

4-20-2017

Review of Deliberation across Deeply Divided Societies: Transformative Moments by Jürg Steiner, Maria Clara Jaramillo, Rousiley C. M. Maia, Simona Mameli (Cambridge U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

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Recommended Citation

Vamvakas, Nancy A. (2017) "Review of Deliberation across Deeply Divided Societies: Transformative Moments by Jürg Steiner, Maria Clara Jaramillo, Rousiley C. M. Maia, Simona Mameli (Cambridge U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2017).," *Journal of Public Deliberation*: Vol. 13 : Iss. 1 , Article 9.

Available at: <https://www.publicdeliberation.net/jpd/vol13/iss1/art9>

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Abstract

Review of *Deliberation across Deeply Divided Societies: Transformative Moments*. by Jürg Steiner, Maria Clara Jaramillo, Rousiley C. M. Maia, Simona Mameli (Cambridge U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

Author Biography

Dr. Nancy A. Vamvakas specializes in the politics of Greece and the European Union. She is currently analyzing and mapping the paths and junctures of deliberation and discourse leading to Greece's signing of the *Third Memorandum of Understanding*.

Keywords

Discourse, Deliberative Democracy, Deliberative Transformative Moments, Deep Social Divisions

Indeed, this book is the result of a very ambitious undertaking; Jürg Steiner *et. al.* have compiled and analyzed group discussions among ex-guerrillas and ex-paramilitaries in Colombia, among Serbs and Bosniaks in Srebrenica in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and among poor community residents and police officers in Brazilian favelas.

The discussions were facilitated by passive moderators who posed a general question about peace, but did not intervene; facilitators did not ask further questions and did not ask participants to speak up. In the case of Colombia, the groups were asked: *what are your recommendations so that Colombia can have a future of peace, where people from the political left and the political right, guerrillas and paramilitaries, can live peacefully together?* (p. 24). The Bosnian groups were asked to *formulate recommendations for a better future in Bosnia-Herzegovina* (p. 31). Finally, in Brazil, discussants were given the following question: *How is it possible to create a culture of peace between poor community residents and the local police?* (p. 36).

Steiner *et. al.* advance the on-going debate between those deliberative theorists who stress a purely rational approach and those who adopt a softer focus which incorporates finer threads of emotions. The authors argue that “deliberation means that all participants can freely express their views; that arguments are well justified, which can also be done with well-chosen personal stories or humor; that the meaning of the common good is debated; that arguments of others are respected; and that the force of the better argument prevails, although deliberation does not necessarily have to lead to consensus” (p. 2). They are in agreement with deliberative theorists such as Laura Black who see the great potential in storytelling and the limitations of the rationalist approach. Personal stories, as presented here are examples of “non-rational elements” (86) that have added to the deliberation model. Steiner *et. al.* argue that Jürgen Habermas set “very high standards of how rational justification of arguments should look” (p. 106). The book proposes a less demanding test for rationality; less stringent criteria; the bar is lowered. Context matters, who the actors are matters, and “standards of rationality should not be universal” (p. 106). The authors argue that given the “low level of formal schooling,” the discussions were “hard tests” (p. 86) for rational arguments.

The authors argue that there is a complexity to deliberation, hence, analysis must take into account deliberation over the course of a discussion. They code deliberation to see how it evolves and whether it fluctuates; for these ups and downs of group dynamics they coin the very innovative concept of Deliberative Transformative Moments (DTM). The units of analysis are the individual speech

acts. Speech acts were coded using four categories: the speech act stays at a high level of deliberation; the speech act transforms the level of deliberation from high to low (flow of discussion is disrupted); the speech act stays at a low level of deliberation; the speech act transforms the level of deliberation from low to high (participants add new aspects to a topic or formulate a new topic). The reader has the luxury of being able to follow these discussions on the book's website (www.ipw.unibe.ch/content/research/deliberation) and is able to see first hand the speech acts; and can also see the justifications given for the authors' coding as to whether deliberation was high, low, shifted up or down. Hence, the authors are able to argue that their research process is "fully transparent and therefore open for replications" (p. 6).

The authors identified Deliberative Transformative Moments in all three countries and see that "the level of deliberation is not a constant in group discussions but varies depending on characteristics of the group dynamics" (p. 20). They conclude that the DTM as a concept was "helpful to investigate the ups and downs of the level of deliberation in our discussion groups" (pp. 252-53). The authors found that "rational arguments and personal stories were about equally successful to transform discussions from a low to a high level of deliberation" (p. 253). However, "rational arguments keep the upper hand for their deliberative functions; they often help to transform a discussion to a higher level of deliberation and are hardly ever responsible for a discussion dropping to a lower level" (p. 253). In cases of transformations from high to a low level of deliberation, "responsibility was much more often with personal stories than with rational arguments" (p. 253). The "best way to increase the level of deliberation was a well-formulated rational argument supported by a relevant personal story" (p. 4).

A high level of deliberation is of itself a valuable occurrence as this "indicates that the two sides listen to each other in a respectful way, which may already be useful for overcoming the deep divisions at a psychological level" (p. 235). Having said this, there remained the question of what effect a high level of deliberation had towards actual policy outcomes, the resolution of issues. The authors expected to find that long periods of high deliberation would increase the probability of concrete solutions; "a virtuous cycle develops, in the sense that reason-giving begets reason-giving" (p. 250). In all three countries, there were groups that after long stretches of high deliberation reached substantive agreements. There were, however, differences in terms of the goals achieved. The Brazilian deliberations "squarely addressed" (p. 250) the reasons so many residents and police officers are killed in the slums. In the two other countries

agreements did not touch the underlying conflicts but were dealing with everyday matters like better education or how to handle stray dogs.

In conclusion, Steiner *et. al.* invite us to expand on their work and to further test their conclusions noting, that “it will be interesting to see whether our findings only hold for discussions across deep divisions or hold as well for discussions within relatively homogenous societies” (p. 254). Their cases were *akraies* (extreme): on a practical level for the researchers and participants and on a theoretical level for analysts in terms of tests for the deliberation model. If some meaningful deliberation was possible under these most difficult conditions, it is even more promising between groups of citizens in less troubled contexts. It can also be argued however, that the difficulties experienced by the individuals in these groups acted as a catalyst for more meaningful deliberation. Sometimes, things may have to get worse before they can become better. As conclusion, the authors raise the possibility of a “grand theory in waiting about the dynamic development of deliberation at all levels of society” and the use of the “DTM concept to connect deliberative theories at the micro and macro level” (p. 255). From the perspective of this reviewer, the DTM should also be applied to the analysis of transformative moments in cases of deliberation taking place between political actors in the international arena. If we take the EU as example, actors can become what the authors term *deliberative leaders*, which may help to bridge over the increasingly deep divisions. With all its complexity, the book is a most valuable addition for the wider deliberation debate.