

COMMENTARY

Afterword: Does Deliberative Democracy Have a Role in Our Time of Political Crisis?

Archon Fung

Since the first generation of deliberative democratic theory, and the ‘deliberative turn’ in the 1990s, many societies around the world have become more institutionally fragile, multi-dimensionally unjust, and deeply divided. Does deliberative democracy have a constructive role to play in these more challenging times in politics? As scholars of deliberation widen their ambit to explore broader forms of political communication, interactions between directly deliberative and non-deliberative institutions, and the roles for forms of highly adversarial political action, developments in deliberative democratic theory can help to guide efforts to strengthen our institutions in the short term and create political arrangements that are more just and democratic in the longer term.

Keywords: Deliberation; democracy; protest; direct democracy; BREXIT; populism; polarization; racism; justice

The first generation of deliberative democracy scholarship (e.g., Cohen 1997; Gutmann and Thompson 1996) emerged in a political moment of seemingly stability, perhaps even inevitably (Fukuyama 1989), for liberal democratic institutions. At least implicitly, many scholars of deliberative democracy took for granted the 1980s and 1990s ‘normal’ of rule of law and representative governments characterized by alternation between center left and center right ruling parties that prevailed in much of the West. Against this stable socio-institutional backdrop, deliberative democrats provoked us to increase our normative ambitions: to seek a deeper democracy that is more responsive to public reason, inclusive of diverse perspectives, in which citizens are more oriented toward a common good.

Events such as Brexit and the rise of the so-called ‘populist right’ in many countries around the world (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Runciman 2018) showed that taken-for-granted liberal democratic institutions were more fragile than we have supposed. These and other developments widened the aperture of politics and political debate on the right and the left. This widening, in turn, has been accompanied by even greater political polarization and broader recognition of the depth of many kinds of exclusionary injustice: increasing economic inequality (reaching hyperbolic levels in the United States), structural racism, and the beneficiaries of globalization versus those left behind (David Goodhart’s (2017) distinction between the ‘somewheres’ and the ‘anywheres’).

What is the role for the theory, social science, and practice of deliberative democracy in this time of institutional fragility, deep polarization, and multi-dimensional exclusionary injustice? Institutional conservatives would urge us to abandon the idealistic quest for deliberative democracy in favor of defending liberal democratic institutions now under assault. In the face of these political crises, shouldn’t we all focus on defending the fundamentals of electoral integrity, constitutionalism, the rule of law, and re-concentrating the gravity of politics around the center-left and center-right? A deliberative democrat might respond that the increased appeals of exclusionary populism didn’t come out of nowhere. Perhaps the very unresponsiveness of liberal democratic center-left/center-right politics—those past practices that institutional conservatives seek to defend—to concerns about economic inequality, globalization, and racial and ethnic exclusion are in part responsible for today’s fragility and conflict (Gilens 2012).

For some social justice advocates, this moment calls for increasing conflict rather than focusing on public reasons and the common good. The point is to vanquish racists, capitalists, globalists, and sexists, not to reason with them. And there is no better time to wage that struggle than this moment of heightened polarization. But after all of those who benefit from institutional racism, capitalism, sexism, and globalism have been cancelled from the polity, there might not be all that much polity left. Many deliberative democrats do not deny the need for conflict and adversarial politics (Fung 2005), but think that a central purpose of that conflict is to establish the political conditions for fair and inclusive deliberative democracy. Such deliberative democrats would ask the social justice advocates, ‘what do

you want politics to look like after the fight, whether you win, lose, or draw?’

Thus, there is much potential for deliberative democracy ideas to contribute to the quality of democratic institutions and practices in these times of institutional fragility, deep polarization, and multi-dimensional injustice. Realizing that potential will require a new generation of deliberative democracy scholarship marked by an expansive creativity that matches the challenges of our time. The essays in this inaugural issue of the *Journal of Deliberative Democracy* exhibit just that kind of creativity, by enlarging the scope of deliberative studies to incorporate wider conceptions of how different kinds of communicators and communication (Beauvais, Casullo) work with reasoning deliberation; insisting upon greater precision in specifying how non-deliberative practices such as violent protest (Smith) and institutions such as direct democracy (El-Wakil) can strengthen deliberation; the complex connections between media and information on one hand and deliberation on the other (Tavernaro-Haidarian; Himmelroos and Rapeli); and the necessarily perpetual, and hopefully progressive, development of more effective designs for participatory deliberation (Steel et al.). This *Journal* thus looks beyond the great democratic anxieties of the moment to lay the intellectual foundations for more successful deliberative participation and governance in the longer arc of our politics.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

References

- Cohen, J.** (1997). Deliberation and democratic legitimacy. In J. Bohman & W. Rehg (Eds.), *Deliberative democracy: Essays on reason and politics* (pp. 67–92). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Fukuyama, F.** (1989). The end of history? *National Interest*, 16(Summer), 3–18.
- Fung, A.** (2005). Deliberation before the revolution: Toward an ethics of deliberative democracy in an unjust world. *Political Theory*, 33(3), 397–419. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0090591704271990>
- Gilens, M.** (2012). *Affluence and influence: Economic inequality and political power in America*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt7s1jn>
- Goodhart, D.** (2017). *The road to somewhere: The populist revolt and the future of politics*. London: Hurst.
- Gutmann, A., & Thompson, D. F.** (1996). *Democracy and disagreement*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press.
- Levitsky, S., & Ziblatt, D.** (2018). *How democracies die: What history reveals about our future*. New York: Crown.
- Runciman, D.** (2018). *How democracy ends*. New York: Basic Books.

How to cite this article: Fung, A. (2020). Afterword: Does Deliberative Democracy Have a Role in Our Time of Political Crisis? *Journal of Deliberative Democracy*, 16(1), pp.75–76. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16997/jdd.407>

Submitted: 03 August 2020

Accepted: 05 August 2020

Published: 26 August 2020

Copyright: © 2020 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.



Journal of Deliberative Democracy is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by University of Westminster Press.

OPEN ACCESS