

## On Theories of Deliberative Democracy

Nathanael Blake

Review: *Tradition and the Deliberative Turn: A Critique of Contemporary Democratic Theory*, by Ryan Holston. Albany, New York: SUNY Press, 2023. Pp. 218. Hardcover, \$99.00, Paperback, \$34.95.

Theories of deliberative democracy are neither deliberative nor democratic.

In his new book, *Tradition and the Deliberative Turn*, Ryan Holston provides an essential critique of deliberative democratic theorists, most prominently John Rawls and Jurgen Habermas. It is not just that they rely upon “an understanding of deliberation that is unrealistic to the point of being utopian” (3), but that this is rooted in a mistaken understanding of morality itself. Holston attributes this error to the presupposition that experience and tradition are morally dubious, and that public justification must rest upon that which can be universalized.

Holston traces this mistake back to Rousseau, who insisted that legitimate democratic self-government requires setting aside particularity and identifying with the whole. For Rousseau, he argues, “justice and the good were not only identified in opposition to the concrete, experiential realm, but they were comprehended in explicitly *anti-historical* terms” (18). In Rousseau’s view, moral freedom is threatened by the historical, for that which is conditioned is neither moral nor free.

Consequently, democratic legitimacy, which Rousseau expressed through the idea of the general will, requires people to set aside their private concerns, interests and experiences as they legislate, and to instead focus on that which is universalizable. The individual must become undifferentiated, stripped of particularity, so that his will may correspond to, and be subsumed by, the general will. Only in this way can the demands of morality be reconciled to those of autonomy—for democracy to be true self-government it must seek that which is universal and common to all.

What Rousseau intuited, Kant organized. As Holston observes, “in Kant’s more systematic philosophical approach, there lies a further entrenchment of the cleavage that

Rousseau had explicitly established between historical experience and morality” (44). Kant saw the moral as that which is universal, and the task of reason as taking particular moral impulses and making them into general moral laws. For Kant, as Holston explains, “man’s distinctive moral worth resides not in an essential nature ... but in his ability to resist the impulsion of historical experience and to become a self-determining agent” (48).

Holston argues that modern theories of deliberative democracy still rely on an inheritance from Rousseau and Kant in presuming a “division between morality and historical experience” (57). It was Rousseau’s attempt to solve the riddle of how naturally autonomous humans might morally and freely govern themselves in community that set the stage for theories of deliberative democracy, and therefore for their aporias. Holston writes that,

While the idea of public reason aimed at the universal justification of political positions first emerged in these early discussions regarding deliberative democracy, the concept has its roots in the autonomy tradition that can be traced back to Kant and Rousseau. For it was the idea of the general will, first articulated in Rousseau’s *Social Contract*, that was responsible for the notion that democratic legitimacy requires citizens to become the authors of the laws by which they are governed (72).

This argument is convincing, though it would have been further strengthened had Holston engaged with scholars, such as Judith Shklar, who explored the fissures in Rousseau’s thought—how does the universality of the moral apply to Rousseau’s familial or solitary dreams, rather than his political ones? Nonetheless, Holston is right that the challenge set by Rousseau remains for modern democratic theorists, which is how to legitimate democratic outcomes as self-government, including for those in the minority. Holston therefore claims that, for deliberative democratic theorists, “What is key and unavoidable for each of these thinkers, regardless of the priority of deliberative procedures or the substantive outcomes of deliberation, is the possibility of reasons of justifications endorsed by ‘all’” (75). The ideal of autonomy and self-government coexist uneasily with each other, unless individual wills can somehow be universalized. Public reason must be accessible to all, and thereby provide reasons understandable to all, including electoral and legislative losers.

These imperatives push theorists to imagine ideal discursive communities, but as Holston demonstrates, these are both exclusive and illusory. Even as they expand theoretical

discourse across populations numbering hundreds of millions, they deliberately exclude and denigrate the concrete communities and traditions that provide the basis for actual discourse and moral/political insight. Deliberative democratic theories treat the historical, particular and traditional as suspect at best. And so endless theoretical expansion results in practical exclusion, as demonstrated by Rawls's antipathy to anything he regarded as a "comprehensive doctrine."

Deliberative democracy is intentionally dismissive and even destructive toward that which is historically evolved, and especially toward anything it deems to be prejudice. But it thereby undermines itself, for real discussants come from particular, historical communities and traditions. Thus, deliberative democratic theories require an intellectual sleight-of-hand. As Holston explains, "Conceiving of deliberation as if it were possible among the millions of individuals who comprise contemporary democratic societies, such theories essentially graft a familiarity with smaller-scale dialogue among rooted interlocutors onto a significantly larger scale, while no longer appreciating or valuing the essential preconditions that made such dialogue possible" (5). We are finite and must speak out of our finitude—to attempt to speak in a limitless dialogue is to leave ourselves behind, forfeiting the very realities that make dialogue possible.

And so Holston turns to Hans-Georg Gadamer to reconcile the moral and the historical, and thereby explain the basis for genuine moral discourse and action. Gadamer collapsed the dichotomy between the particularity of human life and the universality of the moral; he addressed our finitude and historicity without succumbing to relativism, for he saw that the moral must be historically apprehended and realized. Gadamer's recognition that justice "emerges within history" (104) is not relativism. Rather, it is a recognition that "justice, where it does exist, always takes place within history, and that as we act within a particular historical situation, it is merely *possible* to instantiate justice with right ethical conduct. The good, for Gadamer, only comes to be within the concrete reality of the particular" (104). We can never fully stand apart from language, history and tradition, but this does not mean that true moral deliberation and action are impossible, because they are always what we are already engaged in and who we are.

We cannot leap outside of history, which would require leaping outside of ourselves to assume some sort of God's-eye view. Thus, the models of deliberative democratic theory

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denigrate precisely that which they require: the historical sources of moral reasoning and the concrete communities in which instruction and deliberation about the good are possible. We are particular and our moral knowledge is of a stature for who we are. It develops through relationship, community, and concrete life far more than abstraction. Holston touches on an intriguing point when he notes Gadamer's reliance on Aristotle's remarks regarding the natural law. However, he passes by the opportunity to explore how Gadamer's insights might renew and strengthen a natural law tradition that, like that of the theorists of deliberative democracy, is prone to abstraction and a separation of the good from the historical.

Still, the neglect of this intriguing side-trail may be forgiven as a requirement of Holston's close focus on how the false ideals of deliberative democratic theories damage the preconditions for actual deliberation about politics and morality, which are always carried out by concrete people in concrete circumstances. Our theories should acknowledge this rather than long for an impossible universalization. Holston asserts that "only the conditions that cultivate the bonds of *philia*—namely, concrete communities that exist over time—can furnish the essential support for a *sensus communis* and a predisposition toward a cooperative search for the common good" (150). Yet it is precisely these existing "thick" communities and relationships that theorists of deliberative democracy denigrate and dismiss.

Holston is right that there is a pervasive unreality to theories of deliberative democracy, and his turn to Gadamer is inspired. Instead of appealing to a veil of ignorance or abstract ideal discursive communities, Gadamer remained grounded in reality, and reminded us of the immanence of the demands of morality.

Even many of the vices of this valuable book are linked to its virtues. Though points of interest are passed over or only briefly addressed (e.g., Habermas's encounter with Gadamer), this also ensures a brisk read dedicated to Holston's main themes. A sterner criticism is that there is more case for hope than Holston's conclusion allows for. He is right that the communities and relationships we need are under assault, and that their waning will make genuine dialogue, moral reflection and persuasion more difficult, and our culture and politics worse. Nonetheless, robust communities and relationships are a better, more authentic way of life than the abstractions of modern theorists and the indulgences of our culture of autonomous individualism, and they may become beacons of hope to the lost.

**ON DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY: A REVIEW OF *TRADITION AND THE DELIBERATIVE TURN***

Thus, both theorists who rely on abstractions, and those who criticize them, may find themselves overtaken by practice if people turn to seek the good in real life.

Nathanael Blake

*Nathanael Blake, Ph.D. is a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center.*