Democratizing Deliberation

A Political Theory Anthology

Derek W. M. Barker, Nöelle McAfee, and David W. McIvor, Editors

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## PUBLIC REASON AND BEYOND: BROADENING CONCEPTS OF DELIBERATION

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We are grateful to the authors for their generous contributions to this volume. Not only did they allow us to use their work, they were also collegial and efficient in working with us throughout the editorial and permissions processes. David Mathews originally suggested this project, and, as is evident in his foreword, provoked our conceptual thinking about common criticisms and misunderstandings of deliberation. Special thanks are due to the Deliberative Theory Working Group, including Harry Boyte, Mark Button, Albert Dzur, Carmen Greab, Roudy Hildreth, Ekaterina Lukianova, Michael Neblo, Melvin Rogers, and Se-Hyoung Yi; and Kettering Foundation colleagues, including John Dedrick, Alice Diebel, and Debi Witte, who participated as ad hoc members. The group met on several occasions to provide feedback on our selections for the manuscript and review our introductory essay. David Alexander granted us permission, on behalf of the late Iris Marion Young, to include her work. Finally, we thank Kettering Foundation staff Val Breidenbach and Sarah Dahm for administrative support.
Democracy has many meanings, and debating its meaning is one of the characteristics of a democracy. It should not be surprising, then, that there are also different interpretations of public deliberation and its role in democracy. At the Kettering Foundation, we have never felt that there is one true definition of either term—only that we need to be as clear as possible about what we mean when we use these words. That necessity led us to look at how political theorists have defined deliberation, because we draw on that rich body of work. In this foreword, I will describe how Kettering has come to see deliberation as a key democratic practice and an entry point into democratic politics writ large.

The story of Kettering’s use of deliberation begins with a distinction that former Kettering board member Daniel Yankelovich made in his analysis of public opinion. He found a qualitative difference between the initial, ever-shifting reactions people have to politicians and policies and the more stable, reflective judgments people often make when it comes time to vote or pass a law. This distinction led Kettering to collaborate with Public Agenda, a nonprofit organization founded by Yankelovich and Cyrus Vance, in preparing briefing books for citizens on major policy issues facing the country (Social Security financing, for example). The purpose of these books was, and continues to be, to help people move from first and often hasty reactions to more thoughtful, shared judgments.

The books, now called National Issues Forums (NIF) issue books, have been used since 1981 by civic, religious, and educational institutions—and even some prisons—in all 50 states. There are variations of these books being used from the Middle East and Africa to Latin America and the Pacific
Basin. Participants in deliberative forums based on these books often notice something different about these conversations. But initially, we didn’t have a word to describe what was happening; we only knew that forums are neither discussions nor debates.

The search for a term to describe what was going on eventually led us to settle on deliberation or, more precisely, public deliberation. The word appealed to us because it has a history. In Latin, libera refers to a pound (libra) or the act of balancing or weighing, as on a scale (libro). These roots call to mind thoughtfully considering a matter, in consultation with others, in order to make a balanced decision. Carefully weighing in the process of determining the worth of something also suggests the exercise of our faculty for judgment. Personally, I like Thucydides’ account of Pericles’ funeral oration, which describes the talk (logo) used before people act in order to teach themselves (prodidacthenai, a word that lacks any English equivalent) how to act. In addition, we drew on Isocrates’ discussion of the particular kind of reasoning he advocated in the Antidosis and on Aristotle’s concepts of moral reasoning and phronesis, or practical wisdom. Yet, deliberation had the advantage of being familiar to English speakers, and Latin won out over Greek equivalents.

Our foundation has learned a great deal about public deliberation from NIF and similar forums. For instance, participants aren’t always content to deal with national issues and policy choices. Many people have gone on to use deliberative framings and decision making to foster collective action on the problems that they encounter in their local communities. Most everyone has recognized that something in the community is not as he or she wants it to be; yet people may not agree about what the problem is or what should be done about it. And the disagreements are normative; people differ not so much over the facts as over what the facts mean. They struggle with determining the right thing to do. When the issues are controversial, like how to prevent the spread of AIDS or whether to permit a clinic that offers abortions, this is particularly evident. The deliberation we see is as Aristotle described it, an attempt at moral reasoning.

Moral reasoning has proven particularly relevant to our colleagues in the Middle East. Modern democracy—or more precisely, representative
government—depends heavily on rational decision making. Reason and logic work fine when factual matters and tangible interests are in contention but not when values derived from identity and religious convictions are involved. One of our associates, Randa Slim, explains this when writing about the Middle East:

The prevalent form of democracy people have come to know so far has been representative democracy. What the West has most cared about is the holding of elections, people going to the voting booths. Though these acts of citizen participation are an essential first step in a society transforming itself into a democratic state, they are rarely by themselves sufficient to usher in an era of sustainable stability. . . .

In divided societies, the challenge for any political intervention aimed at promoting sustainable democratic change is to move the individual from the confines of his or her self (often defined by the tribe or ethnic identity) to the wider realm of a citizen actor.  

These experiences, both domestic and international, led us at the foundation to expand our understanding of deliberation. We see deliberation as decision making on normative or morally charged issues that require the exercise of judgment rather than reason alone. This decision making proves to be difficult because things that people hold dear or consider valuable are in tension with one another, and the tensions can’t be eliminated because they grow out of shared concerns. Watching hundreds of forums over some 30 years, we have found citizens grappling with political imperatives—the need to be free, to be secure, to be treated fairly. Yet in making decisions on what to do in specific situations, these imperatives pull people in different directions. For example, actions that would make citizens more secure might impose limits on their personal freedom. We have called these imperatives simply “the things people value,” although they seem more basic and common than values. Because the tensions can’t be resolved by eliminating one or more of the imperatives, they have to be worked through to the point that people find some balance and can move ahead, even if they aren’t in full
agreement. We have found that these tensions lie behind many problems that appear to be technical yet can’t be solved unless the tensions are recognized and addressed.

We have also come to see deliberative decision making as part of acting, not as something separate or distinct. We have called this integrated activity “deliberative politics.” It begins in deciding on a name or description of a problem that resonates with the things people consider valuable. It continues in creating a framework for decision making that puts all the major options for action people want to consider on the table—along with the tensions inherent in each option. As people weigh these options, they think about the resources they will need and the allies that will be critical. They imagine how they might organize their efforts. And, most of all, people seem to be learning as they go along—learning what the problems really are as they take in the experiences of others, learning what trade-offs have to be made, and learning which actions are and are not likely to gain support. Deliberation seems much as Pericles described it, the talk people use to teach themselves as they prepare to act. As a means of learning, deliberation has its own way of knowing, by using experience as interpreted by the things people hold dear, and its own kind of knowledge, practical wisdom. It employs the human faculty for judgment (a faculty that neuroscientists have mapped in the brain).

Most important of all, for democracy understood as people having the power to shape their future, deliberation makes citizens political actors in their own right with the ability to produce public goods themselves or co-produce them with governments and other institutions.

The dilemma that Kettering has encountered is that the more precise we have become in describing what we see as deliberation, the more we have given the misimpression that we have in mind some special, esoteric technique that can only be mastered by highly trained experts. (There may be some types of deliberation that require considerable expertise, and even the deliberation used in the National Issues Forums is demanding and re-
quires preparation.) To correct the misimpression that NIF deliberation is a technique for experts, we are now exploring the deliberative elements in everyday conversations. Regardless of how our understanding of deliberation compares with that of political theorists, many themes in this volume resonate with our experience. One thing is certain: political theory has multiple concepts of deliberation available to illuminate our experience and deepen our research.

David Mathews
Kettering Foundation

NOTES


Introduction: Democratizing Deliberation

by Derek W. M. Barker, Nöelle C. McAfee, David W. McIvor

In the mid-20th century most people had come to think of democracy as the biannual trip to the ballot box punctuated by occasional protests and letters to the editor and supplemented with membership in a special-interest group. During the latter part of the century this conception of democracy started wearing thin, especially with Watergate’s breach of public confidence in the political system. A quiet revolution within democratic theory and practice began to take place as scholarly attention turned to civil society and the importance of public deliberation about matters of common concern. By the 1990s, political theorists in academia and practitioners of community forums around the world were using the language of deliberative democracy to describe their new focus.

Even with this transformation, the theory and practice of deliberative democracy did not always converge. Instead, first-generation deliberative theorists hypothesized a rather narrow conception of deliberation as rational discourse that could guarantee the legitimacy of democratic procedures and decisions, putting theory at odds with the rich but messy world of deliberation in practice. Deliberative democracy in turn became stereotyped as impractical and divorced from action. But during the past decade another generation of thinkers and practitioners has started developing ideas about deliberative democracy that are open to more forms of political talk, practical on a wider scale, and better connected with collective action. In so doing, theory and practice have together arrived at more robust forms of deliberation than had been proposed in the original generation of deliberative theory. This latest turn is the subject of this collection of essays.

The authors whose work is collected in this volume have each contributed to deliberative theory in their own ways. Combined, however, they represent a trend within deliberative theory towards a “democratized” conception of deliberation. If, as John Dryzek has argued, the 1990s saw a “de-
liberative turn” in democratic theory, the essays included in this volume reflect a “democratic turn” within deliberative theory.\(^2\) In addition to attending to the core norms of deliberative democracy, “democratized” deliberation emphasizes how deliberation might play a central role in creating a culture of civic action, confidence, and collective self-rule. In this view, deliberation is not a narrow procedure for adjudicating conflict, but a crucial practice for facilitating civic life. The theorists in this book provide a new way to understand deliberation, as an attempt to rename political problems as subject to real choices and actions by citizens, rather than having “given” solutions dictated by expertise, ideology, or special interest.

This democratization of deliberative theory addresses a series of related challenges to deliberative theory and practice. The concept of deliberation that still dominates political theory today is a rational discourse ideal of consensus reached through free and uncoerced public discussion. This concept of deliberation provides a compelling alternative to narrow conceptions of democracy as majority rule, voting for representatives, or a balance of power among competing groups. However, the rational discourse ideal has raised problems of its own. In various ways, critics and even proponents of deliberative democracy have challenged this concept of deliberation as too narrow to be truly democratic. Moreover, the model has been seen as too demanding to actually engage citizens in practice. As a result, deliberation has been said to be purely communicative and divorced from action; to privilege elites; to ignore conflict; and to apply only to small-scale, controlled settings. While the scholarship in this book retains many of the core features of deliberative theory—particularly the fundamental aim of restoring confidence in collective decisions and the central role of public discourse in a democracy—it has moved toward a broader understanding of deliberation as a set of practices open to different forms of communication and applicable in a wider range of public spaces and practices. In so doing, this work shows that most criticisms of deliberative democracy in fact apply only to a particular concept of deliberation. As a result, this collection reframes deliberative democracy in a way that is more sensitive to deep conflicts, nonrational forms of communication, and aspirations for increased civic agency.

Due to these advances, the theoretical scholarship in this volume also has the potential to both influence and draw upon a new generation of deliberative practitioners. One of the most exciting aspects of deliberative theory is
its dynamic relationship with a network of practitioners that has been engaging citizens in deliberative politics for more than 25 years. These efforts include organizations such as National Issues Forums, Everyday Democracy, AmericaSpeaks, the Deliberative Democracy Consortium, and the National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation. Many of the practitioners of deliberative politics have been influenced by deliberative theory, and deliberative theory in turn has drawn upon these practical experiences. In many respects the practice of deliberation was ahead of deliberative theory. As David Mathews argues in the Foreword to this volume, practitioners all along have aimed at neither perfect discourse nor rational argumentation, but rather at the pragmatic goal of clarifying tensions and reaching decisions on difficult issues. Practitioners of deliberative politics are perhaps in the best position to testify to the broader and more democratic concept of deliberation that informs this body of work, having encouraged and witnessed firsthand, for instance, the powerful role in deliberative contexts of emotion, storytelling, and other varieties of communication.

Nevertheless, the articles collected here also challenge practitioners to take more seriously the notion of democratizing deliberation. Democratizing deliberation asks practitioners to look beyond what Martín Carcasson calls “first-order” goals, such as producing deliberation within forums and informing citizens about specific issues. A broader concept of deliberation must also push toward intermediate goals, such as public action, and, most important, toward ultimate aspirations to strengthen democracy as a whole. At first glance, these goals seem consistent. However, focus on the immediate task of producing deliberation can invite the common criticism that deliberation is “all talk and no action.” The use of specific techniques for producing deliberation can signal that democracy requires advanced skills that are, ironically, beyond the capabilities of most citizens. The articles in this volume encourage practitioners to think critically about the extent to which they have internalized a narrow concept of deliberation, using deliberation as a technique to produce a certain type of discourse, or manufacture a consensus within a discrete forum. Democratizing deliberation encourages a broader view of deliberation as an exercise in civic agency, an effort to make visible to citizens the choices they have available to them in politics, and to cultivate these citizens’ capacities to make a difference in the lives of their
communities. Democratizing deliberation does not reject or trivialize the first-order work of convening forums, but rather seeks to inform that work with more robust conceptions of deliberation that treat citizens as capacious civic actors.

The literature on deliberative theory is now vast as well as highly specialized. However, the democratization of deliberation has implications far beyond academic debates within political theory and philosophy. This volume is intended for audiences interested in the frontiers of deliberative theory and practice. With this audience in mind, we have gathered together works that best reflect the democratizing of deliberation. To introduce these pieces, we begin with a genealogy of deliberative democracy that provides an introduction to the field, and, more important, the challenges it currently faces. We then highlight the ways in which the contributions together respond to many of these challenges and push deliberative theory in more robustly democratic directions.

A Genealogy of Deliberative Democracy

Over the past three decades, deliberative approaches to democracy have achieved a certain gravity in both academic circles and broader public discourse. These various approaches have coalesced into a paradigm that is now perhaps the dominant—if not the hegemonic—orientation within democratic theory. Yet the consolidation of deliberative democracy as a paradigm of political thought has served to obscure its plural origins and its ongoing tensions and controversies. In this respect, deliberative theory is not only an identifiable orientation to democratic life that has, as some have argued, “come of age,”5 it is also—perhaps appropriately—an ongoing and oftentimes fractious conversation about how democratic life can and should be organized. This section will trace a genealogy that marks out key political conditions that prompted the deliberative turn and crucial moments in its development and contestation. As we argue, deliberative theory both usefully addressed a variety of maladies within democratic societies yet simultaneously created new challenges and obstacles for democratic theorists and practitioners. As a result, deliberative theory must continue to broaden its focus and engage with the pressing challenges that democratic citizens face today.

In the latter half of the 20th century, political events and philosophical trends in the United States converged to challenge and ultimately over-
turn the dominant understandings of democracy within the academy and the larger public. With historical roots in the theory of the *Federalist Papers*, prevailing theories of democracy at the time identified democracy with contested elections and institutional checks and balances for maintaining equilibrium among competing interest groups. Growing social complexity and intensifying political and social cleavages seemed to threaten the identity of a people, or *demos*, that could govern itself. Dominant paradigms within social theory, such as “pluralism” and “social choice,” were valuable because they seemed to account for the ways in which a highly fragmented system could remain relatively stable without a thick sense of a common good. These theories rested on a sharp distinction between the “liberties of the ancients,” understood in terms of collective self-rule and public action, and the “liberties of the moderns,” rights of noninterference, leading to a minimalist conception of citizenship. Jane Mansbridge described the dominant system as “adversarial democracy,” in which organized groups compete against one another for advantage, but formal channels of governance function by limiting and fragmenting their power.

Yet pluralist and social choice theories of democracy—and the assumptions about civic life on which they were based—soon came under heavy fire from a variety of angles. The 1960s and 1970s witnessed a steep decline in trust towards democratic institutions and public officials, resulting in a largely disaffected and alienated citizenry. Citizens felt that they had been sidelined by large institutional actors and were denied a voice in the decisions that shaped their lives. Dominant theories of democracy could not account for this dissatisfaction nor provide any enticing avenues for civic redress. They also could not account for long-term trends, such as growing public concern over both the hyperpolarization of electoral politics and the increasing power of special interests.

Concurrent with the collapse of public trust in the institutions of democratic governance, political theory experienced a revival of interest in participatory politics and a local autonomy. This revival gained impetus from a variety of sources, ranging from the Civil Rights Movement to the free speech movement to the community control movement, each of which emphasized the rights and obligations of citizens to have a role in shaping the organizations and institutions that governed their lives. These demands for a more robust participatory politics dovetailed in many ways with the
renewal of civic republican traditions that emphasized local control and an active citizen body. For instance, Jane Mansbridge argued that citizens could find common norms and interests through practices of “unitary democracy,” albeit in specific circumstances limited by the dominant forces of the adversarial system described above. Both civic republican and participatory critics, moreover, were deeply critical of what they saw as the narrow instrumentalism underlying dominant conceptions of citizenship within social choice and pluralist theories of democracy. Within each tradition, citizens were seen not as narrowly rational actors who pursued their own discrete agendas but as agents whose preferences and beliefs were susceptible to social influences and mutable through democratic procedures. Democracy on these terms was not reducible to the clash of pre-political interests but rather was seen as the process of forming, reforming, and transforming preferences and opinions through civil dialogue and widespread public participation.

As the consensus around the dominant paradigm of democratic theory unraveled, the foundations of deliberative democracy were set in political theorists’ efforts to reconstruct theories of democratic legitimacy. As noted above, the collapse in public confidence and growing complexity and increased pluralism challenged the foundations of democratic institutions and processes of political decision making within advanced industrial democracies. These trends threatened the idea of political legitimacy founded on the autonomous decisions of the collected citizenry. In his highly influential _A Theory of Justice_, the American political philosopher John Rawls constructed a grand theory of liberal justice on the basis of a decision procedure that could be seen as legitimate in spite of social and class stratification. Relatedly, in response to a perceived crisis of democratic legitimacy, Jürgen Habermas, a leading voice in European philosophy, developed his theory of communicative action, the view that democratic decisions are legitimate only if citizens could come to consensus through free, uncoerced dialogue.

Combined together, the trends in democratic society and political theory reflected a deep dissatisfaction with the dominant practices of democratic politics and corresponding paradigms of democratic theory. The conception and practice of democracy as an adversarial contest for resources had increased the influence of special interests and frozen out or alienated ordinary citizens. The elite-dominated clash of factions and the growing influence of unresponsive administrative bodies were incompatible with mount-
ing demands for participatory politics and local control. Moreover, the narrative of citizens as combatants with preformed and inflexible preferences was incompatible with the still-robust democratic faith in a citizen body concerned with the common good and for a political life that displayed the virtues of civic friendship and social solidarity. In sum, the conditions were ripe within democratic theory and practice for a paradigm shift.

This shift occurred under the banner of deliberation. In 1980, Joseph Bessette is widely attributed with coining the term *deliberative democracy*, using it to recognize the failures of democratic institutions to reflect the interests and desires of citizens. Bessette’s term quickly gained adherents, who began to challenge the reduction of democracy to interest-group politics and the electoral system. As political theorists continued to work out concepts of democratic legitimacy, the term became an increasingly popular alternative paradigm for thinking about politics. Democracy understood as a deliberative process among citizens represented a promising response to the collocation of civic distrust and discontentment, emergent demands for public participation and local control, and worries over legitimacy in complex and pluralistic societies. The subsequent shift within democratic theory was both rapid and thorough. Within 20 years after Bessette coined the term, John Dryzek confidently remarked that, at least among theorists, “the essence of democracy itself is now widely taken to be deliberation, as opposed to voting, interest aggregation, constitutional rights, or even self-government.”

Deliberative theory maintains that legitimate decisions must be essentially *deliberative*. They cannot result from the mere aggregation of preferences or heuristics, such as tradition or voting. In other words, the realization of political autonomy is “talk-centric” rather than “voting-centric”; it depends upon the public deliberations of the collective body politic. This deliberative work, moreover, is characterized not by antagonistic negotiation, but rather what Jürgen Habermas calls the “unforced force of the better argument.” This idea promised an alternative to both the dominant pluralist paradigm, which could not account for the loss of confidence in the contemporary system, and its communitarian rivals, which had failed to propose an alternative appropriate to complex pluralistic societies. The new theory supplied an aspirational view of politics as mutual persuasion beyond the clash of interests described in pluralist theories. Yet the theory
did so by locating legitimacy in democratic procedures rather than any kind of thick underlying unity favored by communitarians. Deliberative democracy seemed to incorporate the best features of interest-group pluralism and communitarianism while correcting their deficiencies.

This broad understanding of deliberation, however, took on more specific meanings as leading philosophers further developed the theory. This process began in part through Habermas’ early work on “universal pragmatics.” Habermas argued that certain norms were immanent to human speech, and that the search for consensus was an inescapable presupposition of communication. The presupposition of an orientation towards consensus within ordinary communicative action was seen by Habermas as a guide for social action in a variety of contexts—including democratic politics. These idealizing presuppositions gave democratic theorists a strong (if not impossibly strong) standard for evaluating democratic procedures. Perhaps because of such criticisms, Habermas shifted terminology in developing what he called “discourse ethics.” According to what Habermas called the “discourse principle,” decisions were legitimate if they could be accepted by all affected through the course of a reasonable discourse. Yet even in the wake of this move, democratic discourse seemed overconstrained by idealized requirements that did not resemble any known political procedures.

In his later work, Habermas developed his theory with an eye towards these challenges. In particular he sought to reconcile the normative claims of deliberative theory with the cultural, administrative, and economic realities of advanced industrial democracies. On this new account, deliberation did not consist of the direct public authorization of legislation but of an ongoing process of public will-formation taking place through a de-centered discursive network. During this time, however, the concept of ideal deliberation articulated earlier by Habermas continued to exert a deep influence within the literature on deliberative democracy.

Deliberative democracy received an important endorsement from John Rawls, considered at the time to be the leading political philosopher in the United States. Rawls’ early work contained quasi-deliberative elements, such as his famous “original position,” an imaginative process in which participants could recognize the fair terms of social cooperation and the demands of justice. Rawls argued that policies could be justified if and only if we could imagine agreeing to them regardless of the contingent features of
our social and historical background, such as class, race, or gender inequalities. The original position, however, was not a deliberative space so much as it was a method of philosophical discovery. Rawls called it a “device of representation” and a “means of public reflection and self-clarification” rather than a public process of deliberation. However, like Habermas’ ideal speech situation, Rawls’ emphasis on impartiality and rationality were deeply influential for deliberative theorists.

Late in his career, Rawls, like Habermas, shifted his emphasis as he took on the challenges to advanced industrial democracies represented by increasing religious, cultural, and moral pluralism. In response to these pressures, Rawls attempted to articulate a more practical conception of his theory, meaning that the theory was not “metaphysical” but “political”: rooted in existing constitutional tenets and traditions of interpretation, rather than being based solely on abstract moral norms. Coinciding with his political turn, Rawls introduced the idea of “public reason” to account for how citizens and public actors who are motivated by different moral and religious traditions can nevertheless come to agreement on the basic terms of social cooperation. Public reason, on this reading, carries within itself the norms of reciprocity and inclusion. Reciprocity requires citizens to offer reasons that all might reasonably accept, and inclusion necessitates that democratic procedures must be open to all citizens. Later, Rawls explicitly identified his ideal of a “well-ordered constitutional democracy” with the term deliberative democracy.

Due largely to the influence of Habermas and Rawls, the dominant concept of deliberation that emerged in political theory in the 1980s and 1990s was the ideal of rational discourse governed by norms of reciprocity, inclusion, and (in some versions) the search for consensus. The ideal of rational discourse seemed to provide a clear alternative to power politics and partisan polarization, and the Rawlsian norm of public reason gained precedence. Deliberative theorists, such as Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson, for instance, regarded the “reason-giving requirement” inherent in Rawls’ concept of public reason as central to all accounts of deliberative democracy. Deliberative democracy, on their reading, insists above all else that citizens have an obligation to justify their views to their fellow citizens, using reasons that “should be accepted by all free and equal persons.” Similarly, Joshua Cohen introduced the ideal of “rationally motivated consensus,” and Seyla Benhabib endorsed rationality as an essential element of deliberation.
What had originally been conceptualized broadly as decision making over contentious issues in opposition to power politics was reconceived in narrower terms as rational discussion according to strict procedures.  

As soon became apparent, however, the growing dominance of this concept of deliberation created new challenges for democratic theory, just as it had resolved old ones. In various ways, the rationalistic view of deliberation has been criticized for undermining other key democratic goals of inclusion and active citizenship, while failing to address practical questions of how citizens can shape their common life together. The critiques that have emerged in response to the reason-centered concepts of deliberation now provide the intellectual context of the current generation of deliberative theory, including the contributions in this book.

First, political theorists often argue that the deliberative ideal could not make room for different identities or forms of expression. Even theorists sympathetic to the deliberative ideal, such as Iris Marion Young and Lynn Sanders, now recognize that the goal of rational consensus seemed to inherently privilege elite voices and conservative outcomes, against minorities and “activist” politics. Similarly, theorists of “agonistic” democracy, for whom difference is a necessary and desirable feature of democracy, worry that deliberation aiming at consensus would repress conflict. Sympathetic critics, such as James Bohman, argue that deliberative theory has forsaken its roots within critical theory and is too accommodating to the structural forces that continued to stifle the possibility of democratic life. Proponents of the rational discourse view of deliberation reinforce these criticisms by locating deliberation primarily within elite institutions. Rawls, for example, associates the ideal of public reason with “judges, legislators, chief executives, as well as candidates for public offices.” With deliberation defined as rational consensus and located within elite institutions, deliberative democracy opens itself to the critique that it privileges some voices and silences others.

Second, deliberation is seen as purely communicative and divorced from action, a central value in democratic theory. Agonistic critics fault proponents of hyperrational deliberation for repressing not only difference, but also the passion often found in democratic movements. As Chantal Mouffe argues, “The prime task of democratic politics is not to eliminate passions nor to relegate them to the private sphere in order to render rational consensus possible, but to mobilize those passions towards the promotion of democratic
designs.”

Agonistic political theory celebrates Hannah Arendt’s theory of action as the “political activity par excellence,” in contrast to Habermas’ discourse theory of the “public sphere,” where civic action is seemingly reduced to the organized influence of formal institutions. Even theorists deeply committed to the deliberative ideal acknowledge that the practical challenge of linking up deliberation and action remained unresolved. Outside of political theory, studies of deliberation in practice similarly struggle to show the impact of forums on larger forms of collective action.

Finally, theorists argue that even if the deliberative ideal is desirable, it is too impractical to make a difference on a large scale. The abstract nature of deliberative theory suggests that the inquiry is still oriented by “ideal theory,” which began from normative presuppositions rather than political realities. Critics see deliberation as a superficial form of political interaction that ignores the realities of power and interest in favor of an “academic seminar” model of politics. Some argue that citizens are simply incapable of deliberation, especially in the context of human beings’ structural and psychological tendencies to avoid conflict and diversity. Still others are skeptical that a large-scale mass public could be capable of deliberation. Despite evidence of deliberation from a generation of experiments in convening small-scale, face-to-face forums, critics remain unconvinced that these efforts were making a difference in the systemic problems that the theory purported to resolve. Moreover, practitioners have difficulty reconciling the messiness of deliberation with the lofty ideal of consensus reached through rational discourse, leading them to struggle to conceive of success in broader terms. Perhaps most important, the practicality challenge is intertwined with the democratic critiques of deliberative theory, for if deliberation is in practice beyond the experience or capabilities of most citizens, then elite decision making would seem to be the default location for political power in any practical effort to achieve deliberative principles on a large scale.

These criticisms add up to the pressing question, how democratic is deliberation? While we acknowledge that many of these criticisms have merit, our genealogy shows that they assume a particular view of deliberation that is neither intrinsic to, nor representative of, deliberative theory as such. Rather, the scholarship we have gathered in this volume makes the case for a broad and democratic concept of deliberation that resists many of these common criticisms. In the next section, we identify a few common ways
these articles have broadened the concept of deliberation and pushed it in a more democratic direction.

**The Democratic Turn in Deliberative Theory**

This collection includes seven pieces written since 1999. Individually these pieces respond to various issues within deliberative theory and practice, but combined they reflect what we refer to as a “democratic turn” within this literature. As noted above, the first generation of deliberative theory drew a sharp line between reason and rhetoric, thinking that deliberation had to be protected from the undemocratic forces of partiality, emotion, inequality, rhetoric, and coercion. But the critics of this approach saw the sharp line to be an impediment to democracy, privileging elite voices at the expense of alternative modes of speech. So one of the first trends in democratizing deliberation has been to broaden the understanding of deliberative reason and discourse, to welcome more forms of expression by making room for affect, emotion, storytelling, and particular perspectives. Instead of narrow “reason-giving” that can be universally understood, deliberation can occur—and often does occur—through the offering of particular stories and perspectives that help shed light on how problems are perceived by people different from oneself. In her “Three Models of Democratic Deliberation,” Noëlle McAfee argues that in addition to the market-style model of deliberation aimed at clarifying preferences and the rational model of coming to consensus, there is a third “integrative” model of deliberative democracy that weaves together partial perspectives. Not only does this model have more explanatory and productive force than the first two, she argues, it welcomes particular perspectives, stories, affect, and difference. In his piece, “Rhetoric and Public Reasoning,” Bernard Yack draws on Aristotle’s account of deliberation to show that, while there is certainly a place for impartial reason, it is not in a political deliberation, that is, a deliberation aimed at deciding what to do. Impartial reason should rule in a court of law, when the question is about what happened in the past. “But deliberation about future action is a completely different matter,” Yack writes. “Decisions about future action … draw on an inseparable mix of desire and intellect, emotion and reason. In other words, it requires a live reason propelled by desire out into the world rather than the dead, emotionless reason that best serves legal judgment.” Likewise, in her contribution to this volume, Jane Mansbridge argues that in “both legislative bodies and
the rest of the deliberative system, the concept of ‘public reason’ should be enlarged to encompass a ‘considered’ mixture of emotion and reason rather than pure rationality.” In “Difference Democracy,” John Dryzek elaborates on the value of storytelling, rhetoric, and other forms of communication that might be included in a broader concept of deliberation. According to Dryzek, a more expansive deliberative theory can address the core goal of noncoercive decision making without privileging elites or repressing conflict.

Instead of focusing on reaching consensus, the thinkers in this volume recognize that often disagreement is an unavoidable aspect of the process of working through difficult choices. Even without universal agreement, deliberation can serve a number of important democratic functions. Rather than rush to consensus, deliberations can first ensure that all the relevant perspectives are brought to the table. Based on her experience as an observer of National Issues Forums, Noëlle McAfee sees deliberation in pragmatic terms, as achieving tentative agreements for specific purposes of decision making and action, without necessarily resulting in any thick or permanent consensus. As John Dryzek observes, deliberation cannot aim at consensus, because difference is itself a precondition for deliberation. In her essay, “Everyday Talk in the Deliberative System,” Jane Mansbridge argues that deliberation can help to clarify the issues at stake in political conflicts, allowing each side to better understand the concerns of the other even while acknowledging the reality of disagreement. Even if some disagree with the ultimate decision, citizens can have confidence through deliberation that their voice has been heard and the process has been fair.

By broadening the criteria for deliberative processes and outcomes, the thinkers in this volume have, in turn, allowed for new theories of how deliberation might be practical on a larger scale and in a wider variety of contexts. McAfee’s essay begins this move by bringing deliberative theory into conversation with John Dewey and the tradition of American pragmatism. She argues that deliberation should be assessed not according to abstract moral standards but for its utility in solving public problems. To those who say that deliberative democracy is impractical on a large scale, some, like Iris Marion Young, point to the necessity of widespread public deliberations in complex modern societies. In the essay, “De-centering Deliberative Democracy,” Young draws on Habermas’ observation that it is in informal public
spheres that public problems are identified and brought to the attention of formal spheres of government. Young develops a concept of de-centered democratic deliberation in which discrete forums and larger political processes, and state institutions and informal social spaces, are all “linked” and aligned together. Similarly, for Jane Mansbridge, with a more relaxed standard for deliberative dialogue, scholars and practitioners can recognize the value and importance of everyday talk about matters of common concern. For example, the “highly informal, unconscious, and aggregative processes” of everyday talk in the public sphere can help identify problems and possible courses of action.

As for the worry that deliberation is only about communication and is divorced from action, many of the pieces in this book develop an idea of deliberative democracy as a practical, problem-solving, and world-building activity. As David Mathews suggests in his Foreword, deliberation has been seen in this way, at least at an implicit level, within the world of deliberative practice from its beginning. As deliberative practice continues to develop, the pieces in this section explicitly reconceive deliberation as pragmatic and action-oriented. In “Sustaining Public Engagement,” Elena Fagotto and Archon Fung explore the value that comes from having deliberative practices embedded in communities to solve local problems and complement the work of formal institutions. This work also sees deliberation and democratic politics as aiming not just to direct the actions of governments but also to develop ideas and collective will for public action. Instead of seeing deliberation as about agreeing on policies, this work sees deliberation as a public activity deciding what kind of political communities we want to be. Finally, Harry Boyte’s essay, “Constructive Politics as Public Work,” provides perhaps the most radical reconstruction of deliberative theory in terms of civic agency and public work. Boyte sees deliberation as a way of “unfreezing” politics, exposing new opportunities for citizens to engage in moral judgment and act collectively on issues typically thought to be matters of scientific planning and top-down administration. Here Boyte explicitly challenges Habermas’ reduction of deliberation to rational discourse and instead adopts a more expansive view of deliberation similar to others proposed in this volume. In this way, Boyte sees deliberation not as divorced from action, but as itself an expression of agency in a technocratic world,
part of a common enterprise along with community organizing and global traditions of public work. From Boyte’s perspective, this politics of agency represents the true promise of deliberation.

The thinkers in this volume present a more complex picture of deliberative theory than is commonly recognized—both by its proponents as well as its critics. Rather than dichotomous oppositions between reason and emotion, consensus and difference, freedom and power, thought and action, and theory and practice, these essays present a view of deliberation that is sensitive to the complexity of democratic politics in large-scale pluralistic societies. We believe these developments reflect a state of maturity within deliberative theory, but this body of work also raises new questions and challenges. Beyond outcomes that can be observed in organized forums, how might practical experiments in deliberation affect the sphere of informal talk in everyday life? Beyond impacts on discrete policy issues, does deliberation produce a more active and engaged citizenry? Beyond deliberation in small face-to-face settings, how can the professions and institutions of large-scale centralized systems align or link their routines with a deliberative citizenry? This volume raises these and other questions as deliberative theory and practice continue to evolve.

NOTES


4. Martín Carcasson, Beginning with the End in Mind: A Call for Goal-Driven Deliberative Practice (New York: Public Agenda, 2009).


14. John Rawls, A Theory of Justice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971). Of course, the legitimacy of this decision process (which Rawls called the “original position”) was guaranteed precisely because it was abstracted from the economic and social stratifications of advanced industrial democracies. See below.


17. Dryzek, Deliberative Democracy and Beyond, 1.


26. Ibid.

27. For differences in how Habermas and Rawls (and their various successors and contemporaries) each understand public reason—including both its content and its location, see Evan Charney, “Political Liberalism, Deliberative Democracy, and the Public Sphere,” American Political Science Review 92:1 (1998): 97-110.


44. On public work as “unfreezing” politics, see Harry Boyte, *Civic Agency and the Cult of the Expert* (Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation, 2009).