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## Review of Deliberative Systems: Deliberative Democracy at the Large Scale edited by John Parkinson and Jane Mansbridge (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012)

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**Abstract**

Review of Parkinson, John, and Jane Mansbridge, *Deliberative systems: Deliberative democracy at the large scale* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

**Keywords**

Deliberative democracy, Deliberative systems, public deliberation

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What would deliberative democracy look like on a large scale? *Deliberative Systems* brings together internationally prominent deliberative democratic theorists to provide rich and sophisticated answers to this question. A deliberative system is “a set of distinguishable, differentiated, but to some degree interdependent parts, often with distributed functions and a division of labour, connected in such a way as to form a complex whole” that “encompasses a talk-based approach to political conflict and problem-solving” (Mansbridge and Parkinson 2012, 4-5).<sup>1</sup> A deliberative system not only incorporates “talk” in the formal institutions of the state like the legislature, but also the talk that occurs in the minipublics, social movements, and informally around the “watercooler.” One of the central motivations for the edited volume is the problem of scale – the difficulty of scaling up from face-to-face deliberation to the level that encompasses deliberation in the large scale – hence the subtitle of the book, “Deliberation at the Large Scale.” I will first briefly summarize the main arguments of each chapter, thematically rather than in a chronological order, before articulating the value of this book to theorists and practitioners of public deliberation.

*Deliberative Systems* is composed of seven chapters. Chapter 1 lays out in programmatic terms the definitions, boundaries, and functions of a deliberative system. It also analyzes three problems in deliberative democracy: expertise, pressure and protest, and political media. Although these three problems were long thought to be incompatible with deliberative democracy, Mansbridge et al. in Chapter 1 argue for their compatibility within the deliberative systems.

In Chapter 2 Thomas Christiano pushes the hardest line on the problem of expertise by offering a normative account of the rational deliberation among experts and citizens in a deliberative system. Christiano rightly points out that expertise and division of labor creates a tension in democracy. The proposed solution to these problems is to theorize about the division of labor between technical experts and citizens, where citizens in a deliberative system sets ends of policies.

Yannis Papadopoulos in Chapter 6 provides normative and empirical evidence to cast doubt on the thesis that democratic citizens control the ends of policies. The author argues that the political actors like the regulative agencies, the courts, and transnational organizations are a cover for elitism, where technical experts make binding decisions with little or no citizen input.

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<sup>1</sup> Inline references will be to Mansbridge and Parkinson 2012.

Michael Mackenzie and Mark Warren develop two trust-based uses of minipublics in Chapter 5, which provides an answer to Papadopoulos' worry. Recognizing that trust is met with skepticism in the arena of the "political" – indeed, trust is natural in families and closer associations, but not in politics – the authors suggest the two uses of minipublics: the information proxy and the anticipatory proxy. The former serves as competence building of participants in minipublics that can serve as proxies for the broader public. The latter serves to signal "potential problems and indicate solution to erosions of public trust within the executive domain" (97).

Scaling up considerably from MacKenzie and Warren's concern with minipublics, Simone Chambers (Chapter 3) theorizes about the compatibility between deliberation and a mass democracy. Chambers' strategy is to define reasoning and impact more capaciously, two central normative features of deliberative democracy. With respect to "impact," for instance, Chambers suggests that Joshua Cohen's definition of "impact as binding decision" is too narrow because an impact can be made without having a binding decision. Drawing on Jürgen Habermas' theory of public opinion, she argues for impact as responsiveness.

James Bohman in Chapter 4 considers representation in a deliberative system. Against the standard account of representation as either counting votes or electoral representation, he argues that we should think of representation as citizens exercising communicative freedom and power by having their perspectives taken into consideration in the deliberative process. The systems approach makes the modern ideal of representation feasible by opening up the forums in which citizens' perspectives are taken up.

Chapter 7 provides not only a synthesis of the arguments in chapters two through six, but it also provides a call for democratization within deliberative systems. John Parkinson argues for the need to democratize not only *democratic* deliberation but deliberative *democracy*. This raises a number of tensions, however, including the conflict between the reason-giving requirement of deliberation and whether deliberation makes any impact on binding collective decisions. He invites empirical researchers to inform how deliberative systems would work in actual political contexts.

This edited volume should interest scholars of public deliberation because it argues that the longstanding objections and normative tensions cannot be addressed without taking a systemic stance. In other words, the normative tensions between deliberation and mass participation, deliberative impact and popular sovereignty, legitimacy and the quality of deliberation, and the like need

to be reconceptualized in light of deliberative systems. Consider, for instance, the tension between legitimacy and the quality of deliberation. Mansbridge et al. rightly claim in Chapter 1 that democratic legitimacy depends on the quality of deliberation (3). Parkinson provides a book-end comment that “the larger goal of deliberation as being to improve the legitimacy of democracy” (170). While most deliberative democrats already recognize this, the difference is that “in the systemic approach the entire burden of decision making and legitimacy does not fall on one forum or institution is distributed among different components in different cases” (5). This stance is radically different from how legitimacy was conceived in the first and second phases of deliberative democracy. Habermas’s proceduralist theory, for example, takes legitimacy to be a function of public reasoning among free and equal citizens, modeled after some political institution like the legislature. Moreover, the systemic conception is an upgrade from the second phase, where legitimacy is realized in various micro-or-macro deliberative sites. According to the systemic approach, however, legitimacy is distributed throughout a manifold of deliberative nodes that work independently and interdependently. In other words, deliberative systems attempt to realize “legitimacy in the real world.” It strikes me as a promising move and deserves to be developed, though the edited volume does not provide the conditions under which legitimacy could be realized within the system.

The value of this book to the practitioners of public deliberation and dialogue is that it provides a “one-stop shop” of central issues in the deliberative systems literature. Although there are other books and articles devoted to deliberative systems, this book paints a broad stroke rather than gives a particular normative or empirical argument. For this reason, this book plays a valuable role for those deliberative practitioners who work in micro-settings like minipublics (as participant, organizer, or designer) that these minipublics are embedded in the “ocean of everyday praxis.” Additionally, for those who work in civil society, they can begin to entertain the thought that their social activism can be deliberative. This option, however, does not seem to be open unless we think differently about normative concepts like “reason-giving” and “decisiveness.” The learning experience should be reciprocal: practitioners have the insights and perspectives of how the deliberative nodes are actually connected and what the consequences actually are. They have the first-hand knowledge about which information would be valuable for those who are interested in theorizing and designing various institutions and venues in a deliberative system.

*Deliberative Systems* moves deliberative democracy into an exciting direction. Though we will not know whether the project succeeds until the claims are tested, there is a cause for the cautious optimism that deliberative democracy can finally

fulfill the original goal of being a lasting rival to liberal constitutionalism and aggregative democracy.

**Author Information**

John B. Min specializes in social-political philosophy and democratic theory. He recently received his Ph.D. in philosophy from Saint Louis University. Prior to pursuing a doctoral degree in philosophy, he worked as a regional representative to both a United States Congressman and Senator.