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Beyond the Myth of the Town Meeting: Discursive Engagement as Governance

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Abstract

This essay offers a response to the special issue essays. It emphasizes that town meetings are a site for governance and have implications for contemporary deliberative practices.

Introduction

As the associate editor of the *Journal of Public Deliberation* charged with the publication of this tremendous special issue on town meetings, I cannot help but feel a sense of responsibility to ensure this collection of essays and critical interview (Article 8) help us understand town meetings better and how they inform the thinking of scholars and practitioners concerned with questions beyond the scope of what is found here within. Along with Matt Leighninger who argues that we can improve upon the idea of town meetings today, this essay offers some lessons about what we can learn about the town meeting beyond its mythical status within the field of public engagement, dialogue, and deliberation.

As Paula Cossart, Andrea Felicetti, and James Kloppenberg noted in their introduction, this special issue presents a translated and revised version of research originally published in French in the journal *Participations* (Cossart and Felicetti, 2016). As they note, "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." The fact that the essays were written for a European audience and in French highlights something significant—for many beyond of the United States, the New England Town Meeting is a foreign way of governing and engaging citizens in the process. And, maybe even more significant for this special issue, we must remind ourselves that for all of the cursory references to New England Town Meetings within the dialogue and deliberation field, many do not know much about them.

I consider myself someone who belongs to a relatively small scholarly community who concerns oneself with historical examples of citizen-centered politics that were animated by public dialogue and deliberation (Shaffer, 2013, 2014, 2016, 2017a, 2017b, 2017c, 2018a, 2018b, 2019a, 2019b). I became fascinated by experiments within the Unites States during the 1930s and 1940s through the U.S. Department of Agriculture, land-grant universities, and specifically the Cooperative Extension System. Exploring that period led me to scholarship from many scholars included within this special issue, namely William Keith's (2007) work on the forum movement mostly in urban settings that took place simultaneously to the rural discussion groups I have studied. Keith and I both point to what he refers to in his book as "Forum Antecedents" including the town meeting, lyceums, and Chautauqua (Keith, 2007; Shaffer, 2016). Significantly, in his acknowledgment of these forerunners, Keith cautions against a "straight-line history of evolution from

the town meeting to the forum."[1] For those within the dialogue and deliberation field, it is important to understand these historical episodes, but one must be cautioned not to flatten otherwise nuanced and dynamic variations that distinguish colonial life from today. We are rightfully cautioned to link anything that looks like a public forum today to the historical town meeting. Yet, as these articles suggest, there were diverse public fora taking place: "the occasional informal town meeting was a less significant forum for citizen political activity than the more traditional county convention and, especially, the militia" in places such as western Pennsylvania, as Martin (Article 7) notes.

Three Lessons for All of Us

So, what do we learn from this collection of essays specifically looking at the New England town meeting? I would argue a great deal. First, as Hall (Article 4) reminds us, the "local communities began to create rules and practices relating to self-governance, doing so within frameworks laid out by the Company-turned-colonial government or, occasionally, in opposition to what that government wanted." The somewhat unexpected departure from Boston, the envisioned central "town," was a significant moment in the development what Hall describes as the "making of…local versions of civil society." It is this sense of self-reliance and determination that makes the study of this early American period so fascinating to us today. Further, Hall notes that while the "word 'equal' appears in town documents, the colonists brought a strong sense of hierarchy to church, town, and colony governments, to which they added a considerable anxiety about instability and rebellion of the kinds that punctuated the history of early modern Europe." If the town serves as an example of civil society, it is a civil society with considerable restrictions as it comes to the maintaining of ethical-religious norms and the expectation that you would be a "visible saint" to your fellow community members.

Second, Sandra M. Gustafson (Article 6) reminds us that the town meeting is primarily associated with small, homogeneous communities, not large, diverse polities like the United States. The issue of race, for example, played out in the efforts of David Walker and Maria Stewart, two noteworthy activists, who highlighted the way that racist attitudes foreclosed the interracial deliberations that would have better fulfilled major republican objectives, including self-government and resistance to oppression. As Gustafson notes, "Their works examine a national crisis in deliberation produced by the increasingly pointed exclusion of people of color from mainstream civic life in the United States, particularly after the presidential election of 1828 when Andrew Jackson, a prominent slave owner and

[1] See Keith (2007, p. 219) and Mathews (1999, pp. 51-64).

leading proponent of Indian removal, won the executive office." The efforts by activists for greater representation and participation highlighted the "absence of black legislators, lawyers, and jurors in the United States," an essential issue to address in the creation of a multiracial republic. But as Gustafson states, "Ultimately, of course, these and other efforts to use deliberative reform to reshape American society failed. War and not deliberation ended slavery in the United States. Even so, while the American Civil War demonstrated the limits of the nation's deliberative institutions and practices, it did not kill those ideals altogether." These themes were picked up in the Chautauqua movement, and even later through the use of radio with "America's Town Meeting of the Air," a technology that allows the ideals of town meetings to play out across vast landscapes (Shaffer, 2019a). Yet, the reader is encouraged to think about the relationship and tension between deliberation and action, especially as it relates to diverse populations.

As Gustafson writes at the end of her article, "Traditional town meetings are places where civic learning occurs in tandem with consequential decision making. The town meeting is not mainly an arena for airing opinions and expressing grievances; it is a place for enacting measures that affect the life of the community. Some of the benefits of the town meeting system can be captured in alternative arenas – school programs, activist organizations, and so forth -- where skills essential to a robustly democratic polity can be developed."

And third, it is critical to remember that town meetings had a purpose. In their collective interview (Article 8), Frank Bryan reminds us that, "Actually the New England town meeting was not created to 'enhance citizen participation and deliberation.' It was created to govern." This explicit reminder is helpful as we think about the implications for town meetings. In a 1935 articled entitled "Back to 'Town Meetings'" in the *New York Times*, John Studebaker's efforts were being framed in a way similar to how many today employ this language within a number of public discussion, education, and governance settings and models (Hill, 1935). As Lee (Article 2) notes in her sociological study of AmericaSpeaks and its 21st Century Town Meeting, there are dimensions of the town meeting that can be altered and updated for our contemporary world. But as Zuckerman (Article 3) points out, what often passes as a town hall is anything but an opportunity for democracy in citizen-centered and community-oriented practice.

Related, as we learn so much from historical examples of town meetings in New England, it is important to note how Jane Mansbridge identifies a difference between deliberative democracy (binding decision making) and democratic deliberation (non-binding but adhering to democratic norms). The growth of

opportunities of deliberation do not necessarily mean that there are more binding political decisions made outside of tradition processes. It often, however, reinforces the ability for people to think about democratic politics as deliberative rather than in adversarial and communitarian forms. As Barker notes, "Between the extremes of adversarial and unitary democracy, deliberative democracy offer a different kind of politics and a corrective to the dysfunctions of division and polarization" (2019, p. 60). Yet, this counter to divisive politics does not mean that it involves governance decisions—a key point when thinking about deliberative democracy rather than democratic deliberation.

Looking Back to Go Forward

Looking for the town meeting today might, in fact, lead us to look at other forms of democratic innovation such as mini-publics (Farrell et al., 2019; Grönlund, Bächtiger, & Setälä, 2014) and the alignment of legislative bodies with sortition—the random selection of lay citizens (Gastil & Wright, 2019)—in order to see how understanding the promise and limitations of town meetings might help us think about democratic experiments today. James Kloppenberg (Article 8), offers us a very succinct way to think about New England town meetings today: "I think Jane Mansbridge and Frank Bryan have identified the problem: the New England town meeting was created to govern small communities of like-minded people, and as power was exercised, some people won and others lost. Our standard for what counts as democratic now is much higher, as it should be, because democracy is an ethical ideal as much as it is a set of institutions." As a field comprised of both as scholars and practitioners, we largely exist beyond the context or confines of the town meeting and its expectations for binding decision making about governance questions. If we disconnect deliberation from governance, then we lose much of what makes the town meeting such a unique form of shared common life. We do well to make sure we do not simply see the town meeting as an opportunity for people to talk—they also made informed governance decisions impacting their collective lives.

"Town meetings have been used as the legislative bodies of communities in New England since their founding in the 1600s and 1700s," writes Townsend (2009, p. 70), but few scholars study town meetings as a form of governance. This volume allows today's scholars and practitioners to reacquaint or, more accurately in many situations, be introduced to town meetings with the appropriate associated complexity. And, similar to Bajan's (2017) exploration of civility and toleration in the colonial period, this special issue allows an insightful and critical look at a familiar yet often vague foundation for today's democratic innovations in governance and beyond.

In conclusion, it is worthwhile noting that there are exciting projects taking place with respect to town meetings today. For example, Anna Przybylska (University of Warsaw) and Rebecca Townsend (University of Hartford) are leading a multi-institutional research project in collaboration with the Town of Longmeadow, Massachusetts, where Townsend is the elected Moderator. Internet communication technology developed by the University of Warsaw called InDialogue will be used with the Longmeadow community in order to understand if such technology can improve how town managers and citizens are educated on new democratic procedures (Przybylska et al., 2019). This innovation is one that contributes to the global development of democratic models that disrupt both thinking and practice about what role citizens have within governance structures. As we have learned from this rich special issue on the town meeting from New England, we would do well to remember that this particular form of governing with significant citizen participation has a complex and important history. Town meetings tap into what de Tocqueville referred to as "schools of democracy," opportunities for people to participate in and enact democracy. It is helpful to better understand the ways in which town meetings functioned rather than to glorify or dismiss this important chapter in democratic innovation, especially if we seek to improve the ways that citizens and elected officials engage today.

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