

Disagreeable democracy: Deliberation, conflict and communication in contemporary democratic practice.

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Abstract

In recent decades Western democracies have been tested by diverse and competing societal demands, generating a range of legitimacy issues, often described as the democratic deficit. Prominent among the scholarly diagnoses of this situation is the idea of deliberative democracy—an appeal to rational procedures of deliberation based on the normative horizons of inclusiveness and consensus. This paper considers the general assumptions of the deliberative democracy model and asks whether certain grammars of political expression are foreclosed by these assumptions. For instance, does the emphasis on rational deliberation too easily discount the role of expressive and embodied modes of communication in current democratic practice? Does the norm of rational consensus miscast ‘conflict’ as simply communicative failure without considering the constitutive role it may play? The paper investigates these types of questions, critically unpacking the theoretical manoeuvres involved and their implications for political analysis. The argument of the paper is that in order to provide a more adequate account of the political for contemporary conditions, both on analytical and normative levels, there needs to be greater attention paid to the ongoing role of conflict transformation, expressive modes and disagreement in modern democratic polities.

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Introduction

It is now commonplace to describe western democracies as complex societies. This description is often based on the features of sociological and cultural diversity and difference. Supposedly the challenge for contemporary democratic theory is how this irreducible plurality can be resolved with a collective project of meaning in a political community. A prominent approach to this challenge is to revisit institutionalised practices and procedures to see how they may be recast to enable some kind of effective fit between plurality and collective action. In this type of approach there is a tendency to assume that differences are pre-given in political processes. Democratic deficits are thus seen to arise out of the shortfalls of political forms that were designed to deal with the aggregation of interests rather than the negotiation and amelioration differences. But is this approach up to the task and does it fully come to grips with the challenges of contemporary social complexity?

A key issue here is how difference is characterized. In pluralist democratic theory, societal difference was more or less assumed to be the variability of particular identities distributed in clearly defined and stable groupings. However it is questionable whether this captures the complexity of contemporary experience. Social complexity is not just an agglomeration of irreducible difference but also seems to involve generative properties that emerge in and through the interaction of multiple actors in varying situations and contexts. In this view, societal difference can be characterized in far more dynamic terms as 'the complex system of figures drawn by homologies of trajectories and communities of situations, forming a tangle of relations as multiple as they are variable' (Rosanvallon 2006: 210). In other words the complexity of contemporary society involves a dynamic system of multiple and

mutually covariant variables. This presents a very different perspective on how identities and political processes interact compared to the old pluralist model. In complexity, the constitution of the political world becomes far more confounded with the formation of the self. This opens analysis to the prospect that difference is just as much an effect of political interaction as it may be a 'cause,' that is as an emergent property rather than as an essential characteristic. This parallels research on new forms of individuation in which recognition is intimately linked to processes of differentiation rather than of assimilation (see Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2002).

If we adopt this sense of social complexity then the negotiation of difference becomes somewhat trickier if for no other reason than that both actors and environments become highly mercurial. For example, a case of political conflict may well be indicative of a robust democratic moment in formation rather than difference in need of amelioration through deliberation. Equally, a case of difference resolved in deliberation may preempt or quash the democratic 'productivity' of a political conflict. Whatever the case, the idea that complex phenomena can be 'domesticated' by engaging a singular procedure fails to appreciate the irreducible quality of the dynamics involved. This warns us of the perils of privileging one form of political expression over another in political practice (and its analysis). This is particularly evident where overly rationalistic approaches seriously underplay 'the role that affect, embodiment, and sensibility play in inflecting [political] arguments and in the quality of the ethical life itself' (Connolly 2004: 171). As in this case and more generally, contemporary social complexity places into question a number of the prevailing categories and assumptions in democratic theory, especially the deliberative response to democratic deficits.

This paper will attempt to identify and problematise a number of these issues through theoretical interrogation and a communications analytic. In particular it considers the general assumptions of the deliberative democracy model and asks whether certain grammars of political expression are foreclosed by these assumptions. For instance, does the emphasis on rational deliberation too easily discount the role of expressive and embodied modes of communication in current democratic practice? Does the norm of rational consensus miscast 'conflict' as simply communicative failure without considering the constitutive role it may play? The paper investigates these types of questions, critically unpacking the theoretical manoeuvres involved and their implications for political analysis. The argument of the paper is that in order to provide a more adequate account of the political for contemporary conditions, both on analytical and normative levels, there needs to be greater attention paid to the ongoing role of conflict transformation, expressive modes and disagreement in modern democratic polities.

Democracy and conflict

Discourses of a 'democratic deficit' have become commonplace in recent analyses of contemporary liberal democratic polities. These discourses indicate a perception that for some reason democratic political systems are not fulfilling the objectives that we expect of them or that political actors are manipulating systems in order to prevent democracies from performing at their peak. These reasons behind the language of democratic deficit suggest either that liberal democratic politics is in need of systemic reform or that more proficient democratic political actors should replace those that are currently in power. While, it is not impossible that a change of elite-level actors could have a

significant bearing on the nature of a particular democratic system, the discourse of 'democratic deficit' is at least partially bound up with the failings of *all* politicians. There is little evidence of support for one set of political actors as inherently more democratic than another but rather a growing scepticism of political elites as a category. With this in mind, democratic theorists have focused more on the 'institutional fix' to the perceived deficit. This is the terrain on which theorists of deliberative or discursive democracy have sought to articulate arguments for new political institutions that can rectify the democratic deficit. The argument follows that a change in the institutional structure of democratic politics will affect the behaviour of political actors and the nature of political engagement.¹

There are a number of presuppositions at work in discourses of democratic deficit which generate the kinds of responses that have prevailed in recent democratic theory. What is clear in these arguments generally, is that the idea of democracy is not going to be subjected to critical scrutiny. It is assumed that democracy is the paramount political system and that its structures and objectives are beyond the pale for intellectual analysis. Thus, there are presuppositions that features such as popular sovereignty, the rule of law, political equality, voting, representation and so forth must be part of the political system with little attempt to evaluate the ways in which democracies try to embody these principles in practice. This amounts to a democratic piety whereby discussion of democracy invokes a number of over-determined principles and objectives as if there was already a political consensus around them (Little 2008). Questions abound from these principles though: how is popular sovereignty to

¹ For a general discussion of deliberative and discursive models of democracy see Dryzek 2000, Elster 1998, Fishkin & Laslett 2003, Young 2000.

be ensured? Must this be majoritarian in diverse and complex societies? Is voting a divisive mechanism and, if so, is this a problem? Does political equality draw attention away from power inequalities linked to broader socio-economic and cultural structures? These kinds of questions face insufficient critical scrutiny in contemporary democratic theory and, more importantly, they are dealt with in a way that suggests that the institutional enactment of these principles is a genuine possibility if only the right 'institutional fix' can be delivered.

One of the problems that follows from the assumptions of pious democratic discourses is the sustenance of the belief that a form of 'genuine' democracy is attainable. This is commonplace in theories bemoaning the effects of contemporary political actors on democratic systems (Connolly 2005). These theories – commonplace amongst 'radical' democratic theorists – are in many ways as bound up with the sanctity of democracy as the deliberative models which they criticise. Neither deliberative democracy nor the radical variants of theorists like Connolly seriously entertain the possibility that many democratic objectives may be unattainable, at least when we try to achieve all of the facets of democracy together. In other words, there may be systems which are more egalitarian than others but the former may be more exclusionary than the latter. In complex societies the idea that diverse and unequal constituents can reach reasoned agreements on democratic institutions and the types of values and behaviours they might demand is highly questionable. This belies the problems of constructing democratic politics around notions of political consensus especially where there is little recognition that such consensus is probably more achievable where societies are not diverse and pluralistic. This highlights the central issue of how we define the 'people', that is, the people who are supposed to comprise the sovereign body and ensure that the exercise of authority is

popularly accountable and legitimate (Laclau 2005). This notion of the 'people' at the heart of democratic self-understanding is all the more significant in complex societies whereby the constitution of the 'people' may be a matter of considerable dispute. By failing to attend to these questions of constituting the people, much contemporary democratic theory presupposes an agreed political body – usually based on the nation-state – which underplays the diversity of complex societies and the multi-level governance which tends to characterise the contemporary political order. Freed from deeper questions about 'who is the people?', democratic theorists are able to focus on their chosen institutional fix to the democratic deficit.

The existence of democratic piety and the prevalence of consensus-based understandings of democracy is further clarified by examining the nature of discourses around the relationship between democracy, conflict and violence. These have been particularly notable aspects of democratic theory and practice in the light of the emergence of a multiplicity of discussions of terrorism and violence in recent years (Honderich 2006). In many of these discourses democracy is imagined as the antithesis of conflict and violence. Although most of its advocates recognise the existence of conflict within democracies, it tends to be constructed as a system of overcoming conflict. Democracy, then, is imagined as a way of resolving conflict in the process of reaching decisions or as a consequence of the decisions reached. Thus, while democratic theorists might see the relationship between democracy and conflict as integral, they tend to see conflict and disagreement as something that needs to be righted. Conflict is seen as a problem and democratic mechanisms are viewed as the most appropriate ways of reaching a solution to the problem. But, as noted already, this notion of conflict resolution presupposes a body of legitimate actors who comprise the

people and who have a rightful say in the process of conflict resolution. An alternative reading might be that democracy is a continuous struggle to manage conflict especially the likelihood of disagreement emerging in the conditions of complexity and plurality. From this perspective, democracy is not concerned with and might be incapable of resolving problems of conflict. Its advocates would be better served by thinking about how democracy might transform conflict scenarios and how it might help or hinder efforts to manage conflictual situations. Where conflictual situations arise, democracy is one instrument amongst many for dealing with issues, but it is only with the most indulgent hubris that democratic theorists can put forward political systems as the primary means of conflict resolution.

A similar problem emerges from discourses in contemporary politics which juxtapose democracy and violence. The evidence of the use of violence in the formation of democratic systems is now clearly articulated and it is clear that democracies have been forged on the back of violence, have used violence against perceived enemies, and have employed violence against their own populations in certain situations (Ross 2004; Little 2006). The utility of talking about democracy and violence as antithetical terms should therefore be challenged not least because it feeds into a rather sanctimonious perception of democracy that does not engage with the fact that its justificatory tropes are highly questionable. What these discourses reinforce is that, despite the sanctity which many of its proponents attach to democracy, such faith is beginning to deteriorate in many democracies. Descriptions of democratic deficit often go hand in hand with the idea of political apathy. Part of the problem here is that the failure of democracies to meet the objectives that are attached to them is seen as a source of disconnection whereby potentially engaged actors give up on the

established political mechanisms that are supposedly designed to incorporate and deal with their competing claims. In designing politics as the space of forging consensus and then taking decisions, we lose sight of the fact that all politics (and thereby democratic politics) are constituted by conflict. The major problem of many contemporary democratic discourses then is the need to imagine democracy as a way of resolving the many fractious divisions of complex societies. An approach which understands the constitutive role that conflict plays in the creation of the political environment is much more receptive to contemporary complexity than approaches which regard 'finding an answer' as the primary objective.

If conflict is constitutive of contemporary democratic politics, it is equally important to recognise the generative role played by democracy in the creation of conflict and violence. The fusion of discourses of democracy with conflict resolution approaches and the attachment of democratic governance criteria to aid delivery are both examples of a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of democracy (Diamond 2005). As a result of the consensual impetus underpinning theories such as deliberative democracy, democratic politics is reduced to an emaciated set of institutions with a predetermined role of mediating conflict. What this neglects is the way in which democratic institutions can shore up political fractures, reinforce rather than negate conflict scenarios, and create new spaces for conflict to emerge. Any decisions that are taken in complex democratic societies generate the potential for new conflicts or the reconfiguration of older disagreements. In this sense, the discussion of contemporary political problems is always shadowed to some extent by the spectres of the past and their potential re-emergence (Chambers 2003; Foucault 2004). Rather than seeing this generative dimension as a problem, democratic

theory underpinned by notions of radical complexity welcomes the idea of a democratic dynamic inspired by dissensus rather than harmony. This suggests that there is a serious problem at the heart of democratic theory and practice that emanates from the primacy of the ethos of consensus.

To be fair to theories of deliberative democracy, it should be noted that conflict and disagreement plays a central role in their conceptualisation of political conduct. The issue here is more concerned with the pursuit of 'rational' answers to complex questions, that is, conflict is always constructed as something which must be overcome. However, in order to develop a model of politics that is capable of producing rational consensus, deliberative models of democracy rely upon a set of (primarily liberal) preconditions to police political conduct. Thus, political interlocutors must support the requisite democratic institutions, must be tolerant of each other, must articulate their arguments in reasonable terms, must be prepared to change their minds and so forth. These are substantial demands to make of interlocutors and are very difficult to enact in practice even if we could agree that they were desirable principles. The policing function these demands ensure amounts to a 'distribution of the sensible' (Rancière 2004) whereby deliberative democracy vets those entering procedures to ensure that their views are 'reasonable' and that they behave in the predetermined democratic fashion. What this amounts to is an attempt to fence political debate off from opposition and criticism and minimise the propensity for systemic change. Rather than improving the fabric of democracy or addressing a 'democratic deficit', strict policing of 'what we can hear' (Butler 2002) and the creation of 'uninhabitable identifications' (Butler 2004) act as a closure of democratic politics. What becomes clear is that the nature of communication is central to an understanding of the policing of the political in the establishment of

appropriate grammars of political expression. Not only are the familiar tropes of both deliberative and pious discourses of democracy reliant on a particular consensual iteration of democratic politics, but the theorisation of political communication plays a pivotal role in the construction of what is regarded as 'acceptable' democratic politics.

Democracy and communication

The consensual form of democratic politics outlined above is integrally entwined with what has been the prevailing understanding of the system of political communication in Western democracies. Political communication in this understanding has commonly been construed as the production, distribution and reception of political information to enable the formation of alliances, the securing of consent and the exchange of meaning. In this view, communication is understood as a kind of conduit that conveys information and persuasion between senders and receivers with the sender's original intentions transmitted more or less intact. Any distortions or asymmetries in this process of transmission are identified as symptomatic of pathology with pure propaganda as the extreme case. This conception is somewhat linear. The underlying assumption is that in communication discrete 'things' — motives, interests, ideas, ideologies, values, policies — are transferred unilaterally between distinct identities from here to there (see e.g. Denton & Woodward 1998; Graber 2005; Hahn 2003; Perloff 1998).

This fitted the general model of democratic politics as a series of linear steps working from the aggregation and institutionalization of societal interests in party competition through legislative debate and governmental action to outcomes in the technical operationalization of policy. These clearly demarcated

linear steps were equated with the sensible and rational, and were associated with due process to ensure in principle at least accountability and fair and equal access. In the accompanying notion of political communication, undistorted information and rational argument were seen to be the democratic lubricant necessary for citizens to be properly informed, to make sensible decisions and to be able to participate in political processes. Bias, impulsive populism, emotional appeals and the like were eyed with suspicion in this view as negative features identified with propaganda and undemocratic practices.

However wide-ranging social, cultural and technological change experienced across Western democracies in recent decades has had significant effects on how political communication can now be defined and understood. Jay Blumler among others has challenged us to think about the impact of these types of changes on communication institutions and processes, and to consider the adequacy of the conceptual and research tools customarily used to analyse them (Blumler 2001; also see Bennett 2000; Blumler & Gurevitch 2000).

On the historical-sociological level, Blumler and Denis Kavanagh have offered some preliminary hunches, proposing that a qualitatively different political communication system is emerging, what they have designated as the third age of political communication (Blumler & Kavanagh 1999). They contrast this to earlier ages, the first covering the late 1940s and 1950s which combined partisan political allegiance, strong and stable political institutions and relatively easy access to mass media. This was followed by a second age of limited-channel network television in which the political audience was expanded and the news media took an increasingly prominent role in the calculations of governments

and parties. Here the media, and especially television, delivered political information to a public that was assumed to be homogenous and passive.

In the contemporary third age by contrast, the avenues of political communication are multiplying into 'media abundance', and are aimed at audiences that are diverse, fragmented and active. The new modes and means of communication have hailed a rapid acceleration in the news cycle along with a corresponding compression of political and journalistic time-frames. Moreover developments in information and communication technologies have created a new political and cultural environment characterized by global reach, ubiquity and high velocity. Specific trends identified by Blumler and Kavanagh in this current era of media abundance include the increasing professionalization of political advocacy, growing competitive pressures within and among media organizations, the blurring of media genres and public-private boundaries, anti-elitist popular sentiment and new forms of populism, and an increase in multilateral communication potentials both in terms of new media and novel forms of political reception and experience. These types of trends according to Blumler and Kavanagh present fundamental challenges to conventional understandings of key notions such as 'democracy' and 'citizenship' (Blumler & Kavanagh 1999; also see Blumler & Gurevitch 2000).

Multiple public spheres

Indeed the trends identified by Blumler and Kavanagh's have profound implications for the linear model of consensual democratic politics. Among other things, the blurring of media genres and public/private boundaries, and the changing character of audiences/actors that accompanies the growing socio-cultural heterogeneity in contemporary advanced democracies raise all sorts of

theoretical and research questions about the character of contemporary public spheres and the enactment of politics. In particular, and as Peter Dahlgren (2005) has observed, these transformations can have an ambivalent impact on the political communication system. On the one hand, the destabilization of older patterns of political communication can appear to be unpredictable, incoherent and chaotic. For example, the discussion of political affairs now leak out of formal political arenas into infotainment realms thus diluting or trivialising the 'deliberative' sense of political debate. On the other hand, the destabilization of older patterns can open up the spaces and modes of political engagement hitherto dominated by professional political actors, authoritative commentators and technical experts, and enacted within clearly defined institutional settings. For instance, the diversification and proliferation of political voices, new modes of engagement, and reconsiderations of what constitutes politics, all entail a potential for the enrichment of democratic practice. Here horizontal as well as vertical civic communication between citizens can extend the scope and quality of political communication. However Dahlgren cautions that 'from a systems perspective, too much dispersion and polyvocality undercut political effectiveness and hamper governance' (Dahlgren 2005: 151). The new terrain thus presents political communication with new opportunities that nonetheless entail perils. Of particular note, contemporary democratic governments are challenged by the systems imperative to 'listen and learn' from the diverse citizenry while trying to avoid a potential spiral of indeterminacy induced by a cacophony of voices that arise in the complex environment (see Crozier 2007). Nonetheless, these new modes and spaces impel a reconsideration of the idea of the public sphere especially the version that casts it as a single integrated space of communication and information (as in the linear democratic model).

Some general observations can be made on this issue. The contemporary condition of pluralism and socio-cultural diversity has generated multiple 'public spheres' of differing sorts alongside and in between the mainstream mass-mediated arena of public political debate. These may be spheres of rational deliberation in a Habermasian sense, but not necessarily so. Indeed they may entail a wide range of other communicative modes including affective, poetic, humorous, ironic and so on that nonetheless have political and democratic import. And the types of action involved may also vary from strategic to expressive through to newer grammars of embodied action (Asad 2005; Campbell 2005; Dahlgren 2005; Goodin & Niemeyer 2003; Ikegami 2000, 2005; McDonald 2006; Young 1996). How multiple public spheres connect, or for that matter don't connect, is a key question in contemporary democracies particularly in the face of the vexed issue of democratic deficit on the one hand and impulsive populism on the other. Aside from anything else, this conundrum generates the incentive for government, political parties and other political actors and agencies to attempt to continually 'listen and learn' from diverse societal sources in order that the circuits of the political system remain 'responsive' and thus 'legitimized' (see Bang 2003; Crozier 2008). For democratic governments in particular, how to 'listen and learn' becomes crucial to their approach to political communication. This involves sophisticated technologies for accessing diverse and changing opinion as well as to the differentiated life-worlds of citizens (See e.g. Druckman & Jacobs 2006; Howard 2006; Manza, Cook & Page 2002; van Onselen & Errington 2004). But this is by no means a simple task and is often a rocky road to navigate. And while the new technologies and methodologies can be highly sensitized to difference, these forms of feedback instruments have limitations and can be partial in the type of information generated. This is indicative of the larger problem in complex societies of how to handle competing bodies of

knowledge in public debate and in policy formation processes. Here norms of undistorted communication and notions of pristine technical information tend to hit new types of systemic buffers that are not easily overcome, if at all, by recourse to rational debate and deliberative procedures. The changing character of 'information' is crucial here and has profound ramifications for how we model contemporary democratic practice. This can be clarified by a closer examination of the role of information in contemporary complex societies.

Informational society

The significant social, cultural and technological change that has been experienced in Western democracies over recent years has been described in a number of different ways though most commonly as a shift from industrial society to postindustrial or informational society. We would like to focus on the changing role of 'information' as a way to characterize this shift. In the older industrial paradigm, the value of information resided in the capacity to operationalize knowledge into material processes. By contrast, in the current era the creation and circulation of information has become an end in itself with information becoming a key productive resource. The processing and production of information has become the prime task rather than for some exogenous purpose. Information processing at high levels of intensity is increasingly prevalent across crucial areas of social action such that information flows themselves take on a new significance as sources of creativity, productivity and power. For instance, power can tend to become 'de-institutionalised' from older organizational arrangements and relocated in the shifting codes of information and images of representation and identity. In this sense, a new problematic of power emerges around the capacity to manage and control information flows (Castells 2000; Lash 2002; Melucci 1996; Urry 2003; van Dijk 2006). This shift in

the status of 'information' in social reproduction and coordination presents some extremely critical challenges for democratic theory and political communication analysis given their traditional concern with information and persuasion. In the first instance, it presses for the clarification of the concept of 'information' in these new circumstances.

In his analysis of information society, the sociologist Scott Lash focuses specifically on the character of information in the current era (Lash 2002). He makes a sharp distinction between information and other earlier socio-cultural categories—narrative, discourse, monument, institution, etc.—identifying flow, disembeddedness, spatial and temporal compression, and real time relations as the primary qualities of information. Where other sociological accounts of information society emphasize knowledge-intensive or postindustrial production patterns of goods and services, Lash broadens the analytical scope by pinpointing a paradox at the heart of information society: 'how can such highly rational production result in the incredible *irrationality* of information overloads, misinformation, disinformation and out-of-control information. At stake is a *disinformed* information society' (Lash 2002: 2). In order to grapple with this paradox, Lash argues that what information society produces must be understood as out-of-control bytes of information rather than as information-rich goods and services. This is information abundance brimming with unintended consequences. The byte-like feature of information is crucial, especially in the regard to compression, both spatially and temporally. For example the information byte denies the time required for reflection or deliberation—as in narrative or discursive modes—but occurs in real time though highly contiguous with its event. Lash suggests that there is a perverse twist to McLuhan's famous dictum at work here in the sense that the message or more precisely, the

'communication' is 'the paradigmatic medium of the information age...The medium now is very byte-like' (Lash 2002:2).

In terms of political communication, Lash's conception of information presents a challenge to those approaches that construe information as a 'rational' stand alone entity, an entity which is subject to appropriate or inappropriate treatment that is external so to speak to the 'information' itself. Examples of this type of approach can be found in critical studies of political advertising, political public relations, and the media colonization of politics thesis. In each, the 'information' is seen to be the object of a communication. Supposedly information becomes 'polluted' for other purposes by manipulation, distortion or 'exogenous' logics through the communication. Lash by contrast argues that misinformation and/or disinformation is part of the contemporary condition of information. Information abundance entails unintended consequences, and as such cannot be controlled in an absolute sense. For instance, a statement of 'information' may be accepted as truthful by an addressee, it may be interpreted as a distortion, it may be understood as one among other interpretations, it may be understood to be a lie, or some other variation of these, all within the same 'communication' (see also Rogers & Kincaid 1981; Luhmann 1992; Craig 1999; Iyengar & Simon 2000). This intimates that information is not easily separated from its communication event. Lash's point is that in contemporary circumstances communication events are rapid-fire and very byte-like. Information is processed at rapid velocity such that there are high levels of redundancy involved, leading continuously to the generation of new information (processing). This raises all sorts of causation questions. For example, the diminishing half-life of the political sound bite is often put down to journalistic deadlines, a pauperization of political life imposed by media logics (see e.g. Meyer 2002). However, from Lash's perspective, this

attributes cause to what is but one component of the more general dynamics of information in the current era. Explanations using linear causation are thus limited in a number of ways in these new circumstances. What is crucial here is the notion of communication and its event.

This is a very different focus to that of traditional political communication studies. Information flows become paramount rather than the quantity and quality of information or the undistorted exchange of data per se. In the new scenario, power rests in the capacity to manage information 'flow-put' rather than controlling, withholding or manipulating substantive information. In a manner the very notion of 'substantive information' becomes problematic given the high levels of redundancy generated by information as it works on itself in rapid motion. At minimum this recasting of the role and character of information in contemporary complex societies means that a central component assumed in older models of democracy and democratic practice has undergone substantial transformation. In these older models the realm of political competition was the domain in which competing interests, ideologies and perspectives would be aired and contested. Once particular goals were resolved through debate, winning argument and electoral victory, action would be implemented in a technical-rational mode through the development and implementation of policy. Among other things, this policy step has become destabilized by the problematization of technical-rational modes under the duress of competing knowledge in complex societies. The old call of "just give us the facts" tends to become displaced by queries and conundrums about competing truth claims.

This is not restricted to the domain of political competition in the old sense but now spills over into policy processes themselves such that contestation is no longer quarantined to public political debate and institutionalised forums of debate such as parliaments. Various forms of consultation, deliberation and policy interdependencies are implemented in attempts to redress this spillage and are often cited as illustrative cases of deliberative democracy at work. But if examined through the new informational prism, the issue becomes less sanguine in regard to democratisation and questions begin to emerge about the management of informational flows. Deliberative processes may be involved but it is another thing to conclude that this is 'democracy' is at work (see Bang 2004). This is not just an empirical matter. If nothing else, this urges us to unpick the automatic linkage of deliberation with democracy in order to rethink the democratic challenges and indeed democratic theory in contemporary conditions.

Conclusion

The deliberative turn in contemporary democratic theory is predicated upon a number of assumptions that require sustained critical attention. In this paper we have suggested that two of these issues are particularly problematic, namely, the predetermined political subject that appears in much democratic theory and the anachronistic understanding of political communication that it employs. The construction of deliberative models as the antidote to democratic deficit ignores the emaciated understanding of the political that emanates from approaches that focus too heavily on institutional solutions that would facilitate the 'right' kind of communication. This sidesteps the serious challenges to democratic theory and practice that are engendered by contemporary modes of social complexity. Our contention here is that democratic politics is generative of as well as constituted

by this complexity, and thus it is problematic to imagine that democratic politics can somehow stand outside of and resolve issues in which it is actively implicated. Among other things, this alerts us to how older linear approaches and models are less than adequate to the challenges posed by irreducible complexity.

The constitution of the political subject is a case in point. It is fundamental to the advocacy of specific democratic models and yet this issue is rarely dealt with explicitly in deliberative democracy. One common means of policing 'appropriate' political conduct is to differentiate acceptable political opinions and their modes of communication from populism (Arditi 2007, Laclau 2005). This kind of policing of political conduct immediately distances deliberative models from the understandings of the 'people' that have traditionally underpinned democratic theory. Political participation is predicated upon a willingness to adopt a certain dispassionate communicative disposition that sits uneasily with the emotive nature of much political motivation. Thus, the 'people' and popular opinion are not inherently part of deliberative processes; it is only when interlocutors are prepared to behave and communicate in a particular fashion that they become legitimate democratic participants. The idea of populism serves a particular purpose in such arguments which is to set up a chain of equivalence which justifies the kind of political conduct which deliberative democrats want to vindicate. Thus, in these renditions populism becomes a signifier of what proper democratic conduct is not.

The political subject in deliberative democracy is understood as plural but it still replicates some of the problems associated with more traditional representative and aggregative models of democracy. The most pertinent of these issues here is

the fact that plurality and diversity are rarely seen as emanating from the democratic process but instead are pre-determined. Deliberative democrats see the communicative process as one that is concerned with the amelioration of *established* differences. This is evidence of the unwillingness of deliberative democrats to countenance the possibility of democracy reinforcing and augmenting differences rather than eliminating them. It places insufficient emphasis on the idea that political opinions are not necessarily formed prior to democratic engagement but actually emerge through it.² Deliberative democracy envisages people entering dialogue with a set position but with a disposition that is amenable to persuasion by alternative viewpoints. However, rather than regarding political perspectives as phenomena that might emerge in the course of democratic engagement, deliberative democracy requires an established political body and a pre-determined set of ideas before dialogue begins properly. As Laclau points out, once this model of pluralism is established, 'the only relevant question is how to *respect* the will of those represented, taking it for granted that such a will exists in the first place' (2005: 164).

The idea of populism is a useful trope for deliberative democracy to try and justify a legalistic, formal conception of politics. At the same time, it draws attention away from the importance of understanding what populism is and how it relates to a passionate, emotive politics. By using populism as a means of dismissing certain political arguments, we lose sight of the significance of the 'popular' in our understanding of democracy. This type of manoeuvre makes it much easier for deliberative democrats to follow the path of the 'institutional fix'. Democratic deficit is a less onerous problem to grapple with if the political body

² For empirical research on how debate and disagreement affects changes in political opinion compare Mutz (2006) and Huckfeldt *et al.* (2004).

is already constituted. But this approach neglects the dynamic nature of democratic politics in complex societies where the political body and its constitutive opinions are not fixed. The problem with deliberative democratic theory lies in its focus on the nature of the regime rather than the constitution of the democratic subject. It ignores the vital questions that emanate from the fact that 'the "people" (as constituted through a nomination that does not conceptually subsume it) is not a kind of "superstructural" effect of an underlying infrastructural logic, but a primary terrain in the construction of a political subjectivity' (Laclau 2005: 225-6).

A final comment can be made here but in a more systemic register. The deliberative turn in democratic theory can be characterized as a type of governance strategy which deals in the management of certain types of informational flows. Democratic deficits are types of dysfunctional information loops that place legitimacy under duress. The strategy of drawing-in multiple actors into networks of deliberation attempts to open up these loops but in very managed ways according to certain criteria. As we have noted, this can be just as exclusionary as it is open, demonstrating how power can be generated in informational flow-puts though not necessarily in a symmetrical manner. A democratic moment may occur in such networks. But this is in no way guaranteed by the imperative of rational deliberation and is more likely to be generated by informational overflow and creative associations. It is perhaps in the realm of the latter, rather than in deliberative turns, that we should begin to investigate the democratic possibilities in and of complex societies.

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