Introduction: The New England Town Meeting: A Founding Myth of American Democracy

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Abstract

Notwithstanding notable exceptions, historical investigation is far from central in deliberative scholarship and even recent work on participatory research stresses the need for more historical work. The aim of our introduction to this collective volume is to assess and to draw attention to the contribution of historical analysis in the current scholarly debate on democracy, in particular regarding the ways in which participation and deliberation emerge and develop in New England's famous town meetings. Town meetings have traditionally been cited as one of the fullest and earliest realizations of the idea of democratic government and of deliberation at work. Nowadays the great debate on deliberative and participatory democracy has contributed to restoring the town meetings as a symbol of democratic deliberation. The critical study of how one of the oldest and most inspiring forms of democratic participation has evolved is not only a fascinating endeavor in itself, it is also a unique opportunity to better understand how and to what extent these institutional practices, inspired by ideals of deliberation and participation, can support – or impede – the democratization of today's societies.

Introduction

This special issue of the *Journal of Public Deliberation* presents a translated and revised version of research originally published in French in the journal *Participations* (Cossart and Felicetti, 2016).[1] Our intention here is to offer a carefully crafted collection of these essays to an English-speaking readership to help provide a historical understanding of New England town meetings and to interpret their significance in the light of today's democratic context. Before doing so, however, we must address two issues. The first relates to the value of translating this special issue from French into English. The second is the need for clarity in any study of the topic to ensure a better understanding and promotion of our own democracies.

To begin with, research on New England town meetings is much scarcer in French than in English. Our contribution may thus be a more valuable resource to a French-speaking audience than to its English-speaking counterpart, which already has access to a much larger selection of literature on this topic. Why then are we publishing this research in English? There are several reasons. First, this special issue hosts an outstanding selection of scholars, who have made key contributions to the study of New England town meetings. Their essays make this special issue highly valuable to anyone interested in this topic, regardless of their working language. Making these works available in English guarantees the broadest possible audience.

Second, we consider it particularly important that these essays were written specifically with a European audience in mind. This was a challenge for contributors who had to go beyond the arguably more familiar process of writing for an English-speaking public. In this special issue there is a genuine effort not to take any aspect for granted when discussing American institutions such as New England town meetings and to make clear the relevance of insights to readers from different cultural or academic traditions. This type of endeavor is fundamentally important when it comes to bringing this work to a French-speaking audience. It has also contributed to developing scholarship that is original not only in its content but also in the way it is presented. We believe that such originality will be particularly appreciated by an English-speaking readership. All the essays in this publication conform to the global standards of peer-reviewed scientific articles, but they also make a genuine effort to communicate meaningfully to 'the other',

namely, to those who do not necessarily share the same cultural elements that come with a common language.

Finally, with this special issue, we not only contribute to the important effort of bridging work in French-speaking and English-speaking academia within the context of contemporary research on democracy. We also want to support the task of presenting scholarship that spells out the universal meanings of democracy. We are not claiming that democracy is a universal product to be exported. Instead, we see it as a complex human construct that must be understood, protected and promoted and with which we should continuously engage, regardless of linguistic or other cultural barriers. While it is certainly salutary for a French readership to learn more about New England town meetings, it is also beneficial for an English-speaking readership to access research that strives towards a universal—or at least transcultural—account of the value of these important democratic institutions.

This leads us to our second aspect of discussion. The challenges facing democracy today appear very distant from those that New England town meetings tried to address in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. How can we obtain a better understanding of these historical institutions in order to enrich the readers' ability to reflect on contemporary democracy? The challenge was keenly felt by the entire research team as the French version of this special issue was published at the same time as the 45th President of the United States, Donald Trump, took office. Regardless of how far detached from each other, and how utterly different these two phenomena might be, both of them are historical manifestations of American political life and of democratic life in general.

An exceptional mix of events and developments has guided U.S. political life from the golden era of New England town meetings to the present day. Like a sentient being, democracy has also undergone profound changes in the U.S. and worldwide. It is against this backdrop of continuous and uneven change that we believe the imperative of understanding how democracy has survived or even, in important ways, even thrived until now, we need to reach beyond any superficial reading of its more apparent manifestations. Instead, we need to examine its different stages in depth and try to understand how and where democratic energies and challenges to democratic life originate. This special issue in English is presented in precisely this spirit, and in the hope that it will be a contribution to the daunting and timely drive to recuperate and revitalize democracy. Having made these necessary premises, we can now probe the more straightforwardly academic issues that may interest the readers of the *Journal of Public Deliberation*.

Historical insight has been particularly important in the birth and development of deliberative democracy studies. In addition to Habermas' (1989) seminal analysis of the transformation of the bourgeois public sphere, major contributions in the theory of deliberative democracy are based on historical investigation. Classic

works include Ackerman (2000, 1991) on the American Constitution and Manin (1997) on representative government in France, England and the United States. Historical insight from more recent events is also important. For instance, Gutmann and Thompson's (2009) influential theoretical developments are to a great extent based on an in-depth analysis of the democratization process in South Africa. Finally, historical investigation has also favored the emergence of two trends characteristic of contemporary deliberative democratic scholarship: the expansion of the concept of deliberation; and the adoption of deliberative theories by an increasing number of fields in political and sociological studies (see, for instance Polletta, 2002). Yet despite its apparent efficacy, and notwithstanding notable exceptions (Bacqué and Sintomer, 2011; Della Porta, 2014; Cossart, 2013; Cossart and Talpin, 2015; Gustafson, 2011; Chambers, 2000), historical investigation is far from central in deliberative scholarship and even recent work on participatory research stresses the need for more historical work (Cossart, Talpin and Keith, 2012; Font, Della Porta and Sintomer, 2012). The aim of this issue is to assess and to draw attention to the contribution of historical analysis in the current scholarly debate on democracy, in particular regarding the ways in which participation and deliberation emerge and develop in a range of different contexts.[2] It contains a number of observations on the modes of participation in New England's famous town meetings.

As a form of direct or semi-direct democratic government, the town meeting is associated with representative democracy, particularly in the North-East of the United States since the seventeenth century. This is where a majority, or all, members of a community gathered together to deliberate and legislate on public affairs, local administrative budgets, and so forth. In the words of Tocqueville, even if these will have to be qualified, "In the town of New England, the law of representation is not accepted" (Tocqueville, 1835–1840, chap. 2). Open assemblies were at the center of the decision-making process at the town level where townsmen met in a specific place to discuss and resolve the community's affairs. While decisions were taken by a vote, debate played an important role in resolving political issues. More recently, the expression 'town meeting' has been used to denote other types of meetings where public matters are discussed, but which have no decision-making power. James Fishkin traces the origins of his famous deliberative polls to the tradition of New England town meetings, noting that Gallup himself had entertained the idea of adapting town meeting democracy to larger populations: deliberative polls were viewed as the democratic model of

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2 This theme became more significant after the turning point of systemic research on deliberative democracy (Mansbridge and Parkinson, 2012). This volume also welcomes Sass and Dryzek's (2014) call for historical studies in deliberative democracy. They argue that historical insight could shed light on the complex and largely unexplored relationship between culture and deliberation.

the New England town meeting scaled up to the level of the nation-state.[3] The term 'town meeting' is even used to describe small, unofficial electoral rallies where participants can ask the candidate questions. Yet, the original form of the meeting, giving the assembly of citizens a role in decision-making, endured and, albeit with slight changes, still persists today in a number of towns in Vermont, New Hampshire, Maine and Massachusetts.

Town meetings certainly occupy an important place in political imaginary. Along with the city-government of ancient Athens—a parallel that one can find in the writings of different types and epochs (Dwight, 1821: 31; Tocqueville, 1835–1840; Bryan, 2004: 1–13)—historical New England town meetings have traditionally been cited as one of the fullest and earliest realizations of the idea of democratic government (Emerson, 1883) and of deliberation at work (Fiske, 1904: 94). In the 1970s the historian Kenneth A. Lockridge wrote that:

> The New England Town is one of the myths out of which Americans' conception of their history has been constructed, along such others as The Liberty Bell, George Washington, and The Frontier. (Lockridge, 1985, xi)

In the 1830s Tocqueville in his celebrated study of the American political system, *Democracy in America*, was very impressed by town meetings. For him, they were true 'schools of democracy' and contributed to his view that local participation is a precondition for the development of virtuous citizenship, where all community members are concerned with the general interest and aware of their responsibilities (Tocqueville, 1835–1840; see also Caeser, 2011; Gannett, 2003; Robinson, 2011: 3–6). Henry David Thoreau (1973: 99) observed that:

> When, in some obscure country town, the farmers come together to a special town-meeting, to express their opinion on some subject which is vexing the land, that, I think, is the true Congress, and the most respectable one that is ever assembled in the United States.
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> Nevertheless, commentators on town meetings have not always been so enthusiastic, as, for example, in the case of Bryan (2004). However, nowadays the great debate on deliberative and participatory democracy has contributed to restoring the town meetings as a symbol of democratic deliberation (Fishkin, 2011;

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3 Based on the observation that the quality of deliberation decreases as the number of participants increases, the method designed and patented by James S. Fishkin and Bob Luskin (2005) mixes polls with deliberation.

> Shane, 2004: 72; Goodin, 2012: 265; Gastil and Keith, 2005). In the words of Berry, Portney and Thomson (1993: 1, 9):participatory democracy may seem a hopelessly romantic notion, evoking Tocqueville's small-town America and visions of quaint New England town meeting [yet] the New England town meeting still captures our imagination as an example of true democracy in action.

We should note that, in town meetings, what we now call deliberation was seen less as an end in itself than as a means for settlers to be self-governing. While these deliberative and participatory models certainly refer to diverse approaches to democracy, placing them in contraposition often means neglecting the areas where there is a significant historical overlap.

In the democratic imaginary the role of town meetings, if not in actual democratic practice, certainly warrants a new critical approach based on fresh empirical research. This volume, with its original contributions, reassesses this foundational myth of democracy and in order to introduce new horizons for democratic participation today. The focus chosen is broad, as the essays take us from what may be considered the 'Golden Era' of town meetings (Mansbridge, 1983) to later developments, including those of the twenty-first century.

The History of Town Meetings

In the seventeenth century the population of New England largely consisted of Puritan settlers who created colonies based on strong ethical and spiritual goals (Westerkamp, 1997: 106). When Charles I chose Archbishop William Laud as the head of the Church of England, it meant the persecution and dismissal of hundreds of Puritan ministers. As a consequence, thousands of Puritans fled to America. The exodus began in 1630 with the departure of 900 Puritans led by John Winthrop (who became the first governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony), and in the next decade about 10,000 Puritans migrated to the colony. Winthrop considered England as morally corrupt and in his sermon "A Model of Christian Charity" envisioning a reformed Christian society, he declared: "We must consider that we shall be a City upon a Hill, the eyes of all people are upon us"[4] (Terchek and Conte, 2000; see also Brener, 2004). With his fellow Puritan ministers, he created the Massachusetts Bay Colony with Boston as its main settlement. Their joint corporation—the General Court of shareholders—was transformed into a representative political system. There was a governor, a council and an assembly (Wall, 1970). The emergence of

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4 "A City upon a Hill" is a phrase taken from the parable of Salt and Light in Jesus's Sermon on the Mount. He tells his listeners: "Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hid" (Matthew 5: 14).

town meetings in New England often goes back to the foundation of these townships. For instance, as early as 1634 the founders of Dedham and Watertown, Massachusetts, convened town assemblies to make decisions on local issues (Lockridge and Kreider, 1966: 550). As soon as a town was created, its meeting-house was also erected which,

> symbolically housed the two ritualistic expressions of collective mind and spirit: the town meetings which were the source of by far the most important political authority in their lives, and the public worship in which they sought the articulation of a transcendent collective destiny. (Bohsfedt, 'Foreword' in Brown, 1975: ix)

From the early eighteenth-century onward, town meetings have been characterized by the search for harmony and consensus as the foundation of the political community. Decisions are often reached by general agreement, emphasizing unity in the Christian community (Lockridge, 1985; Rovet, 1973).

Several general theses have been proposed, by nineteenth and early twentieth-century observers in particular, on the origin or genesis of the town meeting.[5] The first is that they were the result of a broader process of importing English prototypes, in turn imported from Germany. This 'racial-cultural' (Kotler, 1974: 79) approach was endorsed by Herbert B. Adams (1898), the main representative of the theory of the Germanic origins of New England towns. His approach was often criticized as insufficiently substantiated (see, for instance, Kellogg, 1900) or overtly challenged. For instance, Edward Channing argued that:

> the exact form that local institutions in the English colonies assumed, was due less to Teutonic or Aryan precedent than to the local economic conditions, previous political experience, and the form of church government and land system that was found to be expedient. (Sly, 1967: 57; Channing, 1884)

A second idea, which focuses on religious factors, is that the New England towns and their assemblies are derived from the English parish and that their procedures were reproductions of the English vestry. Both views oppose the third idea, that indigenous factors were primarily responsible for the invention/emergence of town meetings.

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5 See, for instance, the address delivered by Arthur Lord, President of the Massachusetts Bar Association, in Boston, at its annual meeting on 7 December 1918.

> Rather than some mystic continuity with a patchwork of Old World local governments, perhaps the mundane mechanics of land distribution and basic sanitary regulation help to explain how the town meetings began in each community and became the uniform standard political organization throughout the region. (Warden, 1990: 4)

This is the theory of the American soil, cultivated by English immigrants. According to this view the customs, traditions, and methods typical of Englishmen were deployed in an environment controlled by charters and other documents produced to cater to the specific needs of the newcomers. Early studies on town meetings provide evidence that legal writers would often refer to towns as 'quasi-corporations' whose affairs were 'administered' through town meetings. For example, Adams, Goodell, Chamberlain *et al.* (1892: 9–10), argued that early New England towns can be understood as "commercial enterprises" where town meetings resemble a "board of stakeholders", implanted following the "usual way of business procedures in vogue" in commercial colonies and selectmen as a "board of directors" (see also De Wolf, 1890: 9–10).

Starting in the nineteenth century the meaning and spirit of 'town meeting', evolves as do the assemblies themselves. Between the Revolutionary Era and the first half of the nineteenth century town government lost its influence and its classical form (Kolter, 1974). Later, the community spirit all but vanished, and participation became more anomic, partly due to the decline of the Puritan faith (Erikson, 1966). Lockridge remarks about Dedham that "The custom of decisions 'by general agreement' was discarded along with the passive obedience to selectmen", and goes on to note that "by the end of its first century Dedham had a Town Meeting that could match the legend: active, suspicious, contradictory and cantankerous" (Lockridge, 1985: 124).

The first substantial change that challenged the town meetings as central political spaces was the emergence of a national political sphere: the Revolutionary Era was characterized by the progress of national politics among the matters discussed in town meetings. When considering these assemblies, and the creation of a new postal system, William B. Warner demonstrated how innovations in communication had a decisive impact on American nation-building, and helped make the American Revolution possible (Warner, 2013). With the Revolution came a new era for Massachusetts assemblies: "Increasingly, it became difficult even to remember how powerful they had been and how homogeneous" (Zuckerman, 1970: 238). Yet, the period was still characterized by a relatively high level of unity. Several observers note that change only came after the Civil War. "America's predominant values

became individualism, competition, expansion and nationalism" (Miller, 1999: 51): these values replaced those of community-building.

As towns grew in size, it became impossible for town meetings to continue to have the same role as in the previous centuries. But size was not the only issue: the population affected by the issues discussed in meetings was also becoming more diverse. Unity—or the prospect of unity—was lost, as townsmen became more polarized. For Lockridge (1985: 73), the force of division reached a peak between 1700 and 1750. In each town, historians have noted the decline of the political community which had been so valuable for town meetings. Industrialization and immigration—and the link between them—gradually sapped traditional norms. The issues faced also grew in complexity, as can be seen in the number of items in the warrants or calls for a town meeting. Some towns decided to abandon open meetings and adopted a system of representative assemblies. In justifying this shift, it is often claimed that choosing which townsmen will participate in a meeting is better than leaving the choice to chance. "Increasing population (…) tends to reduce the proportionate attendance at Town Meetings, and hence justifies a government of chosen rather than accidental and fluctuating representatives for such meetings", remarks Alfred D. Chandler (1904: 19), about Brookline, which in 1915 became the first town in Massachusetts to abandon the traditional town meeting. In 1918 at the annual meeting of the Massachusetts Bar Association in Boston, Arthur Lord explained: "Brookline, like the once town of Boston, by its normal growth changed long ago from a direct democracy into a dangerous chance representative democracy that imperiled its administration, until rescued by its limited Town Meeting Act" (Lord, 1919: 82).

Another reason for the mutations of town meetings was the transformation of the perception of partisanship. Before the advent of what can be seen as modern American political culture (Formisano, 1971), the idea of a permanent division of opinions had no place in New England towns: "The close-knit towns placed a premium on consensus, not on pluralism. While they sometimes experienced bitter divisions, they regarded these as aberrations to be resolved by deliberation" (Formisano, 1983: 26). However, the 1820s and 1830s witness the emergence of organized political parties which were to become the predominant institution of political mobilization. The political underwent culture changes and competing political parties were more easily accepted (the opposition between Federalists and Republicans, and later Democrats and Whigs):

> Disagreement arises about the timing and nature of the shift from one political world—implicitly aristocratic, overtly elitist, deferential, relatively stable, consensual, and devoid of political parties—to another—professedly democratic, self-consciously

egalitarian, expansive, pluralist, and organized into political parties.
(Formisano, 1983: 24; 1984)

In the nineteenth century, not only had the organization of parties changed, but so had citizens' perception of parties: they were now accepted as the normal expression of a plurality of viewpoints. "From this point of view, party formation can be seen as reflecting and causing an overall change in political culture" (Formisano, 1983: 26; 2001).

The myth of the town meeting actually began to emerge in an era when it was no longer the preferred forum for community-building. The image of a house where pros and cons are shared, is mostly created in the twentieth century. The Progressive Era (1890–1920) "dealt town meetings several blows" (Bryan, 2004: 28): "the democracy of the progressives was defined in terms of direct voting rather than face-to-face deliberation" (Bryan, 2004: 30). Yet, there was a revival during the Great Depression which continued during World War II, exemplified in the hugely successful radio show *America's Town Meeting of the Air*, first broadcast in 1935 and on the air for several decades, which can claim responsibility for the success of the myth of town meetings. Much has been written about the show and about the idea of its creator George V. Denny to produce a radio adaptation of New England town meetings, described as a typically American institution rooted in its colonial heritage.[6]

> The open and free debate of controversial issues, in which all points of view are represented is basic to the tradition of American democracy. Town Meeting of the Air takes the early New England Town Meeting concept and broadens it to cover the entire nation. [...] Through the instrument of radio, an institution nurtured in New England in colonial times has become a symbol of democracy throughout the world. Every week millions of people listen to the ABC broadcasts of America's Town Meeting. ('Good Evening Neighbors', 1950: 45–47)

As noted, town meetings remain an important apparatus of participatory democracy in modern-day America, especially in New England where several states still keep the tradition alive, and elsewhere where communities resort to informal gatherings of town residents to debate controversial issues. In the states of Vermont, New Hampshire, Maine, and in some rural areas of Massachusetts, towns still hold

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6 Other descriptions of this style and a number of speeches can be found in the volumes entitled *America's Town Meeting of the Air*, published by the American Book Company and available in New York Public Library.

meetings to reach decisions on important budget or local planning issues. Most of the contemporary research on town meetings focuses on participation in Vermont, where the tradition is at its most vibrant. This is the case for *Beyond Adversary Democracy*, by Jane Mansbridge (1983 [1980]), which bases its powerful insight on the dichotomy between 'unitarian' and 'adversarial'' democracy' on the analysis of two cases drawn from the dynamic period of participation in the 1970s. The first case is the Helpline support center, where the workplace was organized as a participatory democracy, and the second was the town of Selby, a pseudonym for a town in Vermont, where the author observed town meetings. Another major work on town meetings, also based on research in Vermont, was published two decades later, *Real Democracy: The New England Town Meeting and How it Works*, by Frank M. Bryan (2004). This provides an analysis of a huge volume of data gathered with the author's students in 1,500 town meetings.[7]

After this presentation of the main features of town meetings and their evolution, we can move on to describe their particular features in terms of deliberative democracy. To what extent was deliberation in town meetings authentic[8] and inclusive (Dryzek, 2009)? Were all participants on an equal footing? While some aspects may vary according to the location, size and history of towns, what follows offers a general view of meetings, with a focus on their deliberative democratic qualities.

The Debate on The Deliberative Qualities of the First Town Meetings: Authenticity, Inclusivity, Equality vs Unanimity, Puritanism, and Social Ranking

Neil G. Kotler (1974: 91) notes that "In New England […] a vigorous public life existed in which leaders and citizens mutually discussed their common affairs openly and freely". Thinking of town meetings as a genuine case of 'talk-centric' politics is probably misleading nonetheless (Bächtiger, Spörndli, Steenbergen *et al*., 2005). Voting, in fact, remained an important mechanism, although far from perfectly implemented (Syrett, 1964: 362–64). It was through voting that disputes were resolved and it was through voting, after due discussion, that town meetings adopted resolutions (De Wolf, 1890: 27). Certainly, deliberating and voting need not necessarily compete with one another. Deliberative democrats repeatedly stressed that a core problem is not voting *per se* but in permitting a better articulated

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7 For an updated version of the study see Clark and Bryan, 2005 and Bryan, 2013.

8 Communications are authentically deliberative to the extent that they are not affected by coercion, induce reflection, display claims that are systematically linked to more general principles, and are characterized by an effort to communicate in ways "that others can accept" (Dryzek, 2010: 136–37).

relation between voting and deliberation in steering political systems (Goodin, 2012; Elster, 1998; Dryzek, 2000). According to recent deliberative scholarship at both the micro and the systemic level, non-deliberative politics may not only be justifiable, but also necessary to generate a good quality of deliberation (Mansbridge *et al*., 2012).

Town meetings appeared to embody some deliberative characteristics (see also Cossart and Felicetti, 2017). First, participants were generally expected to present their views publicly in order to win the support of the audience. Thus, town meetings were arguably meant to induce reflection on the part of participants. Since town meetings were concerned with issues (public or private) relevant to the community at large, participants also had to convince those with different interests. At town meetings, proposals could not be justified solely in terms of one's own interests, but particular claims needed to be linked to more general principles (Miller, 1999: 11, 22, 43; Kotler, 1974: 91, 95; Brown, 1975: x, 11; Zuckerman, 1970: 71). However, appeals to higher principles could take the forms of paternalism and strengthen social domination. In this regard it seems to matter whether appeals to higher principles are linked to the good of the community or with religious dogmas or social norms (the appeal to the Bible, for instance, is frequent; see: Zuckerman, 1970: 51). We can argue that whilst town meetings allowed the participants to air their dissent on certain issues, they offered little space for developing and expressing views which deviated from the norm (Henretta, 1971; Zuckerman, 1978). At town meetings it was the weaker components of the township that had to adapt to the social norms of the dominant groups. The popular classes also had to engage within the boundaries of discourses that they were certainly not encouraged to challenge (Green and Pole 1983; Pole, 1979).[9]

Town meetings were regulated by detailed guidelines and, whilst they could host quite turbulent sessions, overt coercion was rejected (The Commonwealth of Massachusetts, 1874: 30; Adams *et al.,* 1892: 15–39; De Wolf, 1902: 23; Copeland, 1892; Metcalf, 1880: 545).

> In 1692 the General Court passed an act which provided for the incorporation of towns. This act gave the inhabitants wide latitude in the annual election of town officers and in the conduct of town affairs. A later act provided more specifically for the regulation of Town Meetings. There was to be a moderator, elected by a majority of the voters present, who would have power over the orderly conduct of affairs. No one could speak without permission of the

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9 This is problematic as dissent and contestation are important not only for societal deliberation (Sunstein, 2005) but also for democratic deliberation strictly speaking (Bächtiger, 2011).

moderator, no one could speak when someone else was speaking, and there was a fine for violations. Also the town was to act only on the specific items contained in the warrant of the meeting, but a petition signed by any ten inhabitants could force the leading town officers, the selectmen, to place any item in the warrant. (Brown, 1955: 78–79)

If the forms taken by the town meetings vary slightly from town to town (Zimmerman, 1999), the same main rules of procedure and debate can be found in the by-laws regulating assemblies.[10] In particular, efforts were made to guarantee all those present an equal opportunity to participate.

It is clear that town meetings had little or no procedure in place to prevent domination by the elites and economic dependency from affecting the debate. Indeed, sometimes seating arrangements seemed deliberately laid out to make social distinction and influence within the group of deliberators clear to anyone attending. Designed for religious gatherings, these particular arrangements were applied to town meetings in some communities (see, for instance, Copeland, 1892: 84–85; Metcalf, 1880: 135; Green, 1886: 131). The dominant position of local elites resulted in a limited inclusiveness of speech and opinions expressed in town meetings.

When observing the inclusivity of town meetings in terms of the background of the participants what emerges is a tension between efforts to enfranchise the community as a whole, and a complex machinery to exclude some components from wielding power (Pole, 1957). The case of women is the most obvious forms of exclusion. Although women could generally participate and vote in school boards, they were systematically excluded from town meetings (De Wolf, 1902:

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10 For instance: Watertown Historical Society: Regulations and by-laws of the town of Watertown, adopted by the town of Watertown, 14 March 1910; Quincy Historical Society: By-Laws of the Town of Quincy, 1876; Bedford Historical Society: Rules and Orders Adopted for the Government of Town Meetings, Bedford, 10 November 1845. From the late nineteenth century, many towns explicitly rely on the rules for holding Town Meetings contained in *Cushing's Manual of Parliamentary Practice*. Luther Stearns Cushing was the author of one of the earliest works on parliamentary practice: Rules of Proceeding and Debate in Deliberative Assemblies, commonly known as *Cushing's Manual*. The first edition was published in 1845 and was revised by Cushing and his son until 1877. After them, others continued to revise the manual periodically. The Watertown Regulations and By-laws states that "In all Town Meetings such matters as are not specially provided by Law or By-Laws shall be determined by the general rules of parliamentary practice contained in *Cushing's Manual*, so far as they may be applicable", and that "The conduct of all Town Meetings not especially provided for by law or these by-laws, shall be determined by the rules of practice contained in *Cushing's Manual of Parliamentary Practice*", specify the By-Laws of the Town of Bedford.

16). Not only "paupers" but also "minors, idiots, women, lunatics and aliens are excluded in taking part in the government either as voters or as officers" (De Wolf, 1902: 15). Town meetings open to the entire adult male population residing in a settlement were an exception to the rule, and indigenous populations, which were not members of the settlers' communities, were rarely included—with notable exceptions, as shown by Daniel Mandell in his essay in this issue and by Donald A. Grinde in his work on the Iroquois influence on American government.[11]

Generally speaking, there were conditions which had to be met in order to be allowed to take part in town meetings and there were other restrictions regarding the right to vote (De Wolf, 1890: 16). Only some of the "inhabitants" were "qualified to vote" (Watertown Records, 1900: 79) or were "Legal Voters" (The Records of the Town of Hanover, 1905: 52). The minimum requirement was that any voter had to be able to read (the Constitution) and to write (his name) and to be twenty-one years of age and to have paid taxes (De Wolf, 1890: 15–16). Although criteria on participation varied greatly, residency, religious views and being a property-owner were (individually or together) key factors in determining whether a person could attend town meetings, whether he could vote and what offices he could hold (Adams *et al*., 1892: 42–44, Syrett, 1964: 359–62; Breen, 1970). An evolving terminology identifies 'free-men', 'residents', 'inhabitants', 'townsmen', and 'Church members' as different members of the community entitled (and generally expected) to participate in town meetings (Breen, 1970). Historians have long debated the significance of these categories in regulating participation in town meetings. To Adams and the co-authors of *The Genesis of the Massachusetts Town and the Development of Town-meeting Government*, 'freemen', 'townsmen' and 'inhabitants' basically referred to proprietors and the admission of new inhabitants was resisted as they were not welcome to "share their corporate privileges" (Adams *et al.*, 1892: 19, 33). In the same volume, however, this view is contrasted with an account depicting towns as agricultural communities where political arrangements, including town meetings, derived from English customs, imposed few restrictions on participation on the basis of wealth (Adams *et al.,* 1892: 77–90). In his panegyric on the development of American towns Ralph Waldo Emerson (1835: 7) claims that by 1641 "every man—freeman or not, inhabitant or not—might introduce any business into public meeting." Yet, when a meeting is called it is the selectmen who

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11 Grinde notes that "in denying Iroquois influence upon the American government, academics […] do so despite documentary and oral traditions that clearly indicate a firm connection between Iroquois political theory and American instruments of government". Historians in particular assume that everything begins in Europe whereas a growing number of researchers now argue that "the colonists of English North America were influenced by the Native American ideal of confederation and democracy" and that "Indian democracies were democracies that Europeans admired greatly from the first contacts. Many Europeans theorists compared the Iroquois to the Romans, the Greeks, and the Celts in the areas of natural rights, statecraft, oratory, and public consensus" (Grinde, 1977).

attend (De Wolf, 1890: 11). However, as reported, for instance, in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts' *The Acts and Resolves, Public and Private, of the Province of the Massachusetts Bay* (1874: 30) "ten or more of the freeholders of any town" had the right to request selectmen to call for a town meeting on any issue. Finally, it should be born in mind that there were significant practical obstacles to attendance. Well into the second half of the eighteenth century the settlements were in a constant struggle to survive. Attendance at meetings was especially difficult for those who were worse-off, who, moreover, were not always informed of the calls for town meetings (see: Syrett, 1964: 355–59; Lord, 1919: 69). Measures were taken to counter low attendance by imposing a fine on those who did not attend meetings (see, for instance, Metcalf, 1880: 71).

Town meetings also had criteria to select those who could exercise various functions within the community. Anyone deemed capable could be nominated as an officer for some specific function such as fence viewer, field driver, measurer of wood and bark and so forth. On the other hand, officers were "chosen by ballot" for more important roles such as assessor, tax collector, health officer, overseer of the poor, road commissioner, treasurer, and of course moderators, clerks and selectmen (De Wolf, 1890: 68–70). Town meetings also retained the power to appoint special committees to consider particular matters (see, for instance, Copeland, 1892: 133, 136). A well-respected personage would generally be selected as moderator of the town meeting. "[The latter] is a political leader […]: as the officer of the Town Meeting he appoints a number of committees authorized by it" (Smith, 1955: 395). Finally, the board of selectmen normally consisted of notables. Although access to this body was granted to an ever larger part of the population over time, control over the board was usually maintained by the local elite. Once elected during town meetings (De Wolf, 1890: 30), the notables were generally confirmed each year (Smith, 1955). Depending on the local rules, selectmen could appoint over forty types of officer (from 'weighers of beef' and watchman to police officers) (De Wolf, 1890: 71). Even if it may have been more practical, the board of selectmen was a much more exclusive body than the town meeting.

Understanding the board of selectmen is important for understanding the serious nature of town meetings. These were steadily integrated into the local political and legislative landscape. What was discussed and voted on affected the community in ways that most modern-day deliberative assemblies would find hard to imagine. However, the allocation of prerogatives between town meetings and the board of selectmen varied greatly over time and across different communities. At one extreme we find boards of selectmen who wield decisional power over all the political business of the community and where town meetings are relegated to an annual event to provide matters of a more generic nature. At the opposite end are

very powerful town meetings where boards of selectmen dealt with very minor routine issues (see, for instance, Lockridge and Kreider, 1966).

As already suggested, in order to understand the cultural environment in which town meetings took place we need to analyze several key aspects that emerge as central in the historical analysis of settlers' communities. These include the relevance of unity and consensus, the role of religion in the political life of towns, the place of consensus and social unity, the question of the origins of the town meeting mechanism and the importance of social ranking. Virtually all town reports emphasize not only unity but also unanimity: "It is ordered that" (1641), "It has been decided that", "It is ordered by one consent" (1642). There are frequent instance of this sort in the records of the town of Braintree from the onset of its town meetings (Bates, 1886). The same observation can be made for the town of Dedham: "It was voted that", "It is further agreed that", as there are many such expressions used by the town clerk in 1672 (Hill, 1899). In Hanover: "voted and chose" (1761) (Foster, Bridgman and Fay, 1905). In Watertown: "Agreed by the consent of the Freemen" (1634) (Historical Society, 1894). In Cambridge: "It is agreed that" (1633), "It is ordered that" (1634) (City Clerk, 1901). In Dorchester: "This year it was ordered that" (1642), "This year they agreed upon" (1645) (Blake, 1846). In Braintree: "It was ordered by one consent" (1642), "It is agreed and ordered that" (1652), "at which meeting, the inhabitants that were their meet voted" (1656), "also voted and assented by the Towne then met together that" (1672) (Bates 1886). In exceptional circumstances the majority would decide rather than all the participants, but records of such occurrences are rare.[12] For instance in 1672 in Dedham it is recorded that:

> At a generall meeting of the inhabitace: after much debate it was propounded to the Towne whither thay would build or erect a new meetinge house". [The town clerk goes on to write that]: it was concluded by generall consent that the inhabitants should bringe thier voats: with whit corne for the affirmative and by red corne for the negitive: which shall desid the question the major part for the afirmaytive by thier voat. (Hill, 1899: 4)

In the very rare cases where unanimity was not reached—or was not confirmed—the names of those who disagreed were mentioned in town records. This is,

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12 Unfortunately, records of meetings are rarely detailed, especially in the early days of town meetings. Jane Mansbridge notes that "The information is not easily available […] for in the interest of the harmony and unanimity early town meetings rarely called for a 'division'. The votes were 'aye' and 'nay' and were recorded simply as 'the town decided'. Even when a division was called for, town clerks rarely recorded the exact vote" (Mansbridge, 1983: 130).

however, more a sign of the exceptional nature of discord rather than proof that the plurality of opinions was taken into account (see, for example, Bates, 1886).

Overall the general consensus reached with most decisions made and recorded in the town records suggests that we are dealing with unified social communities. At least this is what is shown publicly. In the words of Formisano (1983, 25), "Towns acted often as units—ideally, as unified political moral communities". Here it is important to stress that the community values of uniformity and consensus were most often articulated in times of tension and conflict, namely when an issue "threatened the internal cohesion of the community" (Henretta, 1971: 395). In a sense this is "Politics without parties" (Hall, 1972). Our view is that written accounts, such as those made by town clerks, are more than a deliberate decision to conceal internal divisions within the community identified with the town. Instead, they speak to an element of the political culture around town meetings which prioritizes unity and consensus. Town records of these meetings give an idea of homogeneous bodies, where a shared public interest is sought and obtained, and narrow individual interests are surmounted. In this sense, the New England town seems to have functioned as a single organic whole.

As Breen and Foster ask (1973: 8):

Why was conflict so restrained in the Bay Colony when serious political, economic, and religious issues were at stake and when all Europe's wisdom combined with Europe's experience would have indicated that such issues must eventually lead to some sort of explosion?

In other words, where does this "sense of an undivided town interest" (Zuckerman, 1978) come from? The influence of religious factors on New England political life is evidently essential. As suggested earlier in this Introduction, town meetings developed in a context of strong interconnections between the political and the religious (see Moreau, 2008). While "political scientists have not paid much attention to the American Puritans" (Miller, 1991: 57), several authors, most of them historians, have focused on the influence of religion in town politics, and town meetings in particular (Green, 1886: 16–8; Hudson, 1889: 84–5). In *De la Démocratie en Amérique* Tocqueville pointed out that Puritanism was not merely a religious doctrine but that it corresponded on several points with republican and democratic theories (Tocqueville, 1835–1840; Nelson, 2005: 183; Kessler, 1992). Indeed, they criticized the Anglican and Catholic churches for being too centralized. The New England Puritans eliminated bishops in order to place power in the hands of ordinary church members. This does not mean that they believed in freedom of speech and individual rights or interests, or that they valued democracy. But, "unlike modern liberals, the Puritans attributed to the public realm a sense of

purpose and mission that required the active support of its citizens" (Miller, 1999: 43). In the Puritan spirit, harmony is possible as long as the differences between the top and bottom of society are not too large.

Consensus governed Massachusetts communities and as Zuckerman (1978) points out, harmony was needed. Yet he stresses that "government by consent […] did not imply democracy" and that "neither conflict, dissent, nor any structured pluralism ever obtained legitimacy in the towns of the Bay before the Revolution" (Zuckerman, 1978: 40). In this perspective, the town meeting is an instrument of authority, giving institutional expression to the peace imperative. It is a place where consensus and social conformity are generated. Their prime purpose was not "the provision of a neutral battleground for the clash of contending parties or interest groups" but "aimed at unanimity. Its function was the agreement or, more often, the endorsement of agreements already arranged, and it existed for accommodation, not disputation" (Zuckerman, 1978: 46). This was possible because the towns were ethnically and culturally homogeneous. People shared not only common moral and economic ideas but also their practice.

In his study of Dedham, Lockridge writes:

> The plan of society Winthrop hoped to construct in Massachusetts was the plan of early Dedham writ large, a holy covenanted corporation mixing mutuality with hierarchy and Christian love with exclusiveness. […] But the origins of this Utopian Corporate Community lay not merely in English villages but in a major strain of peasant culture also found in medieval and modern villages of France and Spain, and in modern Indian and Javanese villages. (Lockridge, 1985: 18)

The settlers' utopia is then basically rural, enmeshed in their 'peasant' origins. For David Hall, the importance of British norms of rural life cannot be overstated:

> They had learned how to deflect orders that came from above in town and counties of their former homeland. […] Starting afresh, and with traditional hierarchies in disarray, the colonists put together a form of government designed to distribute land in ways that satisfied most people. There was a near-universal agreement that the surest means of meeting this goal was to refer decision-making to as many townspeople as possible, and, concurrently, to keep local officers on a short leash. (Hall, 2011: 56)

At the time land ownership was widespread (even if this did not mean equality of status). Settlers managed to form a group of owners, distributing the land between the heads of family. In this way, a society was built where independent households and ordinary farmers, wielded equal power in the town meeting.

What then is the place of social deference/ranking, aristocracy or oligarchy in this cultural system? There seems to be a marked divide among historians. Lockridge (1985) and Waters (1968), have emphasized the importance of deference and oligarchy in New England society during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Roger Thompson (2001: 37), recently reinforced the skeptical views of earlier scholarship stating that: "Analysts of town government in early Massachusetts have almost invariably argued that towns were run by their elites (…)", and notes that "old world oligarchic institutions were re-rooted in New-England soil" and that the same commentators considered town meetings as "mere rubber stamps" (Thompson, 2011: 37). Thompson goes on to illustrate how we cannot have a full understanding of New England politics by simply considering the regional power of a merchant aristocracy. Indeed, there is no solid evidence that the region was ruled by a merchant aristocracy.

If the issue of democracy was fundamental in the struggle for independence, it was not in the sense that democracy was unproblematic within the New England community. Rather, democratic ideas were employed as a tool against the wishes of Britain to regain control over the colony of Massachusetts (Thompson, 2011). Brown, writing about Samuel Adams—a leader of the Revolution and "the man of the Town Meetings" (Hosmer, 1884)—reports that "Adams was known for his anti-British views, not for being opposed to [the] upper classes in America" (Brown, 1955: 223). For him, indeed, "the trouble in Massachusetts had nothing to do with an internal revolution for more democracy" (Brown, 1955: 227).

The question of just how progressive the Revolution really was remains controversial, as can be shown, for instance, in the debate between Gordon Wood and Aziz Rana. The former, in *The Radicalism of American Revolution*, insists on the emancipating aspect of the Revolution as a radical shift towards the freedom and independence of all men—an attack on aristocratic privileges (Wood, 1992). For Rana, on the contrary, the British efforts to render the imperial power more culturally inclusive (proclamations, court rulings, laws limiting the ability of settlers to buy land from Natives and extending imperial protection to non-European, non-Protestant inhabitants of the new territories) jeopardized settlers supremacy and freedom within the territories. From this perspective, the Revolution—a "rebellion of settlers"—appears more as an attempt to preserve English domination over the New World: the vision of liberty defended by the

settlers was politically tied to the subjection of marginalized groups, in particular Negro slaves, Native Americans, women and non-Protestants (Rana, 2010).

On Deliberative Democracy in America: A Legacy of the Town Meetings

Much less controversial is the idea that the dynamic culminating in the separation of the Northern American Colonies from the British Empire, and to the birth of the United States of America, had its origins in local assemblies analogous to New England town meetings (Warner, 2013). John Adams, still an obscure young attorney chosen by the town of Braintree in 1765 to represent its grievances before its elected representative in the General Assembly, adapted the arguments he had made in the preceding two years according to the sentiments expressed by his fellow townspeople. Throughout the colonies, town or county gatherings generated hundreds of proclamations stating the colonists' many grievances. Between the outbreak of hostilities in Spring 1775 and 4 July 1776, such documents provided not only the templates for declaring independence but also, in Adams's *Thoughts on Government* (1776), the framework for the new state constitutions written during the early years of the War of Independence. Local gatherings of citizens, often rancorous, had already acquainted Americans with the difficult business of governance. By the time the United States Constitution was submitted to the people for ratification, they had been arguing about politics for decades and in some parts of the new nation for a century and a half. They disagreed with each other about a multitude of issues. In New Jersey, women could own property, and as a result they were entitled to vote. In an increasing number of Northern states, free blacks could do the same, and Northern states began to outlaw slavery. Throughout the South, however, commitment to slavery hardened in the crucible of the Constitutional Convention and the debate over ratification. By the end of the eighteenth century, resolving this fundamental conflict had been deferred, and in the coming decades an uneasy truce was struck on the principle of white male supremacy. The institutions that would enable self-rule in the new nation were sufficiently robust to survive the traumas of war against Britain and recurrent conflicts on the Western frontier. The underlying commitment to resolving disagreements through deliberation and compromise, that made the survival of American democracy possible, grew increasingly fragile under the persistent pressure of intensifying sectional divisions.[13]

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13 For a detailed discussion of the War of Independence, the formation of new governments of individual States and the drafting and ratification of the Constitution of the United States, see Kloppenberg's *Toward Democracy* (2016). In this book, the institution of the town meeting plays an important role in explaining how democracy emerged and the obstacles faced by all attempts at autonomous government.

When Tocqueville visited the United States in 1830–31, the nation was just beginning to take stock of the consequences of these divisions and the deferral of a decision on slavery. *Democracy in America* opens by drawing a sharp contrast between the North and South that Tocqueville traced to the colonies' origins, a contrast informed by conversations he had with former President John Quincy Adams. Because Virginia, founded by adventurers and settled by good-for-nothings, quickly became dependent on the forced labor of African slaves, all whites came to consider themselves superior to all blacks, and work itself was dishonored by its identification with slavery. New England, by contrast, attracted families of well-educated and devout Puritans inspired by austere religious principles. "Puritanism was not only a religious doctrine; it mixes in several places with the most absolute democratic and republican theories" (Tocqueville, 1835–1840, chap. 2). These settlers, Adams explained to Tocqueville, established towns with lively political institutions and a striking degree of economic equality:

> From the first, what was striking about their gathering on American soil was that here was a society with neither great lords nor commoners, indeed, one might almost say with neither rich nor poor, at least in relation to European nations. (Tocqueville, 1835–1840, chap. 2)

In this society, homogeneous in all its parts, emerged a democracy beyond anything imagined in the ancient world, with a set of institutions and dispositions that leapt full-grown and fully armed from the heart of the old feudal society. Such achievements, however, came at the price of enforced conformity, a paradox that Tocqueville traced to the unique confluence of the Puritans' religious zeal and their political independence (Tocqueville, 1835–1840, chap. 2).[14]

Tocqueville's description of early New England democracy, particularly his rapturous descriptions of citizens' participation in town meetings, jury service, and cooperation in civic projects of all kinds, reflected the accounts offered by some of the most prominent citizens he met while in Boston, including not only John Quincy Adams but also Josiah Quincy, then president of Harvard College, and Jared Sparks, a historian who later became president of Harvard. Administering government at the local level, Tocqueville contended, following his informants' lead, kept citizens involved in the public sphere. Their shared experience in town meetings and voluntary associations of all kinds, coupled with the widespread circulation of many small newspapers, moderated opinions and forestalled the emergence of potentially dangerous rivalries between parties or religious denominations.

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14 For a detailed account of Tocqueville's trust in his informants on New England, and his lecture on James Madison, Thomas Jefferson and others, see Kloppenberg (2006).

Despite its general tone of approbation, the first volume of *Democracy in America* concluded with some sober observations. Americans in the early nineteenth century could get along with each other because no deep divisions had yet emerged. Tocqueville worried, however, that the gulf separating North from South might eventually grow so wide that the ethic of reciprocity would vanish and the union would dissolve. The dangerous and deepening differences could be traced to slavery. Since racial distinctions would persist even if slavery ended, free blacks would never escape the stigma of their enslavement. This argument, which Tocqueville first encountered in Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia*, was confirmed in his travels. As proof he cited the hardening racism he encountered outside the South: "Nowhere is intolerance greater than where servitude was unknown." Neither intermarriage nor a return to Africa seemed plausible to Tocqueville; unlike Frederick Douglass, but like many whites of his day (and ours), he could not envision a multi-racial democracy. Nor did he see any viable intermediate condition for blacks between the slavery they hated and the equality that he believed whites would never concede. In Tocqueville's account of sectional tensions, the lifeblood of democracy, commitments to equality, autonomy, and mutuality nurtured in town meetings and other forms of representative democracy, seemed to be draining away. The poisonous hatred that was to ignite the Civil War, hatred still discernible today, appeared to be on the rise.

The second volume of *Democracy in America* took on an even darker tone. This was primarily a result of the time Tocqueville had spent in England where he witnessed rapid industrialization for the first time, and worried that its consequences threatened the preconditions necessary for democracy: social and economic equality, self-rule for all, and a commitment to something other than material self-interest. Whereas equal conditions and religious devotion had combined to nourish self-government in early New England and the 'middle colonies', Tocqueville now feared that a mad scramble for money would only intensify an already worrying form of majority tyranny and stifle all public spirit. Whereas Americans had learned from experience that attending to the common good was in the long-term interests of all, the emerging culture of materialism blurred this understanding and undermined the civic spirit that had inspired individuals to join together in shared undertakings and manifested itself in the give-and-take of local self-government. Americans had readily explained to Tocqueville that "self-interest properly understood" led them "to help one another out" and "sacrifice a portion of their time and wealth for the good of the state." That distinctive American quality, however, now seemed to him endangered either by the ancient vice of egoism or by its even more sinister modern variant, "individualism", a word Tocqueville coined to describe the deliberate isolation of the self from community. As government expanded to fill the vacuum formerly

occupied by widespread participation in civic life and in voluntary associations, and self-governing citizens lapsed into a torpor of petty pleasure-seeking, he feared that the result would be a triumph of vulgar money-making and the decline of democracy into despotism.

While Tocqueville resisted the temptation to predict the future based on the past, an outline of our own predicament emerges from *Democracy in America*. He saw participation giving way to consumerism, moderation to dogmatism, and persuasion to accusation and denunciation. In place of equality and fellow feeling, he saw the emergence of unprecedented inequality and growing mistrust of the undeserving 'others' among Americans—particularly those of different races, nations, or religions. Where once American political culture thrived on lively civic projects such as barn-raisings and in town meetings or other forms of local political activity, and engaged in conversation with people unlike themselves, today's Americans are now 'bowling alone' and screaming at each other in cyberspace.[15] Yet the people remain sovereign, at least in principle. As Rousseau might have put it, "If Americans are born free, why are they everywhere in chains?" If the nation remains a democracy, why can Americans not identify the sources of their problems—sources apparent to Tocqueville almost two centuries ago—and address them?

The Essays in this Volume

The six essays published here examine town meetings from a variety of different viewpoints. Five of these contributions focus on the traditional New England town meetings, which are still a source of inspiration for experimentation in democratic practice today. David Hall's essay tackles the fundamental issue of the role of religion in the origins and evolution of town meetings; a question often dealt with in the literature on such meetings. Michael Zuckerman's extensive analysis of the social and historical context of the development of town meetings highlights how it is practical necessities rather than democratic ideals that generate democratic processes. Robert Martin explores the relationships between town meetings and other forms of democratic participation, highlighting both the specific potential of the town meeting and its limitations in the democratization of the emerging North American political community. Daniel Mandell investigates town meetings from the perspective of indigenous populations and how they adapted to the form of

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15 In *Bowling Alone* (2000), Robert Putnam shows that in the United States the quantity and frequency of interpersonal relations have weakened considerably. The title of his book refers to one of the signs of this weakening of social ties; the practice of modern-day Americans to go out bowling alone on Saturday night, an activity that had always been a traditional practice of social interaction. For the decline of participation and collectivity in contemporary American life, see another classical work by Robert Bellah *et al.* (1985).

political participation implemented by settlers. He analyses the ambiguous role of town meetings in New England in the process leading to the subjection of Native American populations. Sandra Gustafson offers an in-depth analysis of the ideal of deliberation, stressing the role played by this ideal in the campaigns against racism and discrimination in the United States. Additionally, Caroline Lee's essay moves from the past to focus on the vicissitudes of "the 21st century town meeting", and the development and subsequent disappearance of one of the most innovative institutions of modern democratic deliberation, AmericaSpeaks. Alongside these essays, this special issue includes a collective interview conducted by Paula Cossart and Andrea Felicetti with a numerous scholars that is described in greater detail below. Finally, in addition to the originally published articles there are two response essays to the special issue from Matt Leighninger from Public Agenda and Timothy J. Shaffer from Kansas State University and the National Institute for Civil Discourse. These speak to the connection between town meetings and the broader field of scholars interested in dialogue and deliberation.

In particular, this strongly multidisciplinary volume consists of a collection of both depth and diversity in its analysis, and its essays will certainly resonate with a very broad sphere of academic readers. Yet there is a common thread that stimulates reflection on the historical value of the town meeting and on the vision of new possibilities, for present and future societies, generated by its deliberative mechanisms. The six essays point to the same idea: while the New England town meetings are integrated into their political context with the help of processes such as formalization and institutionalization, these same processes appear to stifle some genuinely democratic aspects of both the town meeting system and the individual meetings themselves. This is particularly significant when town meetings are considered in terms of their capacity to protect the interests of the weak and their ability to safeguard the fundamental role of dissensus in democratic communities. Any study of New England town meetings must thus be careful to examine the way in which such meetings are presented as an integral part of a broader project not only of governability but also of democratic change.

In the first essay presented in this issue, Caroline Lee makes a detailed observation of community forums in the twenty-first century and offers important elements of analysis of the town meeting model, its contemporary development, and the challenges it faces. This analytical perspective is significant in the recent landscape of deliberative democracy: experiments in participation inspired by town meetings in New England in the seventeenth century are still   important today. This hints at the relevance of town meetings, not only in historical records or as a democratic myth, but as concrete, actual and present-day events.

Lee's contribution sits alongside other studies in suggesting that there are means, which more or less, facilitate deliberation. For example, in her study of appreciative inquiry Lee points to a method of driving positive change within organizations which first emerged developed in the late 1980s in the United States and which has become widespread since the 1990s until the present (Curato *et al.*, 2013). Lee also suggests that public deliberation offers a solution—one of many—to improve the quality of political processes. When deliberative democratic logic enters the field of politics (Parkinson, 2003), the dynamics at play are complex (Hendricks, 2006) and the ability to discriminate between positive and negative experiments, and consequently to highlight theory and actual practice, is crucial. Without condemning either experts in deliberation, or the booming industry of facilitation, or even the notion of deliberative democracy itself, Lee stresses the need to take a closer look at the economic and political context in which these deliberations take place. Her organizational approach allows her to identify the commodification of the political as one of the main barriers, in a barely detectable yet efficient way, transform deliberation, which gradually sheds its democratic aspect. Reducing involvement in innovative deliberation to the delivery of a desirable market product (a stimulating and captivating political experience) may allow the actual forces in power to conceal its wrongdoings and to promote agendas and dynamics which are not in the least democratic.

When describing the last days of the pioneering organization AmericaSpeaks, Lee reveals the difficult situation of democratic innovation inspired by great ideals, as well as the daunting task of putting these ideals into practice within contexts where political power resists the democratization of political life. This tension suggests that the future of the town meeting may not depend solely on the, albeit important, continuing qualitative improvement of deliberative assemblies, but also on the linkage between meetings as an instrument and the shared vision of those who are, in good faith, carrying on the struggle for a more democratic society. Time and time again democratic theory has shown that the fate of deliberative democracy cannot be bound by the limits of deliberative or participatory devices. Town meetings, like other forms of democratic experience, must find their natural place within the broader context of the overall struggle for democracy.

Michael Zuckerman's essay presents a large-scale analysis of the context of New England town meetings. The author starts by suggesting that historical town meetings cannot simply be equated with deliberative or participatory democracy. On the contrary, he asks to what extent asking whether meetings were democratic or not would be missing the point. Indeed, among the factors leading to the creation of these assemblies, it is hard to find a democratic intent. According to Zuckerman what town meetings produced as democracy in effect happened by sheer accident, giving us "a democracy without democrats."

Zuckerman starts from the idea that, rather than democratic ideas, the values sought and promoted by North American settlers were harmony and homogeneity. In towns without a significant coercive power and with a strong need for unity and solidarity, an emphasis on these two values came easily. Deviancy, dissensus and diversity, when they existed, were discouraged and rejected. Yet, no town member was to be neglected since the discontent of individual elements could have negative consequences for the entire group. In this context, the attempt to involve a large part of the population in the decision-making process may well have been predominantly, if not exclusively, a means to an end. Far from realizing democratic ideals, the broadening of the right to participate was based on the mere fact that without the involvement of all the actors involved the town would have been ungovernable. Zuckerman notes that there were frequent exceptions to the rules limiting the number of those qualified to vote, and that these exceptions were designed to allow the involvement required to resolve disputes within the settlement. The author rejects the idea held by generations of commentators from Tocqueville onward that the New England town meeting is, as a "school of democracy", arguing that the assemblies were the instruments for the production and promotion of the community's ideas and decisions. The great majority of those excluded from deliberations were those whose involvement was not practically required for decision-making and government processes: namely, youth, women and the poor, all of whom were dependent on someone who could make decisions for them. For this mechanism to operate, the principle of exclusion had to take precedence over that of practical diversity. Religious, racial and ethnic differences were efficiently kept outside meetings by excluding potential newcomers not perceived positively by the community. Another dynamic at play was the rarity of majority votes, always taken reluctantly: following this basic rule of democracy would have meant risking division, thus threatening the stability of the community. Zuckerman's essay ends with a critical consideration on the town meeting, which stops short of its democratic potential—not only because of the limited applicability of this assembly format in today's context, but also because of the way this device is often instrumentalized.

David Hall's essay is a stimulating analysis of the origins of New England town meetings. Hall tackles the complex and often debated question of the role of religion in the evolution of town meetings. His essay considers the origins of Puritanism, Henry VIII's reform and its unintended consequences: namely, a social and religious landscape characterized by marked divisions on a range of issues, including relations between church and state, and in particular the acceptable forms of subjection to the hierarchies of both. Hall describes how the idea and practice of consensus among the faithful were opposed to the notion of authority imposed from above. For the most radical, separatist groups in particular, the idea led to the

formation of an increasing number of communities, operating in relative isolation from the rest of society, and with tense relations with the British monarchy. These alternative forms of religious community, Hall contends, are at the foundation of the characteristically Puritan anti-authoritarianism later found in New England settlements. Alongside the hostility to the social and political subjugation of communities to monarchic and aristocratic powers, Hall highlights other key aspects of Puritanism, in particular a program of civic devotion inviting Puritans to involve themselves in improving the circumstances of the less fortunate in their communities. These activities constitute an essential aspect of the process which defines the profoundly social nature of devotion for Puritans. These dynamics helped participation become an integral part of the religious and civic life of the settlements on the new continent. It is the ordinances, shaping the political order of the towns, which give a vital role to public debate as a way of governing public life.

After illustrating the various mechanisms through which events and religious ideas contributed to creating the local political life by pushing it in a direction clearly similar to the precepts of deliberative democracy theory, Hall offers a critical analysis which warns the reader against reaching hasty conclusions. According to the author, the phenomenon we observe today as the historical New England town meeting should not be equated with what we now refer to as contemporary deliberative democracy. The towns of New England were more concerned with religious precepts than with democratic ideals. With them, the settlers brought to the new continent norms condemning instability and the risk of rebellion and encouraging obedience. As these norms hinder the opportunities for participation, they are incongruous with the (future) requirements of democracy. Like Zuckerman, Hall links the development of town meetings to a need to manage day-to-day issues, in particular the administration of land since this relates directly to the inclusion of settler families in the decision-making process. This dynamic plays a crucial part in the life of communities and local government through town meetings. Hall's study concludes with the constructive idea that town meetings, whilst a means to ensure the survival of small communities of settlers, are in practice often far from democratic ideals they claim to advocate. They are nonetheless deeply rooted in a radical opposition to authoritarianism and constitute a vigorous challenge to the established order. Although the government of settlers' communities through town meetings may fall short of being a model of exemplary democracy, we can nevertheless discern a democratic and egalitarian spirit at the basis of this political innovation.

In Daniel Mandell's essay, the focus is on the relations between settlers and Native Americans, in the context of town meetings as a form of government. In a field usually dominated by the Anglo-American perspective, the inclusion of the indigenous populations and the specific influence of town meetings on their

communities, provides a broader and more insightful context. The study focuses on the case of the Stockbridge settlement between 1730 and 1775, where Mahican communities lived in close contact with English settlers.

Mandell shows how the Native population, to a large extent, adapted to town meetings. He contends that this integration resulted from the ability and willingness of the Mahicans to participate in political life, on the one hand, and from the very flexibility of town meetings where deliberative practices allowed for their participation, on the other. For instance, the use of both English and Mahican as languages for deliberation and communication, the choice of consensus rather than secret ballot for decision-making, the inclusion of Natives in key administrative roles, and so forth. Yet these practices failed to guarantee the long-term pacific coexistence of the two communities, or to protect the town from subsequent dishonesty by settlers. What made town meetings a success in Stockbridge was what lay at the root of its failure: while the Mahicans had to adapt to town meetings so that they could participate with settlers in administering the town, the settlers refused to adapt to local customs, and time and again resorted to theft and fraud in order to appropriate resources from the Native community. In addition, the original flexibility of the town meeting disappeared as settlers strove to gain control of decision-making and started to use deliberation in the assembly where they could reaffirm their domination over the Natives. This process, Mandell shows, was met with resistance from the Native Americans and even from some settlers.

While it would be exaggerated to attribute the full weight of the defeat of the Mahicans on town meetings, the deliberative assemblies failed to transcend the practical divide between settlers and Natives and were to become the instruments in the subjugation of the latter. Like Hall, Mandell insists on the importance of land ownership as it became, more so even than religion, education or social customs, the central issue where the domination of the settlers was ratified. This process would certainly not be judged favorably by modern democratic sensibilities. Mandell's essay provides us with extremely valuable insight into the ability of the town meeting to help affirm the interest of an entire community. Without special attention given to the protection of most vulnerable community members, the meetings may not only be unable to oppose the conditions of the domination of one party over another but may also become instrumental in the process of domination itself.

Sandra Gustafson's contribution gives us another take on town meetings and minorities, as the author explores the link between the ideal of the town meeting and the solution of racial issues in the United States. Using this original perspective, Gustafson observes the profound effects of town meetings on political and social thought and on the American imagination, together with its significant practical

consequences. She takes us on a long and detailed journey into the history of Republican values and reformative ideas and shows us how the myth of the town meeting became a source of inspiration first, and subsequently a source of critical reflection on the struggle against slavery and discrimination, and the affirmation of equal civil rights. The reader is given an extensive overview of several great American narratives upon which the idea—or ideal—of government through town meetings has exerted an undeniable influence: John Dewey, Albion Tourgée, William Gordon, Daniel Webster, and Alexis de Tocqueville. What emerges, the author recounts, is a clear vision where the horizon of the town meeting is also that of an emancipated society.

The racial issue is considered in this context. The case of David Walker, one of the earliest Afro-American abolitionist writers, and Mary Stewart, the first woman to publicly discuss abolitionism and women's rights, is analyzed with special care. The essay shows that it is precisely in the context of antiracist activism that the ideal of the town meeting is subjected to its most critical revision. In particular, what emerges is a need to connect the ideals of the town meeting with a broader drive for democratization and educational involvement within American society. One especially interesting example of the realization of such ideas is the Chautauqua educational meetings. Gustafson concludes on an additional track of action, inspired by the town meeting debates, and illustrated by communication initiatives designed to counter discrimination through dialogue and verbal engagement involving dedicated media events. The legacy of the town meetings appears in many forms, depending on different historical circumstances and political challenges.

Lastly, in his examination of town meetings in their historical context, Robert W. T. Martin asks what price community assemblies paid to become a model of political life. Martin shows that the town meeting established its position as a form of government to the considerable detriment of other, less formal modes of participation which were no less precious in democratic life. The author suggests that the position taken by town meetings can be explained not only by the inherent virtues of the assembly, but also by its limitations in terms of democratic mechanics, in particular its lack of ability to challenge the *status quo* or to promote dissensus, as highlighted by Zuckerman, and stressed by Lee for contemporary experiences. This last aspect greatly benefits from a robust and critical reflection made by Martin: he observes that no institution or group of institutions—and what is valid here for town meetings can be expanded to apply to other democratic institutions—should in itself be able to express democracy fully since a vital element of the latter is the practice of political life in the public sphere (Fraser, 1990). When the town meeting is seen as an organized, reflective alternative to activism in civil society, the horizon of a deliberative and democratic society becomes elusive; instead, it

should be considered ancillary to other, more or less deliberative moments of the democratic experience. This appears to be in full agreement with recent expressions of the theory of deliberative democracy, as it is present within the systemic approach to deliberative democracy (Mansbridge and Parkinson, 2012) referred to in Martin's essay.

Three case studies illustrate Martin's thesis. The first follows events treated by history as rebellions: Shay's Rebellion,[16] the Whiskey Rebellion,[17] and Fries's Revolt.[18] These were all firmly repressed by the elites they sought to target, and were systematically stigmatized as violent, unruly mob revolts. And yet, Martin argues, these rebellions were not only based on tax and economic recrimination, but also demanded access to democratic space made scarce by the authorities. More specifically, state and county conventions, as well as militias, contested the idea that only certain forms of institutional participation in politics—such as town meetings—with their limited tolerance for dissent, could be considered legitimate. In contrast to the agenda of the elite, described as meeting the needs of the few to the detriment of the many, the 'rebels' had their own more inclusive vision which recognized the importance of more informal and direct modes of participation. These alternative channels may facilitate the expression of the less privileged, and better protect their interests.

Martin's second case study focuses on the democratic societies that emerged in the early 1790s in contrast to the centralist and elitist tendencies of federal government. For the author, these communities exhibit features that are characteristic of counterpublics, where rare phenomena can occur in meetings: critical and popular visions can intermingle and be structured, and then spread into the public sphere. Democratic societies came under harsh criticism from the more elitist federalists which opposed town meetings, seen as supporting elitist institutions and more interested in protecting the vested interests of the dominant actors than in including the people in politics. Martin observes that, while democratic societies were soon deprived of their legitimacy and become irrelevant, they had nevertheless created a significant precedent of popular participation in the political debate in the American landscape.

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16 In Western Massachusetts, the armed uprising of farmers protesting against indebtedness and rising taxes, lasted from August 1786 until January 1787.
17 The rebellion came to a climax in 1794 and is named after the budget deficit caused by the American Revolutionary War, leading the Secretary of the Treasury to seek new revenue by convincing Congress to raise taxes on spirits.
18 In 1799, several hundred armed men, led by John Fries, encouraged Pennsylvanians to reject a new tax (on land and houses), and threatened the state's assessors.

Lastly, Martin addresses the Madisonian approach of direct and extra-institutional popular participation to politics. The essay analyses how Madison's stance on informal participation shifts from clear support to strong criticism. The shift is illustrated in relation to Madison's famous text on religious intolerance, *Memorial and Remonstrance Against Religious Assessments*. Martin shows that Madison's support of informal popular participation is visible when he advocates religious freedom and he goes so far as to suggest a potentially justifiable form of civil disobedience. Martin also defends the extra-institutional participation in Madison's position on laws on foreigners and sedition.[19]

Madison is very eloquent in advocating this stance and almost appears as a precursor of deliberative democracy when he glorifies the importance of collective reflection when working to identify the best democratic solutions to adopt. However, Martin identifies a turning point in popular participation, in Madison's stance on the 'Resolutions' on sharing power between the federal government and the states. Here, Madison reveals a preference for institutional means of democratization, rather than direct participation. For Martin, this approach can be linked to a general trend towards more formal political life, expressed in the reliance on town meetings.

This special issue includes a collective interview conducted by Paula Cossart and Andrea Felicetti with a number of scholars: Jane Mansbridge and Frank M. Bryan, whose key works on town meetings are mentioned above; Graham Smith, whose research focuses on democratic innovations, institutional design and more broadly the theory of democracy; William Keith, professor of communication who has published on rhetoric, argumentation, and the history of deliberative democracy; Michael Morrel, whose work uses a political science approach to examine the links between empathy and democracy, as well as the effect of direct participation on citizens, and who is currently researching town meeting government in Connecticut; and James Kloppenberg, a specialist of intellectual history and co-author of this introduction, and who has published on American political thought from the seventeenth century to the present day, on American pragmatist philosophy, and on European observers of the United States, such as Tocqueville. After agreeing on the interview process, a set of identical questions was sent to all participants, before they had the opportunity to read the essays that make up this volume. Once the answers were submitted, a collective text was drafted and sent to all interviewees for additional comments and changes. This process produced a

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19 The Alien Act and the Sedition Act were presented to Congress in 1798 by federalists and ratified by John Adams. Drafted during the naval war against France, the acts were supposed to protect the United States against [the actions of] foreign citizens from enemy countries, and to put an end to seditious attacks aiming to weaken the government.

confrontation of sometimes divergent, but often complementary viewpoints, a collective essay where the research and insight of all authors intersect.

There is a clear need for a more efficient participation in democracy. It may be misleading to think that deliberative and participatory reforms of government can in themselves resolve the demands for substantial democratization. Yet, we can in all fairness say that over the years much hope has been pinned on the development of these forms of involvement as a mode of democratic reinforcement, and that significant efforts have been made to promote them. In such a context, the critical study of how one of the oldest and most inspiring forms of democratic participation has evolved is a fascinating endeavor in itself. But it is also a unique opportunity to better understand how and to what extent these institutional practices, inspired by ideals of deliberation and participation, can support—or impede—the (re)democratization of societies today.

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