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## Review of From Deliberation to Demonstration: Political Rallies in France, 1868-1939, by Paula Cossart, trans. Clare Tame (Colchester, UK: ECPR Press, 2013).

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**Abstract**

Review of *From Deliberation to Demonstration: Political Rallies in France, 1868-1939*, by Paula Cossart, trans. Clare Tame (Colchester, UK: ECPR Press, 2013).

With the publication of *From Deliberation to Demonstration*, Paula Cossart joins a small coterie of scholars who have applied deliberative democracy theory to historical analysis.<sup>1</sup> (Clare Tame is responsible for the book's capable, if not fluid, English translation.) Cossart makes effective use of this analytical lens to examine historical events, but the book may also interest modern scholars of deliberation—or at least those who can brave its linguistic and historical density. Cossart's primary historical subject is France under the Third Republic, that nation's first sustained period of democratic rule, which began with the Prussian Army's invasion of France in 1870 and ended with the German Army's invasion in 1940. Cossart argues that the French republicans who advocated for representative government during this period thought in deliberative terms. In her reading of late-19<sup>th</sup>-century French political theory, "It is impossible not to draw a parallel with the arguments put forward today in favour of deliberative democracy" (4). These proto-deliberative French republicans, who sought to guide their nation into a new era of democratic government, placed great emphasis on the "contradictory assembly," a setting in which candidates representing different parties and ideologies articulated their competing political visions for diverse audiences. Republicans argued that these meetings not only helped citizens to make informed political decisions, but also provided training for a citizenry unaccustomed to democratic deliberation about public concerns. "[T]he assembly should generate a virtuous circle: taking part in debate in assemblies makes men better citizens, and better citizens are more capable of taking part judiciously in debate in assemblies" (146). At times, the first half of Cossart's book reads like a utopian description of an attempt to found a political system based on deliberative principles.

But this deliberative ideal was short-lived. The second half of the book chronicles the decline of deliberative contradictory assemblies during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Already by the 1890s, Cossart perceives "two 'deviances' in relation to the republican mission of civilisation of mores by taking part in assemblies. . . On the one hand, there are the practices by the 'soldiers of uproar and systematic violence', who resort to noise or violence in order to suppress discussion. . . On the other hand, the use of what can be described as assemblies-cum-demonstrations; that is, the organisation and participation in meetings in order to assert the force of a preconceived opinion by means of the gathering. . ." (179). These two anti-deliberative trends were mutually reinforcing: As nationalist, anarchist, and socialist parties began organizing groups of partisans to attend assemblies and shout down opposing candidates, even republicans were forced to

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<sup>1</sup> For other examples, see Sandra M. Gustafson, *Imagining Deliberative Democracy in the Early American Republic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), and Jeffrey L. McNairn, *The Capacity to Judge: Public Opinion and Deliberative Democracy in Upper Canada, 1791-1854* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000).

abandon multi-candidate assemblies in favor of single-party rallies. And as rallies became the usual method of political organization, political parties no longer focused on persuading new converts through reasoned debate. Rallies, rather, demonstrated the strength of existing support bases. Politics devolved from public deliberation to rival displays of force. By the 1930s, it was common practice for parties to respond to the rallies of their rivals by announcing a counter-demonstration on the same date and in the same location, in the hopes that the implicit threat of violence would force authorities to ban the initial rally. These anti-deliberative tactics to silence alternative perspectives demonstrate just how much the French political system changed over the course of the Third Republic.

As intellectual and political history, this is a convincing and well-researched book, drawing from a wide range of published and archival sources, and creating a compelling account of France's evolving political culture during the Third Republic. Historians will find much here to engage them, although readers not already familiar with French history may be thrown by Cossart's casual, unexplained references to "Boulangists," "Dreyfusards," etc. The book also demonstrates the usefulness of deliberative theory as a tool to understand the past. For example, it helps Cossart make sense of the distinctions 19<sup>th</sup>-century republicans drew between political "assemblies," which were open to the public, and "associations," or private meetings of like-minded partisans. Laws that permitted the former but banned the latter, which were passed during the waning years of the Second Empire and expanded early in the Third Republic, can be understood through the lens of deliberation. Even though they might be raucous and contested, assemblies trained citizens to weigh competing priorities and ideals, and therefore played a necessary democratic role. Private political associations, on the other hand, might allow resentments and plots to multiply outside of the public sphere, and were therefore dangerous to democracy.

But deliberative theory is not only a useful tool for historians; deliberative theorists can also learn from history. After all, the story Cossart tells, of a society founded on deliberative ideals, and its inexorable slide into division and partisanship, might be taken as cause for deep pessimism about prospects for deliberative democracy. The very assemblies which French republicans had designed as deliberative training grounds for citizens devolved within a few short decades into anti-deliberative displays of force, "forms of deliberation giving way to intimidatory games and propaganda actions; and . . . laboratories of democracy [transforming] into showcases of political parties" (280). Cossart does not explicitly theorize the reasons for this decline, and a deeper engagement with deliberative theory might have provided a more satisfying argument here. For example, one possible explanation for the unsustainability of the Third Republic's

deliberative politics might be found in the flaws of the era's conceptualization of deliberation. According to Cossart, French republicans of the period rejected "[t]he idea that differences of opinion were normal and legitimate. . . [T]he outcome sought by assemblies was an opinion on which there was consensus on what constitutes the public interest" (71). Furthermore, "one of the elements of the apprenticeship in civic wisdom called for by republicans to stabilise representative government, [was] the ability to master one's uncontrolled emotions, . . . which impede the use of reason" (163). But this conception of deliberation as excluding emotions and requiring universal consensus has been questioned both by critics of deliberation and by some of its defenders.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps French republicans' insistence that rational debate would result in unanimity of opinion laid the seeds for the political devolution into partisan rivalry that Cossart describes.

*From Deliberation to Demonstration* is a work of history, but the recent tragic attacks on French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* have demonstrated the continued relevance of Cossart's major theme: the need for free speech and civil discourse among French citizens with divergent ideological beliefs. The problems of disunity and incivility that concerned French republicans in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century continue to bedevil France and every other democratic society today. Cossart's work provides an excellent opportunity both to understand the past through modern democratic theory and to learn lessons from that past that may continue to guide democratic practice today.

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<sup>2</sup> For example, see Lynn M. Sanders, "Against Deliberation," *Political Theory* 25 (June, 1997): 347-376, and Iris Marion Young, *Inclusion and Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).