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Review of Do-It-Yourself Democracy by Caroline Lee (Oxford University Press, 2015)

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Abstract

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Keywords

Democratic Deliberation, Facilitation

In her book *Do-It-Yourself Democracy*, Lee defines public engagement as “structured and professionally-facilitated conversations that bring stakeholders together for a face to face dialogue.” She argues that these kind of conversations have morphed and expanded into all corners of society, becoming a nascent industry. But as the title conveys, she is especially interested in efforts that impact democracy. Here, facilitators and other practitioners see themselves as nothing less than “midwives of a new civic form.” Rejecting old style government as “one-way information sharing,” they see deliberative democracy as a means for making decisions that are more inclusive, more democratic, more educational, and more empowering.

That is an impressive list of objectives. Lee isn’t against them—who could be? But she believes that these claims need a more rigorous assessment, one that evaluates the on-the-ground practice of the deliberative democracy industry. Lee means to “remove the moral halo” that derives from these objectives and evaluate the real life consequences deliberative democracy has for democracy writ large.

Her assessment is reasonably mixed. She appreciates that a good facilitator can create possibilities for healing and compromise that formerly looked utterly impossible. Too, deliberative democracy can demonstrably bring people into the process who often feel left out and devalued. If things work as they should, those same people can leave feeling empowered and better connected to their community and their government.

But while there are a lot of practitioners and a lot of models out there, not all of them are good ones. Lee rightly calls out a lot of the folderol that is often associated with these kind of exercises, especially the infantilizing ice-breakers and the calls for mutual respect that sometimes bleed into new age treacle. She recounts one event that began with the organizer asking the participants to close their eyes and imagine themselves as eagles flying over a restored New Orleans. Are entreaties like this one constitutive of aborning democratic practice? And are those who would roll their eyes—or walk out—at such an entreaty legitimately left on the sidelines? Finally, Lee rightly asks whether these models are as useful as they claim. What good is any newfound engagement and empowerment if it requires the gentle tutelage of the enlightened facilitator?

But all this is just a warm up. Lee’s bigger question is whether these direct democracy methods are equipped to engage, let alone improve, the climate of our times. She says we are living in a world of “extreme capitalism.” And that means that methods and processes are often subtly compromised by the one calling the

tune. Facilitators—who let’s face it, need to eat too—may find themselves constrained to bracket conversations for corporations who are looking to smooth over benefit cuts, plant closings and the like, or for politicians who want political cover for their budget cutting. In both instances, a conversation that is supposed to have no agenda and hear all voices might well leave many choices off the table. You want to let locals understand the hard choices associated with health care or state budgets? OK, but why shouldn’t one be able to look at the constraints themselves and conclude that something far more fundamental needs to change?

It is certainly fair for Lee to suggest that maybe the hard choices taken up in deliberation are not hard enough. However, it is another thing to conclude that deliberative democracy is just another example of how our culture is undermined by, and in service of “extreme capitalism.” She may be right about this, of course, but this term could surely do with some explanation. More to the point, if that is the case she wants to make, there ought to be more argument in service thereof.

At the very end of the book, Lee offers the following as part of her effort to tie it all together.

Just as “servant leadership” lifted floor polishing and shelf stocking into a higher register of virtue as customer care, deliberating about public priorities and community hopes in precious free time is appealing not because publics fall for the social consciousness and environmental friendliness sold with the energy drinks they need to make it through the day, but because they fear it is not enough. Authentic self-sacrifice is the sprit and soul of deliberative capitalism. (pp. 230-231)

To my mind, prose like this is more purple than explicative. And regardless, without more evidence, it is not sufficient to sustain the claim she is making. As a result, this part of her argument left me unpersuaded.

Yet whatever one thinks of Lee’s cultural criticism, the book raises questions that the industry, and for that matter scholars of democratic deliberation, must confront. To be sure, theorists have with more or less effect addressed the immense problem associated with a Janus-faced democracy—agonistic, self-interested, and strategic on the one hand, and collaborative, respectful and dialogic on the other. But practitioners create the conditions where the rubber hits the road. Therefore they must be part of this critical assessment.

Human nature being what it is, democracy’s combative dimensions are not going away. But nor should they. It is simply a fact that compromise and resolution are

not always the best way to engage a problem politically. And it is merely faithful to assume that engagement in and of itself is the best way to move beyond our current political morass. Reinhold Niebuhr defined politics as “sinners fighting each other.” Quite frequently, fighting is the best way—and sometimes the only way—to bring about a political solution. Climate change, surging income inequality, and looming budgetary crises could quite reasonably bring one to believe that now is one of those times. And while it is one thing to offer the wrong method for a given time and place, it is quite another to end up undermining the more appropriate method in the process. Is deliberative democracy the right means for achieving a more just society? Lee’s book insists that this question has not yet been fully engaged, let alone answered.