Journal of Public Deliberation

Volume 3, *Issue* 1 2007 *Article* 4

Activists' Views of Deliberation

Peter Levine* Rose Marie Nierras†

*University of Maryland, Peter.Levine@Tufts.edu
†University of Sussex, R.Nierras@ids.ac.uk

Copyright ©2007 The Berkeley Electronic Press. All rights reserved.

Activists' Views of Deliberation

Peter Levine and Rose Marie Nierras

Abstract

This article, based on more than 60 interviews, explores the tensions between deliberation and various forms of political activism and advocacy. It identifies more than 20 objections to deliberation that are proposed by political activists in various countries and contexts. It concludes with suggestions for combining deliberation and advocacy.

KEYWORDS: deliberation, advocacy, politics, protest

Erratum

In [article title], the process referred to as a ‘Twentieth Century Town Meeting’ is actually a 21st Century Town Meeting.

Activists' Views of Deliberation

Peter Levine and Rose Marie Nierras

This article explores some reasons that political activists—including those who are sincerely committed to democracy and/or social justice—resist organized efforts at public deliberation. We have three motives for exploring their resistance and skepticism. First, we hope to develop responses that might strengthen the case for public deliberation. Second, we believe it is appropriate to *adjust* deliberative approaches in the light of valid criticisms from democratic activists. Third, we seek to understand deliberation as part of a repertoire of democratic approaches, appropriate for some circumstances but not others.

Activism and Deliberation on a Spectrum

We define an "activist" as someone who tries to advance a substantive political or social goal or outcome. A clear case would be someone who seeks government money for a new health clinic. Activism is always an attempt to exercise power, yet some activists' motivations are highly altruistic. They try to develop and employ power for ethical ends. To complicate the definition, we note that many activists feel constrained by democratic procedures or principles. For example, they may drop their demands when they see that they have been outvoted or have lost a public argument. They may be sincerely interested in learning from rival perspectives; and they may try to help other people to become independent political agents with goals and interests of their own. In all these respects, activists can be democratic, not merely strategic.

Meanwhile, an organizer of a public deliberation is someone who helps people to decide on *their* collective goals and outcomes. A clear case would be someone who organizes a forum to discuss how much money the government should raise in taxes and how the funds should be spent. To organize such a deliberation means suppressing or deferring one's own views about state spending in the interests of promoting an open-ended conversation.

Nevertheless, organizing a deliberation is also an exercise in power. It requires making substantive decisions that can be controversial. Even to invite people to a deliberative session, one must give oneself the right to define the scale and scope of the community, to identify certain issues as important, and to select a method or format for discussion. Even if the process is very open-ended, organizers may rationally predict that a particular outcome will emerge. In such cases, they may use deliberation as a tool to obtain support for the outcome they want.

In short, activists and organizers of deliberations are not sharply distinguishable. It is not only activists who have agendas, desired outcomes, and some degree of power. However, the two groups cluster at opposite ends of a spectrum. At one end, politics is strategic and oriented toward policy goals (albeit constrained by procedures or ethical principles). The main evidence of success is achieving the desired outcome. At the other end of the spectrum, politics is open-ended; the main evidence of success is a broad, fair discussion leading to a set of goals that may be unanticipated at the outset.

Methodology

The previous section makes a theoretical distinction and raises the question of when we need activism, open-ended deliberation, or both. To begin addressing that question, we asked informants with relevant backgrounds and perspectives. At four separate international meetings, we facilitated and recorded four discussions that collectively involved more than 60 different people from at least 14 countries.[1]

We asked these informants to discuss "public deliberation." It was impossible to avoid some ambiguity about what that phrase meant. In scholarly literature and general discussions, "deliberation" sometimes implies an "ideal speech situation," in which (contrary to actual practice), all participants have equal influence and full information, and the best argument prevails.[2] Objections to that conception are mostly practical: even if it sounds desirable, it may seem impossible or unlikely. The phrase "public deliberation" can also refer to everyday debates, conversations, advertisements, and communications about issues, as conducted in a diffused way throughout society, especially in private associations, newspaper columns, parties, legislatures, and courts. Such deliberation certainly exists, but it can be criticized as inequitable, poorly informed, unbalanced, and so on.

We suspect that some of our informants were thinking about ideal speech situations, and others about ordinary political conversations that are diffused though a society. However, we had a third type of "public deliberation" in mind and tried to steer the discussion toward it. We primarily meant a set of actual deliberations that have been conducted on a human scale (involving scores to hundreds of participants in each venue) since the 1970s.[3] These have not been controlled laboratory experiments, but public processes designed to address real problems.

To create representative groups of citizens for these deliberations, organizers randomly select the participants (Citizens Juries, Deliberative Polls), recruit people who are deliberately diverse in various relevant ways (Twentieth-Century Town Meetings), recruit stakeholders who are known to represent all the major conflicting positions (Regulatory Negotiations, Consensus Councils), distribute background materials through a diverse network of community-based organizations (National Issues Forums, Study Circles), or try to include a whole population in large-scale deliberations. To achieve the last goal, organizers sometimes divide a very large deliberative process into many local venues (as in Brazilian Participatory Budgeting) or push decision-making down to the local level (village governance in Kerala and West Bengal).

---

[1] Deliberative Democracy Consortium (DDC)/ LogoLink North-South Meeting (Washington DC, June 2004), 21 participants from seven countries; LogoLink Partners' Meeting (Brighton, Enland, July 2004), 13 participants from seven countries; meetings in Porto Alegre, Brazil (October 2004), 14 participants, all Brazilian; DDC Researcher and Practitioner Network Meeting (Washington DC, June 2005), 30 participants from six countries. Some individuals attended more than one of these meetings. Each meeting also had other purposes, but time was set aside for taped, focus-group style discussions of our topic.

[2] Jürgen Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis* (1973), translated by Thomas McCarthy in 1976 (Cambridge: Polity, 1988), p. 110 and subsequent works.

[3] More than a dozen methods are described in John Gastil and Peter Levine, *The Deliberative Democracy Handbook: Strategies for Effective Civic Engagement in the Twenty-First Century* (Jossey-Bass, 2005).

To ensure that the agenda and any background materials are unbiased, organizers typically work with various opposing interest-groups and experts, giving each group equal time or space to present to the deliberating citizens. Sometimes, activists present to groups of deliberators; in other models, they are encouraged to participate in the discussions themselves. To improve the fairness and quality of the conversation, organizers may employ trained moderators or distribute discussion guides and frameworks.

Evidently, certain values underlie these methodologies. Organizers of public deliberation assume that many (perhaps all) people have useful things to say about public issues, despite gross inequalities in education, technical knowledge, access to the mass media, social status, and political power. They believe that a public deliberation has some legitimacy even if the social conditions are unfair and even if they do not agree with the results. They see value in hearing a wide range of perspectives (although their tolerance may not extend to certain fanatical views).

We would have liked to ask highly strategic activists for social causes what they thought about these examples of deliberation. That goal, however, collided with several challenges. For one thing, social activists constitute a very large and diverse category, encompassing people from across the political spectrum who promote various agendas and philosophies in a wide variety of contexts around the world. We decided that constructing or locating a representative sample of activists would exceed our resources. Furthermore, most activists have no prior experience with explicit efforts to promote public deliberation. Truly deliberative forums, meetings, and online exchanges are still rare. We feared that for most activists, the idea of public deliberation would be abstract, and their reactions would have limited interest.

Therefore, to begin our empirical investigation, we interviewed a group that fell, we believed, on a useful point along the spectrum from strategic to deliberative politics. We recruited a subset of activists from the developing world and from poor communities in Europe and North America who have deep commitments to specific social goals, such as reducing poverty or improving the health of people with HIV. Thanks to their backgrounds, these activists understand the grittiness of everyday politics, the pressing nature of social challenges, and the common impatience toward mere talk. They were likely to have a rather detached or skeptical attitude toward “deliberative democracy,” not viewing it as an end itself but wondering whether it could help them achieve more urgent goals.

That description would cover many thousands of activists from around the world—too large and diverse a group for us to study for the present article. Instead, we honed in on a subset of activists who had developed strong interests in democratic *procedures*. These activists were no longer simply interested in policies or legislation that would achieve social outcomes; they also wanted to change the way that ordinary people participated in politics. Their motivations for making that procedural shift were various; some saw it as a strategic move to enhance their odds of achieving their original goals, while others saw some intrinsic value to participation. In any event, these activists were deeply grounded in strategic politics and primarily moved by deep social injustice, yet they were concerned and sophisticated about democratic procedures.

We convened these activists at three meetings (in Bethesda, MD in June 2004, in Brighton, UK, in July 2004, and in Porto Allegre, Brazil, in October 2004). At the first two sessions, we asked

the participants whether they saw themselves as advocates for one or more social causes, for democracy, or for deliberation. Everyone said he or she is an advocate for democracy. Most work for political reforms, such as more transparency, public participation, or decentralization. In addition, everyone is (or has been) an advocate for a social cause, such as HIV/AIDS prevention, inclusion, or poverty-reduction. Finally, almost everyone tentatively or confidently identified as an advocate for deliberation. However, few had done direct and sustained work in support of deliberation. Decentralization and the political inclusion of very poor people were the main procedural values that had captured their attention, not deliberation.

Because these people were concerned about democratic processes but not deeply committed to public deliberation, we thought that their responses would be particularly interesting. On one hand, their skeptical comments should be taken very seriously, because they have democratic motivations and a wealth of practical experience. On the other hand, they represent an opportunity for expanding deliberative work if their objections and concerns can be addressed.

In the following pages, we categorize the activists' concerns by subject. However, it is worth noting that people from different countries tend to have different worries. In Brazil, Participatory Budgeting (PB) is a well-established practice that gives hundreds of thousands of citizens actual control over portions of government budgets. Activists in Brazil have concerns about the sustainability of PB, its limitations, and the potential for capture by powerful forces. In other countries, deliberative processes are much further from institutionalization. Activists in countries without traditions of broad-based deliberation are more likely to worry that poor people will not be able to participate in their own interests.

1. Concerns about equity: Some people are much better than others at expressing their interests and values in a public forum. For instance, Joel Rocamora, a Philippino activist for democracy, worries that "The discourse of peasants is often not explicit—often hard to understand." In contrast, formally educated people from the middle classes are more likely to be clear and forceful.

In turn, putting people who are not well prepared to speak into a deliberative setting can merely demoralize or alienate them. As Bettina von Lieres from South Africa observed, "In a situation where people have no experience of effective representative democracy… to take groups of people like that into deliberative processes … it can be completely threatening, and it can actually alienate people from democratic processes in the future."[4] Fatma Yusuf from South Africa said, "I get the feeling that deliberation is an elitist discourse, if I'm not wrong? That it has to be a certain level of maturity and there has to be a certain level of power in order to deliberate."

Some activists (like some democratic theorists) argue that poor and oppressed groups are placed at a disadvantage by *any* process that favors compromise and reasonableness. They need to organize, articulate their interests, and obtain political power before they can deliberate. Therefore, participation—not deliberation—is the primary goal. Yusuf said, "We don't necessarily want to have a unified discourse. We do want a divided discourse. Because it's that

[4] Von Lieres participated in a meeting (described below) of deliberation-proponents and in a meeting of democracy advocates.

much richer. So we'd rather be talking about 'participation' [not 'deliberation'], and we want to have winners and losers, because there have been winners for many years in that part of the world, so we want a zero-sum game. Yes, that's what we want. So I'm more comfortable with participation at the level of NGOs, grassroots. But the kind of deliberation that's happening is definitely a bit lopsided at this stage. And maybe we're not ready."

2. Concerns about bias. As in the theoretical literature, so in our conversation with activists various questions about bias arose frequently. Several forms of bias trouble activists. First, there is the concern that deliberation favors reasonableness, moderation, or compromise, even though there may be a legitimate basis for radical claims and passionate discourse.[5] In an anonymous written comment, one of the activists defined "deliberation" as "calm, cool, civil, incremental change." This definition can be problematic. As Rocamora said, "The problem is that deliberation privileges reasonableness. And that's why I have asked, 'does deliberation exclude struggle?' When I think of deliberation, I think of something that I wish there could be more of. …. If I ask a hungry person who's been put in jail to be reasonable, he'll give me the finger. But it would be nice if it would be possible to deliberate. So I think of it as something we should strive to widen or broaden spaces for deliberation but not make it the only way we can discuss is through deliberative methods."[6]

Another (related) argument holds that deliberation is biased toward certain kinds of issues. For example, as Nelsa Ines Fabian Nespolo from Brazil noted, Participatory Budgeting works well for allocating a pool of public resources. "But there are many other struggles that go beyond public resources…. We need to recognize that PB cannot provide everything—that may be asking too much of the PB process itself." Maria Leonice de Deus da Silva provided an example. She said that half of the women councilors in Santiago, Chile are concerned about rights. "Gender politics has taken up much of this collective reflection and yet this is not a constant theme/subject/priority in PB processes."

Finally, some people believe that deliberation favors a particular epistemology (perhaps a scientific one), and that way of knowing and arguing is itself part of a power structure that should be challenged. As Hans Antlov, who works in Indonesia, said, "I don't believe in neutrality or rationality. Knowledge isn't power. Those who have power can define what knowledge is."

3. Concerns about representation: A group could appear representative because its members were demographically similar to the whole population, but this appearance could be misleading. As Lisa VeneKlasen wrote in her questionnaire reply: "… a person's dominant visible identity doesn't mean they represent the consciousness of that identity group, not to mention that women, young people and latinos don't all have the same viewpoint…. Not only does a classic notion of representation not guarantee a diversity of views and critical analysis, it also doesn't ensure that people will feel comfortable about speaking their mind…."

---

[5] Cf. Iris Marion Young, "Activist Challenges to Deliberative Democracy," in James S. Fishkin and Peter Laslett, eds., *Debating Deliberative Democracy* (Malden, Mass: Blackwell, 2003), p. 119.
[6] Cf. Lynn M. Sanders, "Against Deliberation," *Political Theory* 25, no. 3 (June 1997), p. 362: "calling for compromise may be perilously close to suppressing the challenging perspectives of marginalized groups." And p. 370: "Deliberation is a request for a certain kind of talk: rational, contained, and oriented toward a shared problem."

Produced by The Berkeley Electronic Press, 2007

4. Concerns about neutrality: Vivek Ramkumar from India said he was favorable toward deliberation but would want to investigate materials and agendas to make sure they were neutral. (He later added that "neutrality in materials and agenda" would be especially important "in the context of the eight-year rule of a right-wing/conservative government in India, and I caution against a deliberative process being hijacked by such interests.") Maria Leonica de Deus da Silva said, "I agree with the importance of deliberation that has been pointed out. But as mentioned earlier, some deliberation processes can be undemocratic also. So how well the deliberation is done depends on the questions asked, as well as the methodologies employed."

VeneKlasen went further and asked: "Is there such thing as a 'neutral' moderator and 'unbiased' information? In all countries, ideology and it's impact on the availability of information and the policy options we consider to be 'acceptable', is one of the most challenging element of power….Ideological bias often operates to narrow even the availability of information."

5. Concerns about potential government control and manipulation. Fatma Yusuf from South Africa described a "cooperative participation process" in her country that convenes "representatives of the labor unions, of the national government, the private sector, and here seems to be a kind of a legitimate deliberation that goes on in that particular institution …created, supposedly, to be an inclusive institution where deliberations are happening …." Unfortunately, Yusuf said, "most of the time, the government participants in that institution hijack the issues." Likewise, Jose Benedito de Oliveira described the participatory budgeting process in Porto Allegre as a very limited and tactical sharing of the government's power. "Citizens are partly in the 'house,' but not all the way in because the people in power want to establish limits. It is like there is a party inside the house but the citizens are only in the hallway, not inside the main room where the party is being held. So participation and even deliberation in the PB process is merely a concession because of the limits."

6. Concerns about sustainability of public support. Some activists fear that deliberation is not sustainable because it can only last as long as an organization supports it, and that organization cannot itself be deliberative. Jose Benedito de Oliveira of Brazil lamented that in one important deliberative process, "we had less than 50 percent of the people expected attend the meetings …. So there is no commitment on the part of the citizens."

Sérgio Baierle of Brazil said, "It is impossible to keep society mobilized consistently in a permanent way. People need to convert themselves into institutions (eg, those involved in the democratic management of schools). This started as a movement that got more institutionalized through the election of a directorate by students and teachers. On the other hand, institutionalization comes with some element of bureaucratization at which point open citizen participation usually drops and the end results of deliberation within these bodies are not always satisfactory." Jose Benedito de Oliveira made a similar point: "PB [participatory budgeting] is not a movement. If it transforms itself into a movement, it will bureaucratize and that may not be a good thing. So why not a PB NGO? This NGO can find a way of linking up with other community organizations. In this way, the PB NGO can reclaim its history."

7. Concerns about scale and scope. Some Brazilian activists observe that deliberation works well for local issues, but many important issues are national or global, and they cannot be deliberated. Maria Leonica de Deus da Silva said, "Participatory Budgeting has been good for actions inside the city. But there are other levels of government—state and federal that the PB processes do not even begin to address. … Governance systems have to go beyond the local."

Likewise, some activists observe that deliberative processes usually involve policies. However, the *implementation* of policies by government officials is equally important, and it is not usually subject to deliberation or even public oversight. Jose Benedito de Oliveria said, "At the current time, there is no monitoring and control by the citizens [of what happens after the Participatory Budgeting process generates the priorities for funding]. Even if monitoring processes were enhanced, the people are still not part of the implementation processes of the projects that they have demanded to be prioritized.

8. Concerns about the definition of "deliberation." In some romance languages (Portuguese, Spanish and Italian), the cognate of the English word "deliberation" may mean decision-making. This is implied in statements like the following (by Felisberto Luisi), "If at a meeting there is no quorum for proper decision making, then it can be said that there is participation but no deliberation." "Deliberation" would take place if and when the group made an official decision.

Other activists define the word in such a way that it must occur at a small scale. For instance, Maria Leonica de Deus da Silva said, "Deliberation involves a small group. Participation, on the other hand, is more inclusive of heterogenous interests and representation (therefore bigger groups are involved) and therefore more democratic…. There are many kinds of deliberation, some are democratic and some are completely undemocratic (authoritarian). Both democratic and undemocratic are forms of deliberation processes and the circumstances will define the possibilities of the outcomes. Deliberation is preceded by discussions. Then there is a deliberation that leads to a decision."

9. Concerns about efficiency: Compared to decision-making by experts—or indeed, compared to voting—deliberation may be slow and expensive. As Hans Antlov said, "There is always a trade-off between 'efficiency' and 'democracy'." That tradeoff might not favor deliberative democracy in all cases.

Objections Heard by the Organizers of Deliberation

As a second step in our empirical investigation, we convened 30 organizers of public deliberations and scholarly experts on deliberation at a meeting held in June 2003. This, in other words, was a conference of the field or movement of "public deliberation." We shared the ideas presented above with these informants and asked them whether they had heard any other arguments against their own work. Since they frequently try to persuade other political actors to support public deliberation, they hear many arguments against it.

Produced by The Berkeley Electronic Press, 2007

Participants rapidly generated a very long list of objections to deliberation that they said they had heard in the field.[7] They told us, first, that many social activists have strong commitments to goals, principles, and values other than deliberative democracy. These activists may seek more social equality or more individual freedom, more support for local traditions or more cultural interchange, more protection for the natural environment or more economic growth. They sincerely see such goals as equal with, or even more important than, any deliberative process. Therefore, when someone proposes to organize a discussion with an unpredictable outcome—and claims that this discussion will have democratic legitimacy—they sense a threat to their own cherished values.

Accordingly, they may ask whether the "right" people (i.e., those who share their own views and interests) will be represented in adequate numbers, whether the "right" facts and arguments will be emphasized, and whether the agenda will be structured in favorable ways. Carolyn Hendriks, a scholar who interviewed representatives of interests and activists in Germany and Australia, said that they often complained that deliberation doesn't "come up with the right answer." Their desire to move the discussion in a particular direction can sound cynical, but often it reflects a principled belief that something else (for example, economic equality, freedom, public health, environmental sustainability, or growth) is more important than a deliberative process. Activists "assess their chances of success," as an American civil servant, Roger Bernier, notes. "They define success in terms of converting other people to their way of thinking, and if they can't imagine that, then they don't participate; they don't think it will work for them."[8]

Some social activists feel that they have more knowledge and expertise than a random or heterogeneous group of ordinary citizens. Some believe that members of their own social movements have invested effort and passion in particular issues; thus it would be unfair for randomly selected people or casual volunteers to acquire equal voice as a result of a deliberative process imported from outside of their community. Janette Hartz-Karp of Australia paraphrased this criticism as follows. A committed activist who is not invited to bring his or her supporters to a meeting may ask, "Why are you rewarding the people who don't care, who sit back and do nothing? Why are you excluding us, when it's us who have been willing to put our time and energy into this?"

Activism can be in support of a policy or perspective *within* a political community, or it can be about the definition and jurisdiction of the community itself. Activists who favor secession, self-determination for an ethnic group, or political partition may hold principled objections to participating in a deliberation that presumes the legitimacy of the existing order. They do not *want* to be included. As David Kahane of Canada observed, "One thing that often gets marginalized is the proper locus of authority or sovereignty. So native people in Canada are

---

[7] They are also reader of theoretical works about deliberation; thus it is possible that some of their responses were drawn from the published literature and not from actual discussions with activists.

[8] Similarly, Carolyn Hendriks writes that activists and interest groups "choose to support or oppose processes of direct citizen deliberation on the basis of instrumental calculation." Most activists are willing to engage in public deliberation "when it presents an opportunity to improve public relations and promote trust, distribute information and market products, sell and legitimise expertise or advocate for a particular cause." Carolyn M. Hendriks, "When the Forum Meets Interest Politics: Strategic Uses of Public Deliberation," *Politics and Society,* vol. 34, no. 4 (2006), p. 3.

invited to take part in a deliberation as citizens; it's their citizenship that's precisely contested from their point of view. The terms of deliberation can already demand a concession that some may not be willing to make."

Some activists would be comfortable with a *truly* neutral process that gave their ideas and supporters equal standing with others. However, they may doubt that any real or proposed process will actually be as neutral as advertised. Subtle differences in the way that the agenda is framed or the participants are recruited may work against them. This distrust may encourage them to prefer other forms of politics (such as protest, litigation, and partisan organizing) that they have learned to evaluate and manage.

When grievances are especially serious, it may be inappropriate to call for discussion among the opposing parties. For instance, the great African-American anti-slavery campaigner Frederick Douglass simply refused to answer arguments in favor of slavery, viewing the whole discussion as offensive.[9] When people are racially segregated by law, Archon Fung asked, "What is there to talk about?"

Sometimes, radical social activists argue that deliberation is *intrinsically* biased against their ideology, because it favors agreement and compromise, whereas they believe that confrontation is called for. An activist group that participates in deliberation may "lose its radical edge," as Carolyn Hendriks put it. A related argument holds that deliberation typically favors majority views, since the voice of many will outweigh the voice of the few. For those who are concerned about a minority group and its interests, other forms of politics may be more appealing and effective. Archon Fung of the USA gave the example of animal rights activists, who are likely to lose in a deliberation in the current context, simply because they are outnumbered. In her article on "Activist Challenges to Deliberative Democracy," Iris Marion Young lists some of the tactics that can be more effective than deliberation: "picketing, leafleting, guerilla theater, large and loud street demonstrations, sit-ins, and other forms of direct action, such as boycotts." As she notes, activists may even choose to "make noises outside when deliberation is supposedly taking place on the inside. Sometimes activists invade the houses of deliberation and disrupt their business by unfurling banners, throwing stink bombs, or running and shouting through the aisles."[10]

Some fear that deliberation will actually change people, altering their perspectives, identities, and styles of argument. In that sense, deliberation might be a form of "social control" (a phrase that Lyn Carson attributed to critics of deliberation). Deliberating might turn poor or marginalized people into supporters of mainstream views and the status quo. Or it might isolate people from the communities and cultures that they are supposed to represent, because once they participate in a deliberation, they develop new knowledge, contacts, and styles of argument. As Bettina van Lieres of South Africa said, there is a fear that "once you're in, you can never get out again." [11]

---

[9] Sanders, p. 361; 373.
[10] Young, p. 105.
[11] Hendriks (p. 126) quotes an Australian civil servant who worries that a deliberation will provide misleading information. Deliberation is "fabulous to tell you what would happen if you could educate the community and they

Produced by The Berkeley Electronic Press, 2007

Conversely, some activists doubt that deliberation can change people *enough*. They do not believe that talking in heterogeneous groups is likely to enhance the political confidence, networks, or skills of traditionally marginalized people. Deliberation "itself lacks transformative power," as Les Ihara, a Hawaii state senator, expressed this criticism. In fact, an activity that is "just talk" may alienate participants and reduce their participation in other forms of politics. Besides, deliberation is usually limited to a few representative people, so its effects on the skills and identities of a whole community appear limited. As Stewart White of Australia said, "The number of participants is too small to generate large consciousness-raising [effects]."

A more fundamental objection starts with the assumption that "politics" is really a clash of interests among people with competing needs, under conditions of scarcity. Creating an appearance of deliberation simply masks the underlying conflict and may give an advantage to those who have political power. Lars Torres (an American who has helped to organize many deliberative forums) observed, "'Negotiation' might be an advocate's preferred approach. In deliberation, you're supposed to be thinking about the common good, not your constituency's interests."

Political communication occurs not only in intentional deliberate forums, but also in newspapers, radio, and television. Some activists think that a small-scale deliberative exercise is irrelevant without significant change in the mass media.[12] A related point is that people who have been deeply influenced by the dominant culture, education systems, and the mass media may not recognize their own interests or know how to express them.[13] In that case, even a representative group of deliberators will not reflect the authentic views or interests of the population.

Proponents of deliberation report hearing the argument that (in Ihara's words), "deliberation is a practice of a particular political, ideological, or secular philosophy." Some activists object that deliberation is not democratic, because deliberators are not accountable to the broader public. They do not, for example, face campaigns for reelection. Finally, social and political activists are often very practical people, so some of their objections are pragmatic. Deliberation sounds too expensive, time-consuming, and vague in its outcomes.[14]

Responses

---

could react. But it doesn't tell you how the actual public will react to a proposal. "No matter what recommendations come out of the consensus conference process—it's not going to change the public's minds."

[12] Cf. Young, p. 118, who argues that "media contribute to naturalizing assumptions and making it difficult for participants in a discussion to speak outside of a certain set of concepts and images."

[13] "Insidious prejudices may incline citizens to hear some arguments and not others. Importantly, this prejudice may be unrecognized by those citizens whose views are disregarded as well as by other citizens. … Prejudice and privilege do not emerge in deliberative settings as bad reasons, and they are not countered by good arguments. They are too sneaky, invisible, and pernicious for a reasonable process." (Sanders, p. 353)

[14] Hendriks interviewed corporate employees, government officials, and representatives of "public interest" groups who had faced decisions about whether or not to participate in public deliberations. For the purpose of this paper, the most relevant responses came from the public interest advocates (summarized on p. 254). They tended to see deliberation as an *opportunity* to advocate for their position, to present their views, to attract members, to "stimulate reform," and to "collect data on citizens' views." They also saw *dangers*, especially: "cooptation and tokenism," drains on their own time and money, excessively limited agendas, insufficient opportunities for interaction and discussion, and the chance that citizens' recommendations would be ignored.

We heard many objections to the idea of public deliberation. The list is too long for a point-by-point discussion; it suggests a whole agenda for research and debate. However, we wish to make three relatively large points that may inform the dialogue between deliberation-activists and social-cause activists.

1. A time and a place for deliberation

First, the comments collected above suggest that many democratic reformers would be more comfortable if deliberation were understood—not as the essence of democracy—but as one phase in a cycle of social change that also includes the organization of interest-based social movements. As Sérgio Baierle of Brazil said, "There is no doubt that deliberation and social movements are [both] essential elements of democratic life." If people lack political power and are merely invited to a deliberation, that invitation will be a gift from the organizers that can be withdrawn at any time. Even if the deliberation itself is fair, there is no way to ensure that any results will be implemented as intended. Social movements address these problems by distributing power to those traditionally excluded. Once power is distributed, deliberation can be a valuable tool for making collective decisions.

One of us (Nierras) noted that social movements must reach negotiating positions and then stop deliberating. Accountable leaders of large groups cannot remain permanently open to discussing policy with other stakeholders; they must represent the position that their own members have chosen. Nierras said, "Let me just give the example from the Philippines. The Freedom from Debt Coalition, which is a coalition around the isse of extreme, heavy burdens of foreign debt repayments. Did we deliberate? Yes, we deliberated, but from a specific perspective in terms of what's involved and the implications of the debt burdens to arrive at the Coalition's unified position on the issue…. In discussions with the IMF and the World Bank, and in negotiations with the Philippine Government, that common position was *the* only position we were willing to negotiate. Outside the boundaries of that position, we were not willing as a Coalition to actually entertain any other views."

For leaders of social movements, the question of when to deliberate can be a delicate strategic one. An alternative to deliberating is to drive a wedge between one's opponents and the majority of the population. For example, in 1962, the Civil Rights movement in America focused on Albany, Georgia. There, segregationist authorities, led by Police Chief Laurie Pritchett, played the role of moderates, avoiding confrontation and even joining the civil rights leaders in prayer. The Civil Rights movement almost foundered as result. Therefore, the leadership deliberately chose Birmingham, Alabama, as the site of its next campaign: "Project C" (for "Confrontation"). Birmingham's notorious Commissioner of Public Safety, Eugene "Bull" Connor, had just been defeated for reelection by relatively moderate voters, but he still had several months in office. The Civil Rights leaders chose to hold protests in Birmingham before he had to retire, because they knew that he would use firehoses and dogs against children. When Connor's police did use violence, the SCLC won a major victory in the court of public opinion.[15]

[15] David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York, 1986), pp. 239-240.

Produced by The Berkeley Electronic Press, 2007

As Martin Luther King wrote in his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," "the creation of tension [is] a part of the work of the nonviolent resister. This may sound shocking. But I must confess that I am not afraid of the word *tension*." And he acknowledged that the "purpose of the direct action is to create a situation so crisis-packed that it will inevitably open the door to negotiation." By "negotiation," King meant a discussion about the proper *way* to desegregate Birmingham; but he considered desegregation itself to be non-negotiable. Thus he never genuinely wanted to deliberate with Bull Connor about common values. Instead, he hoped to force a capitulation by the city government on the issue that divided racists from believers in civil rights. Told that the forthcoming administration might end segregation of its own accord, King replied: "My friends, I must say to you that we have not made a single gain in civil rights without determined legal and nonviolent pressure." Asked to wait for change, King declared: "This `Wait' has almost always meant 'Never.'" Finally, called an "extremist," he embraced the label -- for "Was not Jesus an extremist in love ... Was not Amos an extremist for justice."[16]

The success of Project Confrontation shows that democracy can be advanced by doing the opposite of deliberation—finding an obdurate opponent and provoking him to take outrageous actions. Carolyn Lukensmeyer reports that in prior discussion between democratic reformers and organizers of deliberation, the issue became one of "timing." "When in the sequence might advocates actually get more of what they wanted if they used deliberative processes? So the conversation became extremely strategic."

Deliberation for learning

Although Lukensmeyer's question is fruitful, we believe that it is a mistake to treat deliberation *merely* as a tool for advancing one's goals, an instrument that's useful in some circumstances but not in others. We think that a strictly "strategic" use of deliberation overlooks one of its advantages: its capacity to change activists' views.

In deliberation, people communicate their opinions and attempt to persuade others. Alternative forms of communication (protests, strikes, nonviolent resistance, street theater, media campaigns) can be more effective and satisfying than deliberation, especially for oppressed people. But communicating is only half of deliberation, which is also an opportunity to listen and learn. If one is not fully certain that one knows what should be done, then it can be very wise to listen to alternative views before acting.

In Young's article about activists' challenges to deliberation, she starts with the premise that activists are right—that they are on the side of "social justice." She recognizes that there are also "Some nihilistic and destructive persons who demonstrate and protest from blind rage or because they get pleasure from destruction."[17] As she says, this is a small group. However, she overlooks the very large category of activists who believe that they are right and virtuous, but who are actually misguided or prejudiced in various ways.

---

[16]"Letter from a Birmingham Jail," in King, *I Have a Dream: Writings and Speeches that Changed the World,* James M. Washington, ed. (New York, 1992), pp. 86-87, 88, 94.
[17] Young, pp. 104, 107.

As Robert B. Talisse argues, deliberation is problematic for any activist who "takes himself to *know* what justice is and what justice requires."[18] For instance, almost everyone believes that Project C was appropriate because King and the SCLC were on the side of justice. But in many situations, activists should be open to alternative ideas and perspectives and possible changes of mind. Indeed, deliberation can be seen as one example of "open-ended" politics. Other examples of political processes that can produce unforeseeable outcomes include democratic elections, independent judiciaries, and expert panels and research studies. Individuals may support these processes because they predict that particular outcome will emerge. Or they may value these processes because they are not sure what outcome would be best, and they hope to learn. We believe that carefully organized deliberations offer learning opportunities that activists should find valuable—not under all circumstances, but often.

Fung argues that it is naive to commit oneself to give reasons and arguments (and nothing but reasons and arguments) even when powerful people refuse to listen. Strikes, boycotts, lawsuits, voter-mobilization campaigns, nonviolent protests, and even occasionally violent uprisings may be necessary. At the same time, Fung believes it is a mistake to abandon deliberation altogether until political equality prevails. If one waits for the "revolution" before becoming a deliberative democrat, then the imperfections of our current order can justify abandoning all pretense of deliberation and simply trying to amass power. That is a path to cynicism and corruption. Fung favors a middle course. The realistic (yet idealistic) deliberative democrat should try to make the world more deliberative through effective political activism, but he or she should be ethically constrained by certain deliberative norms. Specifically, the activist should keep in mind the goal of making institutions more fair and more influenced by reasons. He or she should assume that others will deliberate in good faith until they show by their behavior that they will not. The activist should exhaust deliberative forms of politics (e.g., giving arguments, organizing open meetings) before resorting to non-deliberative tactics. And any non-deliberative responses should be strictly proportional to the situation[19]

Deliberation and diverse styles of participation

In the academic literature, deliberation is sometimes defined as "reasonable" or "rational" conversation, hence different from emotional outbursts, personal testimony, ritual, song, and other forms of human expression.[20] That contrast leads some activists to dislike deliberation. It seems to favor those who are best at reasonable discourse (usually the most highly educated, most urban, and wealthiest citizens). It limits people with grievances to speaking in a calm voice about the common good, when they may have a legitimate need to express anger, grief, and other powerful emotions. And it presumes behavior that is culturally specific, such as sitting in a circle and talking in turn.

---

[18] Robert B. Talisse, "Deliberativist Responses to Activist Challenges: A Continuation of Young's Dialectic." *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, vol. 31, no. 4, p. 428.
[19] Fung, "Deliberation Before the Revolution: Toward an Ethics of Deliberative Democracy in an Unjust World," *Political Theory*, Vol. 33, No. 3, Spring 2005
[20] Seminal definitions of deliberation as rational talk include Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962), translated by T. Burger (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991, p. 54; Joshua Cohen, "Deliberation and Democratic Legitimacy," in Hamlin and Pettit, eds., *The Good Polity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989). For a critique, see Iris Marion Young, "Communication and the Other: Beyond Deliberative Democracy," in Seyla Benhabib, ed., *Democracy and Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

Produced by The Berkeley Electronic Press, 2007

However, deliberation-practitioners are much less likely than academic theorists to use terms like "rational" and "reasonable" in describing excellent public conversations. For them, the chief goal is to get a representative group of people together to communicate about some common issue. They often see emotion as an asset if it increases engagement, provides information about the intensity of participants' views, or encourages introspection.[21] Organizers of deliberation have principles that allow them to distinguish good conversations from bad ones, but their standards do not emphasize rationality. They are more likely to cite the use of reliable information, along with equality, mutual respect, engagement, and participation. Few practical people in the field of public deliberation define it so narrowly as to exclude story-telling, emotional testimony, or even songs.

Activists for deliberation and for various social causes have much to learn from one another; the dialogue should continue. This small empirical study finds that social activists have many doubts about deliberative practices. However, organizers of deliberation hold less rigid views of their own work than might be inferred from classic philosophical texts that define deliberation as the essence of democracy, that equate it with reasonableness or rationality, and that overlook situations in which more confrontational tactics are appropriate. Thus the gap between social activists and deliberation-proponents is narrower than previous writing has assumed.

[21] See the comments of professional facilitators who assessed the quality of actual (taped) deliberations. See Jane Mansbridge, Matthew Amengual, and Janette Hartz-Karp, with Moira Pulitzer Kennedy, "Norms of Deliberation: An Inductive Study," forthcoming in the *Journal of Public Deliberation*, p. 13