

John Dryzek

The workshop was very instructive in terms of bringing two communities together. Deliberation (sometimes connected to democracy) is arising in all kinds of places; in political practice (innovations often with little theoretical input, sometimes with questionable motivation ^ for example when public managers in UK use citizen panels as a way to sideline established interest groups), and in a variety of disciplines (constitutional economics, ecological economics, public administration, international relations, social psychology, etc).

Deliberative democracy as an ideal should not be equated with its manifestation in any single institutional design or process, be it environmental impact assessment, deliberative polling, or dispute resolution. However, it is possible to see deliberative democracy as a critical angle that informs processes of democratization. These processes can include limited innovations in any kind of political institution or setting. In this sense, dispute resolution exercises can be seen as moments of deliberative democratization.

Some deliberative democrats (including me) remain uneasy with the exclusive stakeholder, emphasis in dispute resolution. This doesn't just concern potential underrepresentation of the weakly organized and disadvantaged. Sometimes the population of potential stakeholders is unbounded; for example complex transnational environmental issues that also affect future generations. More problematic still is that even if all conceivable interests are represented, the sum of their partial interests does not necessarily constitute the general public interest. A local agreement might externalize its costs. There is also a civic republican angle here: that general public interests should always be the focus of debate. Lay citizens may be more open to deliberation in these terms than are partisan stakeholders. However, this is not an argument for excluding stakeholders in favour of lay citizens, because deliberative democracy is also a theory of political legitimacy, which can only be secured with the deliberative assent of relevant partisans.

Once issue that could have received more attention in the workshop is the fact that deliberative democracy comes in several quite different varieties. In retrospect a ten-minute presentation at the outset on these varieties might have been good. For example, when it comes to the location of deliberation, there are at least five categories:

1. Institutionally unspecified ^ some philosophical treatments.
2. The conventional institutions of liberal democracy: legislatures, courts, maybe administrative agencies.
3. Designed forums, more innovative.
4. Governance networks, possibly transcending formal jurisdictions
5. The diffuse processes of the public sphere.

Obviously these locations are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but deliberation can be a very different matter in different locations. There is also variety when it comes to the essence of the activity of deliberation. If everyone had done the assigned readings these differences would be apparent ^ but an overview/summary reminder might still have been helpful.

The role of consensus in the theory of deliberative democracy remains problematic and contested. For deliberative theorists, “consensus” connotes agreement on an action, and also on the reasons for it, including values (Habermas influential here). Obviously this isn’t the kind of consensus required in dispute resolution, which can allow continued dissensus on the content and relative weight of values supported by participants. I’d now say one main purpose of deliberation is to produce meta-consensus: on the validity of disputed beliefs, the legitimacy of disputed values, and the range and structure of disputed preferences. Meta-consensus can co-exist with continued pluralism in beliefs, values, and preferences. To the extent meta-consensus is achieved, collective decision becomes more tractable no matter how decisions get made.