BOOK REVIEW

Deliberative Democracy in Multicultural Societies: The Challenges of Effectiveness, Legitimacy, and Equality

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Multicultural societies are marked by the coexistence of ethnic, sexual, religious, racial, and cultural minorities and mainstream groups. This coexistence can either be tense or collaborative. How do they bridge the gap between the political demands of majority and minority groups? What are the obstacles to meaningful participation? What are the main challenges faced by such societies? And finally, how do we encourage large-scale debates around issues of minorities? In order to provide answers to these questions, this review examines *Intercultural Deliberation and the Politics of Minority Rights* by R. E. Lowe-Walker (2018), *Deliberative Democracy Now: LGBT Equality and the Emergence of Large-Scale Deliberative Systems* by Edwina Barvosa (2018), and *Deliberative Democracy, Political Legitimacy, and Self-determination in Multicultural Societies* by Jorge M. Valadez (2018).

Introduction

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, philosophers from the Global North examined the normative implications of demographic and cultural diversity in countries such as the United States and Canada. The idea that different groups from the most varied cultural backgrounds had been coexisting—through tensions and collaborations—in the urban setting of large-scale liberal democracies attracted scholarly and political attention.

Recent scholarship on deliberative democracy and multiculturalism reveals the shortcomings of the early versions of the deliberative theory, which primarily relied on Jürgen Habermas's theory of communicative action. Scholars such as James Bohman (1995), Iris Marion Young (2000), and John Dryzek (2005) were among the first to call into question the classical premises of deliberative theory as potentially exclusive and unjust. Monique Deveaux (2003; 2017) summarized four clusters of key criticisms around the debate: (1) the inequalities permeating deliberative processes; (2) the differences across cultural groups and deliberative styles; (3) the identity group claims and the virtues of deliberation; and (4) a critical vision of the common good ideal.

There is a profuse multiplication of claims for recognizing specific rights in Western societies of late capitalism (Oxhorn 2012). These struggles take place due to tensions with rights established centuries ago in liberal societies. On a global scale, there is an emerging tension between the promotion of identity-based rights and an ossified political system unable to process these demands democratically.

There is some interesting research on concrete mechanisms trying to bridge the gap between social groups in deeply divided societies (see Dembinska & Montambeault 2015; Luskin et al. 2014). However, some puzzling questions remain open for debate: How do political institutions bridge the gap between the political demands of majority and minority groups? What are the obstacles to meaningful participation? What are the main challenges encountered by multicultural societies? And finally, how do we encourage large-scale debates around minority issues?

To answer these questions, we examine *Intercultural Deliberation and the Politics of Minority Rights* by R. E. Lowe-Walker (2018, University of British Columbia Press), *Deliberative Democracy Now: LGBT Equality and the Emergence of Large-Scale Deliberative Systems* by Edwina Barvosa (2018, Cambridge University Press), and *Deliberative Democracy, Political Legitimacy and Self-determination in Multicultural Societies* by Jorge M. Valadez (2018, West View Press/Routledge). An examination of these works provide us an opportunity to discuss the challenges faced by liberal democracies in the light of political claims made by minorities and mainstream groups.

In the succeeding sections, we present each book's main arguments, methodological tools, key insights, and shortcomings. We conclude by pointing out how debates surrounding deliberative democracy and multiculturalism can be advanced.

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Lowe-Walker, R.E. (2018). *Intercultural deliberation and the politics of minority rights.* **University of British Columbia Press**

The book begins by presenting the reader with an intriguing problem. According to Lowe-Walker, a paradox exists between claims of minority rights and institutions of Western liberal democracies. On the one hand, specific claims by minority groups compromise the very system of rights used by these groups. For instance, indigenous peoples' claims to sovereignty are based on the rights of a liberal democracy, but at the same time it questions the authority of the liberal state itself. On the other hand, it is impossible to make the claims without appealing to the public institutions and policies created to support fundamental ideas of liberal democracies, that sometimes clash with minority groups. Thus, such institutions could discriminate against minority interests even before they are considered, given that these systems were not developed to deal with such cultural differences.

Because of the constraints of liberal democratic institutions, minority groups are compelled to translate their demands using terms that dominant cultures can understand, even if these are contrary to their own cultures. This process is a complex undertaking. For example, indigenous people who talk about the spiritual significance of maintaining a forest may sound incomprehensible to business executives who are interested in buying the land. In such cases, the demands for recognition of the rights to speak a specific language may seem exaggerated to a majority language group. The differences, among others, make it challenging for citizens in multicultural societies to understand each other before making collectively binding decisions.

In the second part of the book, Lowe-Walker proposes *intercultural deliberation* as a form of political dialogue suited to respond to a pluralistic society's demands and to reduce injustices imposed by the majority. By broadening the scope of pluralism, the author argues that political institutions can include different worldviews and avoid the hasty rejection of claims based on the views of the minority.

Intercultural deliberation happens when majority and minority groups attempt to understand each other's argument in deciding the best course of action. This deliberative process would be the most appropriate method in discussing minority rights. It allows one to recognize the different reasons and worldviews of the opposing group and make political decisions based on this interaction. Moreover, it enables other styles of reasoning in decision making, thus circumventing the paradox that minority rights face during claims making. By recognizing the pluralistic nature of political associations and promoting inclusive and intercultural deliberation, such a contradiction can be overcome.

On the one hand, Lowe-Walker takes a more philosophical examination of the implications of deliberative theory for multicultural societies. She provides a robust normative basis for questioning classical political concepts that can, and should, be critically re-examined in light of the 'fact of pluralism' of contemporary societies.

On the other hand, the author does not shy away from identifying the problems that may arise when implementing a democratic deliberative model in a multicultural society. First, intercultural deliberation could coerce minority groups into acceding to the views of the majority. Second, deliberation could reinforce the divergence between the opposing groups. However, Lowe-Walker argues that intercultural deliberation does not necessarily require changing the core concepts of one's subjectivity, it only needs to ensure the equality of access and influence among the participants.

Finally, despite providing a robust conceptual work regarding diversity, the author presents an 'anthropological deficit,' that is, the lack of a more profound reading of the concepts from anthropology and, more importantly, from indigenous authors themselves. This critique could be easily extended to the broader field of political science that is traditionally reticent of incorporating non-Western political viewpoints (Ferguson 2016). However, since the author is working within the topic of diversity, it is necessary to include decolonized perspectives of politics in her work.

Barvosa, Edwina. (2018). *Deliberative democracy now: LGBT equality and the emergence of large-scale deliberative systems.* **Cambridge University Press**

Edwina Barvosa's book presents a more up-to-date and operationalized version of the deliberative theory that encompasses recent developments around the idea of systemic deliberation, as first conceptualized by Jane Mansbridge and colleagues (2012), a subject of numerous works in the last decade (see Mendonça 2016; Ercan 2013; Elstub, Ercan & Mendonça 2016).

For Barvosa, any deliberative system contains four characteristics: (1) discursive forums are articulated discursively among themselves; (2) they connect with other institutions that work with distinct decision-making procedures; (3) they seek to strengthen, over time, the idea of social justice and does not require reaching a specific result; and (4) they produce results with a higher degree of legitimacy and consensus, among others.

In addition to these characteristics, Barvosa also defines which tools are involved in the self-organization of these systems, namely, deliberative catalysts, social networks as a means of information traffic, and what she calls 'seven small steps.'

Deliberative catalysts include 'deliberative entrepreneurs,[1]' 'deliberative packages,' and 'precipitating events.' Deliberative entrepreneurs are individuals who raise conflictive questions to provoke an internal reflection within citizens. Deliberative packages convey the message around which the debate is taking place, such as films, music, interviews, reports, and even social media posts with experiences of people with public prominence offered strategically in the game of conflicts of ideas. Some deliberative entrepreneurs create their packages, while others use existing ones or are able to combine several types.

Finally, precipitating events are occasional and unexpected events, which are not necessarily linked to the deliberative system, but whose occurrence can influence the process of their formation and expansion. Among the events the author uses are the series of suicides of LGBTQI + youth in the summer and fall of 2010 in the US and the removal of a lesbian mother from the position of supervisor of her son's scout troop in 2012. Events like these ignited the discussion on equality and civil rights in the country, brought the news in the flow of deliberative packages on social networks, and provided more individual reflection on the subject.

The seven small steps alluded to by Barvosa must occur broadly enough to the point of spreading and fixing the act of deliberating in the individual's daily life. They are the basis for individuals to self-organize in the deliberative system. Since this system functions as a social network, the higher its reach, the more significant the proportion in terms of scale and intensity of deliberation. These small steps do not have a defined sequence and can happen simultaneously. The seventh step, however, aims at implementing public laws and policies.

The seven steps are as follows: (1) the inspiration of new deliberative entrepreneurs; (2) the involvement of deliberative entrepreneurs in the creation and circulation of deliberative packages; (3) the acceptance of invitations to deliberate and the involvement in reflection or collective deliberation; (4) the transmission of news about deliberative progress on social networks, informing the logic of thought and identifying which instruments are used; (5) the expression of opinions through a speech consistent and coherent with actions; (6) the flow of these opinions on social networks by encouraging individual reflection on the subject; (7) and, in cases where there is a consensus of public opinion, the attempt to look for ways in which that opinion can be recognized, structured, and applied in legal form by politicians and institutions.

Barvosa's excellent empirical work contributes to the accumulation of evidence around the validity of deliberative practices as feasible in large-scale contexts, and corroborates the explanatory force of deliberative theories. The text is, doubtlessly, indispensable for any practitioner in the field.

Finally, although Barvosa's book shows an incredibly methodological *tour de force*, research that works within the deliberative system framework is frequently plagued by the threat of remote causality, and hers is no exception. Even in the face of persuasive argumentation, reliable data, and methodological rigor, it is hard to establish a clear causal chain between large-scale public debate and concrete political consequences. Fortunately, the author recognizes the importance of using further empirical research utilizing big data and other research tools to validate her propositions.

Valadez, Jorge M. (2018 [2001]). *Deliberative democracy, political legitimacy, and self-determination in multicultural societies.* Routledge/ West View Press

Jorge Valadez argues that multicultural democracies face the great challenge of promoting the coexistence of individuals and groups with fundamentally differing worldviews. It is then politically crucial to find common ground that supports the consequent political dialogue between individuals and collectivities with distinct conceptions of the common good.

Considering the context of the resurgence of ethnicity in the global geopolitical context, the author highlights what he calls the 'three dilemmas of cultural democracies': (1) the distinction among existing ethnic groups in a given society and its demands related to fair political representation, partial autonomy, or even secession from the mainstream society; (2) the problem of intercultural cooperation and understanding; and (3) the challenge of having to deal with the political characteristics of a given community that favor the perpetuation of inequity between different groups.

The author suggests the rethinking of deliberative democracy based on the challenges posed by the coexistence of different cultural groups and mainstream society in liberal democracies. Thus, this rethinking proposes the categorization of these groups based on their political objectives within these societies, which would result in the existence of 'accommodationist' groups (as the first category). It denotes, for example, groups of immigrants who leave their countries and want to work, prosper, and have political and economic opportunities abroad, without having to renounce some specific characteristics of the group (e.g., Latin or Asian immigrants in the US). The second category is 'autonomist' groups that encompass indigenous peoples, ethnonationalists (territorially concentrated ethnic groups with a history of struggles for autonomy or, in some cases, separation), and communal contenders (groups with the desire to have some relevant role in the conduct of state affairs). The third category pertains to the 'secessionists' who, as the term implies, seek the total separation of political communities and the constitution of distinct states. This refined classification, argues Valadez, allows analysts and political agents to design specific proposals for each subgroup. He then argues that it is possible to think of varying power sharing arrangements with accommodationist groups and communal contenders and other mechanisms in promoting autonomy and self-government for indigenous and ethnonationalist groups. However, there are cases wherein these arrangements are deemed impossible due to the strong determination of groups to engage in secessionist practices.

Whatever the case may be, these arrangements should promote epistemological egalitarianism among the various groups involved in the deliberative processes as their central objective. Valadez emphasizes that equity and political effectiveness go hand in hand. There is no fair deliberation in an environment wherein historically subordinated groups face a series of structural and cognitive obstacles to the free formulation of their autonomous preferences. Meanwhile, the political institutions of these societies must change profoundly to accommodate the multicultural nature of the societies in which they operate.

The author argues that deliberative democracy has some specific advantages for multicultural societies.

First, it would promote intercultural understanding that aims to erode linguistic, religious, and cultural barriers in the production of consequent and mutually beneficial political dialogues. Second, it helps draw attention to the distance that separates formal conceptions of citizenship and social realities from the different groups existing in each society. Finally, it contributes to the political legitimacy of multicultural states by including subaltern voices in public debates and producing results through fair and public procedures.

Moreover, intercultural deliberation allows different styles of reasoning, unlike Western 'hegemonic' rationality, in decision-making processes, thus circumventing the impasses that minority groups face during their demands for rights. It conforms as a critical political process for achieving a multicultural society in which human beings can develop their potential and organize their lives according to their conception of a good life.

Written at an early stage of the development of deliberative theory, the book seems to be too optimistic to the contemporary reader. Since its first publishing in 2001, the immigration crises severely worsened in the US and Europe and hate crimes increased dramatically. In that sense, it is hard to believe that Valadez would keep emphasizing deliberation as a means to promote intercultural understanding without a severe critique to some of the first deliberative theoretical assumptions. Unfortunately, the author apparently decided not to move forward with the original project of publishing three books on the topic.

Conclusion

The works reviewed here explore the issue of minority rights and the difficulties that minority groups have in claiming their rights in the face of democratic institutions due to problems of intercultural understanding and material and epistemic inequities.

Based on classic texts by deliberative theorists, Lowe-Walker, Barvosa, and Valadez circumscribe the main aspects that make deliberative democracy a normative ideal to be pursued by political agents and institutions in contemporary democracies. Its substantive characteristic is the support of rationality and the strength of the best argument in political dialogue between individuals and groups.

The three authors present the civic implications of adopting a deliberative model in debates between different cultural groups. The emphasis on mutual understanding and reciprocity leads participants in these processes to moderate their demands to obtain a substantive consensus capable of fostering a sense of collective responsibility.

The authors propose intercultural deliberation as an alternative for viable dialogue in multicultural societies, despite their challenges in their concrete implementation. In cosmopolitan societies of late capitalism, minorities regularly encounter challenges of matching the most diverse interests and conceptions of the common good in a society with a robust democracy.

Writing from Brazil, where a politically divided public has been met with severe losses in popular participation since the beginning of Jair Bolsonaro's far-right and populist government, it seems hard to find renewed faith in the transformative power of deliberative practices. We can only hope to construct a more just, egalitarian, and politically sensitive democracy to the diverse sexual, ethnic, racial, religious minorities who live in the country.

The three books show us, however, that the normative ideal of deliberative theory continues to produce excellent empirical and theoretical works, which will undoubtedly be necessary for the resumption of the participatory ideal—the hallmark of politics practiced in Brazil in the recent past—when returning to democratic normality.

Note

[1] Although the author does not explicitly engage with the idea of 'inducers of connectivity,' policy entrepreneurs are easily relatable to the bureaucrats and activists that Mendonça's (2016) work suggests as relevant actors in connecting multiple discursive arenas.

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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