobilization, and the convenient technological instruments to switch off inputs from others, all reduce the chance for face-to-face encounters and exposure that was the fundamental ingredient of a common, public space.

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[26] *Ibidem*, p. 9.
[27] *Ibidem*, p. 147.

Realism and deliberative democracy

The relative radicalism of deliberative democracy is thus usually assessed against various understanding of what is currently feasible or "conventional", and as such, against a background of "realism". The puzzle here is that a number of political theorists – dubbed "political realists"[28] – have recently described deliberative democracy as a radical theory; but other authors, writing in a very different tradition, hold deliberative democrats to be advocates of a "politics of consensus" that a true radical democratic perspective should dislodge.

Criticizing the Kantian overtones of much of contemporary normative political theories, Raymond Geuss writes that

> *political philosophy must be realist. That means, roughly speaking, that it must start from and be concerned in the first instance not with how people ought ideally (or ought "rationally") to act, what they ought to desire, or value, the kind of people they ought to be, etc., but, rather, with the way the social, economic, political, etc., institutions actually operate in some society at some given time, and what really does move human beings to act in given circumstances.*[29]

What the democratic realists object is precisely the disregard that deliberative democrats tend to share, for specifying the practical ways in which a more deliberative republic can be instituted. Without such an incremental approach and without tests that evaluate to which degree the prospective changes actually improve the conditions they purport to change, any radical change is doomed to be irrelevant at best, dangerous at worse.

This has been a classical staple for pragmatists that want social change to have measurable benefits. But at the same time, arguments that dismiss radical change as irrelevant or dangerous would also find inspiration in a similarly old, but very different tradition. Best described in

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[28] Marc Stears, *Demanding Democracy: American Radicals in Search of a New Politics* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010.

[29] Raymond Geuss, *Philosophy and Real Politics* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008, p. 9.

the work of Hirschman[30] on the "rhetoric of reaction", this critique takes the form of three main types of discourse: the futility thesis, the perversity thesis, and the jeopardy thesis. The futility thesis maintains that radical change, while ambitious and normatively appealing, may not lead to any effective change. Revolutions may wreak havoc in societies, yet after the dust is settled, the changed may turn to be ephemeral or illusory, as "the 'deep' strunctures of society remain wholly untouched".[31]

The perversity thesis, however, maintains that the change brought by radical transformations is real, yet it is, "via a chain of unintended consequences, the *exact contrary* of the objective being proclaimed and pursued". As a theoretical weapon of choice of such critique, the argument is that "*the attempt to push society in a certain direction will result in its moving all right, but in the opposite direction.*"[32]

The jeopardy thesis, finally, accepts as well that radical change is possible, but instead of proclaiming it as being the polar opposite of the intended noble outcome (hence an unmitigated disaster), it describes such change as bearing an insurmountable cost. Each time change is produced, something of equal value is irremediably lost. There is a fundamental tragic conflict in any social change, in that all such radical transformations bring about the injury to as many valuable features as they help produce. In this logic, the more radical the change, the greater the value definitively lost. Usually the costs are seen to be bore by some previous most important accomplishment, be it a particular cultural identity, collective endeavor, or traditional institution.

All three theses can be understood as types of arguments against deliberative democracy as purporting change that is ultimately struck by irrelevance or dangerous side-effects. The futility thesis is at work whenever critics of deliberative democratic procedures manifest skepticism as to the real effects of such procedures. In spite of the best intentions, they

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[30] Albert O. Hirschman, *The Rhetoric of Reaction: Perversity, Futility, Jeopardy*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991; see also, Joseph V. Femia, *Against the Masses: Varieties of Anti-democratic Thought Since the French Revolution*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2001.

[31] Hirschman, *op.cit.*, p. 43.

[32] *Ibidem*, p. 11.

say, the various deliberations must end in a decision, and that decision will bring back the aggregative mechanisms of 'conventional' democratic voting procedures. We cannot expect to reach consensus systematically, so most of the times we will be constrained to revert, after long and excruciating deliberations, to the same aggregation by vote. Deliberation does not manage, critics say, to change anything profound, after all. In the words of Raymond Geuss,

> *Just because certain ideal or moral principles "look good" or "seem plausible" to us, to those who propose them or to those to whom they are proposed – to the prophet or to the people whom the prophet addresses—it does not follow that these norms, canons, or principles will have any particular effect at all on how people will really act.*[33]

The jeopardy thesis might be understood to include arguments pertaining to the costs of deliberation. All deliberative democrats accept that public deliberation, if it is to be meaningful, entails important costs on our resources in time and organization. But, critics may say, we are not really deliberating animals: many other valuable purposes and projects become sacrificed for the sake of deliberation, and these losses are something that deliberative democrats are seldom interested in quantifying. Some authors advance proposals for compensation[34] in view of better organizing systematic, widespread and thorough public deliberations, but few studies are interested in a methodical evaluation of the nature and magnitude of the losses (individual and collective) that such generalized deliberations could produce.

The perversity thesis, finally, is indirectly invoked any time arguments against deliberative democracy point to its unintended disastrous consequences. In Cass Sunstein's analysis, an unreflected endorsement of generic deliberations will lead to the creation and multiplication of self-radicalizing and mutually rejecting small enclaves of like-minded individuals[35]. Instead of helping societies reach a shared sense of the common good, achieve

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[33] Geuss, *op.cit.*, pp. 9–10.

[34] Ackerman and Fishkin, *op.cit.*

[35] Sunstein, *op.cit.*

greater legitimacy and epistemic verification, deliberatory settings in inadequately crafted groups will lead to the internal polarization and radicalization of members' preferences, concomitant with a further separation of these groups from each other. Various psychological mechanisms are at work in explaining how this process usually happens. They are either cognitive or reputational in nature, and are augmented by the social amplification of these perceptions within groups ("social cascades"[36]).

Another version of the perversity thesis underlies the arguments that point to the exclusionary nature of public deliberatory procedures. In a book in which she laments the moralizing style of theories of deliberative democracy, Wendy Brown observes that the different requirements of public deliberation can be assimilated to what she calls "speech codes" that, in the end, kill critique. They impose codifications and discursive filters that, at the end of the day, limit the opportunities for democratic contestation:

> "[T]urning political questions into moralistic ones – as speech codes of any sort do – not only prohibits certain questions and man dates certain genuflections, it also expresses a profound hostility toward political life insofar as it seeks to preempt argument with a legislated and enforced truth".[37]

The move that is decried here is one in which deliberative democrats opt to exclude, for instance, rhetoric from the acceptable forms of collective deliberation. Moreover, rhetoric is described as a "pathology of communication" (Habermas) or as an improper strategy that "would limit rather than enhance social justice because rhetoric moves people and achieves results without having to render an account of the bases upon which it induces people to engage in certain courses of action rather than others"[38] Yet rhetoric is one of the discursive strategies used precisely by those vulnerable and excluded, who are also most unable to comply with

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[36] Cass Sunstein, "Deliberative Trouble? Why Groups Go To Extremes", in *Yale Law Journal*, vol. 110, no. 1, 2000, pp. 71-119.

[37] Wendy Brown, *Politics Out of History*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001, p. 35.

[38] Seyla Benhabib, "Toward a Deliberative Model of Democratic Legitimacy," in Seyla Benhabib (ed.), *Democracy and Difference*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996, p. 67.

the strong requirements of public deliberation. Many episodes of political and social emancipation were historically not examples of careful rational public deliberation, but quite the opposite, irruptions of rhetoric and political passion that would have failed any test recently proposed in the literature on deliberative democracy.

But when explaining the exclusionary nature of deliberative democracy, what most of these authors have in mind is precisely the loss of any radical attitude of deliberative democrats. "Competing" radical democrats such as Chantal Mouffe would decry the "politics of consensus" that is at the core of public deliberatory accounts, with their reliance on the presupposition of a common framework of deliberation. Deliberative democrats have perpetuated, according to Mouffe, the conviction that a rational consensus can be achieved, whereby power and antagonism are purged. By doing that, theories of deliberative democracy deny "the central role in politics of the conflictual dimension and its crucial role in the formation of collective identities". In this sense, these theories are fundamentally "unable to provide an adequate model for democratic politics".[39]

Radicalism is, hence, from the perspective of the ideational content of deliberative democratic theories, a *relative* feature. It consists mainly in the juxtaposition of two demanding ideals, of public participation and rational deliberation, and the denial of their potential conflicts. According to the critical perspective adopted and the historical acceptability of their gist, deliberative democrats and their supporters may appear as radical or, quite the reverse, part of an establishment.

Epistemic radicalism?

Razmig Keucheyan suggests that, besides the radical positions of radical theories, there is a sense in which we can speak of an "epistemic radicalism", understood as a particular mode of concept-creation and

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[39] Chantal Mouffe, "Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism", in *Social Research* vol. 66, no. 3, 1999, pp. 752.

theory-construction that is characteristic of radical theories. As a first approximation, epistemic radicalism claims that when theorizing a social phenomenon, one should always look to the extreme manifestations of this phenomenon, and not to its normal or ordinary manifestations.[40] Using quotes from Walter Benjamin, Siegfried Kracauer and Carl Schmitt, Keucheyan develops a characterization of radical theories as departing from a "default" method. Normal theories seek to examine precisely the most typical and oft-occurring phenomena, in order to extract the general attributes from these. If we care to study contemporary politics, for instance, then elections – a fairly regular occurrence with vital significance – should be of primary interest. Radical theories, however, seek to examine the rare events – revolutions, states of emergency – with the anticipation that those rare events truly reveal the essential nature of politics.

A second dimension of epistemic radicalism is the programmatic opposition to the common sense.[41] It operates an epistemic break with commonly held beliefs, by questioning the shared assumptions of what is possible and desirable. In the words of Frederic Jameson, "our current blind spots block out any vision of genuinely radical change and limit our visibility to merely local readjustments and corrections (in other words, to what used to be called reforms, as opposed to that systemic transformation that used to be called revolution)."[42]

"Our current blind spots" are indeed the primary object of contention between radical theories and their challengers. What radical theories aim to achieve is the profound transformation not only of the social and political landscape, but also of the shared maps that delineate for

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[40] Razmig Keucheyan, « Qu'est-ce qu'une pensée radicale ? Aspects du radicalisme épistémique », *Journal du MAUSS*, 2010 [http://www.journaldumauss.net/?Qu-est-ce-qu-une-pensee-radicale#nb8], 20 June 2015 : "En première approximation, le radicalisme épistémique soutient que lorsque l'on fait la théorie d'un phénomène social, il convient toujours de se tourner vers les manifestations extrêmes de ce phénomène, et non vers ses manifestations ordinaires ou normales."

[41] Razmig Keucheyan, *Hémisphère Gauche: Une Cartographie des Nouvelles Pensées Critiques*, Paris: Zones, 2013.

[42] Fredric Jameson, "Utopia and Failure", in *Politics and Culture*, 2, 2010, [http://politicsandculture.org/2010/08/10/utopia-and-failure-by-fredric-jameson-2/], 20 June 2015.

us (or for governments[43]) the limits of the known possibilities. We see the world through these conceptual maps that Michael Freeden calls political ideologies,[44] and radical theories are there to disrupt, expand and convert their contours.

According to Freeden, political ideologies are clusters, or networks of concepts that shape the way in which individuals make sense of the political world.[45] These clusters are structured as specific combination of decontestations of the essentially contested concepts,[46] emerging as ideological morphologies that both enable and limit our capacity and resources for human action. A *radical* ideology might then be characterized by a particular type of conceptual decontestation and one that is trying to use the successively the partial decontestations in order to expand the spectrum of meanings available within the other essentially contested connected concepts.

Can we speak, then, of a "radical attitude" in political theory[47]? According to Edwards, such an attitude consists in providing "a fundamental challenge to established ways of thinking, talking about and acting in politics". The main paradox of radical political theories is, however, that most classical radical theories display a drive towards de-politicizing political philosophy, through a systematic and fundamental subordination of political principles to morality, religion and philosophy. Deliberative democrats are, after all, often accused of attempting to transcend the proper political nature of our relations by proclaiming the precedence of impartial moral obligations. They are at the same time often understood to be part of a longer tradition that aims to deny the legitimacy of partisanship and political polarization.[48]

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[43] James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998.

[44] Freeden, *op.cit*.

[45] *Ibidem*.

[46] W.B. Gallie, "Essentially Contested Concepts," in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, vol. 56, 1955, pp. 167–198.

[47] Jason Edwards, *The Radical Attitude and Modern Political Theory*, London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

[48] Nancy L. Rosenblum, *On the Side of the Angels: An Appreciation of Parties and Partisanship*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008; for a different perspective, see also Jane J. Mansbridge, *Beyond Adversary Democracy* Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1983.

Yet while not arguing for the overcoming of political polarization *per se*, deliberative democracy theories are indeed premised on a presupposition of possible or necessary consensus that helps locate such theories within the conceptual space between reform and utopia. The precise ascription will depend on the particular local elaborations and their contrast with the perceived contemporaneous political realities. Assessed against three possible criteria for epistemic radicalism in political theory – searching the essence of the political in the rare phenomena; systematically contesting the established order; and purporting a radical de-politicization of social relations, then, it turns out that deliberative democratic theories fail to be intrinsically radical theories. They may still become radical relative to the established set of "blind spots" of our time.

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