**Deliberative Democratic Theory and the Key Challenges,
Opportunities, and Innovations
of 21st Century Democracy**

John Gastil

I would like to begin by thanking the organizers of tonight's lecture for inviting me to speak with you today. Biennale Democrazia reminds us that democracy is a work in progress, and this week's diverse schedule of events looks at democracy from a variety of perspectives—from academic lectures to children's games. But what is the implicit theory of democracy that underlies such a variety of activities? Tonight, I hope to show that one particular blueprint for democracy—the theory of deliberative democracy—helps us better appreciate not only the various events at Biennale Democrazia but also the larger challenges and opportunities in our path as we strive to make our societies and our governments more democratic.

Defining Deliberative Democracy

To begin, let's give some shape to the word democracy itself. To be democratic, a system must have three general features. First, a democracy must be *inclusive*, which is to say that it should include in its decision-making all persons in a society, with the exception of mere tourists, such as myself. Second, a democracy must practice self-government. That is, the citizens included in the democracy should regularly exercise authority through elections and other, more direct processes, such as initiatives and referenda. Third, a democracy must ensure adequate opportunities for all of its citizens to express themselves beyond the mere completion of ballots, through political campaigns, social movements, and other forms of public and private speech.

These three features are a good start, but democracy also requires inclusive, influential, and egalitarian *public deliberation.* Stated more precisely, deliberative democracy fuses together a democratic *social process* with a deliberative *analytic process*. In this view, public talk needs to be democratic by ensuring that each participant has adequate speaking opportunities, ensuring participants can understand one other, and giving each other due consideration and respect. Such talk needs to be deliberative in that it establishes a solid information base, prioritizes the key values at stake, identifies a broad range of solutions, looks carefully at the advantages, disadvantages, and tradeoffs among choices, and ultimately makes the best judgment. To see the power of the theory of deliberative democracy, I will now show how the elements of this theory function as a tool for criticism, appreciation, and innovation.

Obstacles and Challenges

To begin, deliberative democratic theory helps us sharpen our critique of the world as it exists today by showing more precisely where our greatest challenges lie. First, the democratic social process requires that we ensure equal and adequate opportunity for all citizens to express their views. Extreme inequalities of wealth in capitalist society make it impossible to meet this criterion in most nations. The wealthiest elites, such as Rupert Murdoch, have a voice in politics that even thousands of well-organized citizens cannot hope to match.

Deliberation also requires that we *understand* each other's words when we discuss issues. The present global economic crisis reminds us of the sheer technical complexity of many modern problems. Experts and journalists can produce flowcharts and graphs to try to explain what has happened, but the truth is that even trained economists have difficulty grasping the intricacies of hedge funds and credit default swaps. Without opportunities for more intensive deliberation,

average citizens will be excluded from any serious discussions on reforming the global financial system.

Even if we understand each other, we may still choose to *ignore* and *disrespect* one another. Our world contains many powerful public figures who preach political dogma, religious fundamentalism, or even a toxic mix of the two that encourages people to disregard any point of view but their own. Zealots and demagogues sometimes go even farther by promoting active disrespect and hostility toward opponents, usually out of a fear that honest and open public debate could undermine the certainty with which their followers cling to their beliefs.

A related challenge is the difficulty of meaningful public deliberation when some participants refuse to accept the credibility of any non-partisan sources of information. Sometimes, this leads to a wholesale rejection of the mass media and educated "intellectuals." In the United States, though, it also appears as a broad rejection of scientific information, particularly when deployed by Al Gore and others with liberal political viewpoints on issues such as global climate change. Sadly, Gore is not exaggerating when he claims to have witnessed an "assault on reason" in the United States.

A more bi-partisan attack on deliberation comes when policymakers and public alike become short-sighted. Too often, issues are reduced to short-term economic costs and benefits, even when questions of social justice and long-term economic and environmental impacts are more important. Short-sighted thinking becomes even more dangerous when the elites of the major political parties *reach an unreflective* consensus on an issue. In the United States, this happens because both major parties share strong ties to the corporate sector and sometimes work together to pursue a narrow corporate agenda. Alternative views can also get ignored on foreign policy issues, such as in the United States before the war in Iraq, when the opposition Democrats feared sounding "unpatriotic" if they vigorously opposed going to war.

On many other issues, however, major parties *do* disagree but refuse to recognize both the *pros and cons* of alternative policies. Instead, each side simply sharpens its "talking points"—the brief, one-sided arguments they put into an empty public debate. On the Internet, for instance, you can see the strong partisan divide between rival political blogs. In this graphic, the blue dots represent the most popular left-wing political blogs, and the red dots show the top right-wing blogs. Looking only at the strongest connections, it's clear just how little direct exchange occurs across partisan lines.

Finally, deliberation leads to a *decision* made by an executive, legislative, or judicial body. All too often, such decisions happen behind closed doors. Elected and appointed officials refuse to let us scrutinize closely their decision-making processes, which leaves us skeptical of the quality of their deliberations—and, consequently, the decisions made on our behalf.

Opportunities and Innovations

Clearly, when used as a means of critique, deliberative democratic theory brings us a great deal of bad news. This same theory, however, can also reveal existing practices and institutions that provide *opportunities* for us to become more democratic and deliberative, and this theory also has inspired many innovations that can bring us even closer to the deliberative democratic ideal.

Social Process
First, regarding the importance of adequate speaking opportunities, most modern societies have established powerful traditions of vocal public protest. Such events bring unheard voices *into* the public debate, and deliberative democracy requires that we legally protect and culturally celebrate public dissent and demonstration.

One deliberative innovation that privileges the opportunity to speak is the 21st Century Town Meeting. These meetings can bring together thousands of citizens, typically seated at tables in large auditoriums. Participants express their views with fellow citizens both at their small tables and through hand-held devices that record everyone's views and display them on large screens. This technology has even been used with a dispersed population after Hurricane Katrina, when a 21st Century Town Meeting was held simultaneously in multiple cities to record the views of the people of New Orleans, many of whom had temporarily relocated elsewhere.

Returning to more routine practices, every day that we walk a child to school, we help to promote deliberative democracy by promoting mutual comprehension among these young citizens. The building shown here is the high school where I, and my father before me, learned both basic knowledge *and* the skills of public debate and discussion. The National Issues Forums is a deliberation program designed to continue these lessons into adulthood. The Forums have been growing for more than a quarter-century in the United States. Each year, thousands of these discussions happen in churches, workplaces, community centers, and even prisons. At a typical forum, citizens read a brief non-partisan booklet about an issue and then discuss different potential solutions for two or more hours—just enough time to begin to understand the many different ways people think about the issue.

To move from mere comprehension to consideration of different points of view, we can draw on our shared history of powerful social movements over the past half century. Civil rights struggles, the women's rights movement, and, most recently, the gay pride movement have promoted not only tolerance but also the open exploration of different perspectives and ideas.

But can we promote mutual respect even among strident political adversaries? For such situations, the Public Conversations Project has developed methods of dialogue that facilitate appreciation and honest consideration of conflicting point of view. Participants in these structured conversations have—often for the first time in their lives—actually *listened* to the other side. Imagine asking your bitterest opponent why they hold the views they do. What do they value? How they *feel* about an issue? Hearing answers to these questions may not resolve our debates, but the Public Conversations Project helps us learn to disagree publicly with more honesty, openness, and respect.

Analytic Process

Turning to the analytic aspect of deliberative democracy, we gain much of the information we need to understand current problems through the best practices of investigative journalists. Executive abuses of power, such as during the Watergate era under Richard Nixon, came to light in part thanks to the vigilance of the press. In the present day, it's essential that we ensure stable funding and public support for such journalism.

Of course, most citizens don't read the news or watch political programs every day, and when polled about current issues, the public's opinions are often not well informed. The Deliberative Poll was designed to address this problem. These special polls, like the one happening here in Turin as part of Biennale Democrazia, bring together hundreds of randomly-selected people, who become more knowledgeable on an issue by talking to each other and directing questions to expert panelists. Thus, the opinions that participants express at the end of the Deliberative Poll reflect their more informed judgments. The Poll shown above brought together 362 people from across the European Union, and their brief deliberations increased their understanding of a wide range of issues, from foreign policy to employment law.

Deliberation, however, requires not merely sound information but also sincere reflection on one's values. Many questions, such as the "right to die" or "physician assisted suicide," are largely ethical questions, and in our everyday lives, we have often received moral instruction from

dramas such as Medea, which is being performed as part of this week's festivities. Political satire, in cinema and in literature, has also given us considerable insight into the moral dimensions of contemporary political issues.

One innovative deliberative process that helps us weigh conflicting values more carefully is the Citizens' Parliament model, which debuted earlier this year in Canberra, Australia. During the Citizens' Parliament, one hundred and fifty randomly-selected Australians considered a range of reforms to their political system, but they spent much of their time discussing their core values. They then connected those values to specific reform proposals by considering the tensions between such values as personal liberty and civic responsibility.

The Citizens' Parliament was successful, in part, because it was able to draw on a well-built infrastructure of Australian colleges and universities. Year-round, university faculty, staff, and students work together to discover new solutions to public problems and to help us weigh the pros and cons of these alternatives. A robust deliberative democracy would be *impossible* without institutions like the University of Torino or my own University of Washington in the United States.

A new deliberative process that can help bring the public face-to-face with the work of university scholars is the Citizens' Assembly model, created in Canada in 2002. A Citizens' Assembly convenes one hundred or more randomly-selected citizens in weekend meetings over a period of several months. The citizens gradually develop a range of alternatives that reflect their values, then they weigh the tradeoffs among those choices and arrive at a final policy recommendation. The Assembly's recommendation is then put to an official public vote through a referendum, such as the one being held in British Columbia, Canada, just three weeks from today.

Whereas the Citizens' Assembly leads to a final decision through a full public vote, other deliberative processes do well with a smaller decision-making body. One valuable model in modern Italian and American society is the criminal jury system. Through juries, we practice a radical form of self-government, whereby everyday citizens serve as official members of the judicial branch of government. My own research in the United States has found that serving on a criminal jury can prove to be a transformational experience by making jurors more likely to vote and participate in political life after the unique experience of being a juror.

It's likely that deliberative innovations like Participatory Budgeting, developed twenty years ago in Brazil, have the same effect on participants. The Participatory Budgeting process gives the members of civil society organizations a direct voice is setting local budgets, and this makes the budgeting process not only more deliberative but also more open and legitimate, particularly for social groups traditionally excluded from such discussions.

Conclusion

In just a few brief minutes, we've covered a lot of ground. I've done this to show the wide scope of deliberative democratic theory and to emphasize three points. First, deliberative theory can serve us as a powerful tool for criticism by showing more precisely how dogmatism, intolerance, and concentrations of wealth and knowledge undermine the democratic process. Second, deliberative democratic theory helps us appreciate taken-for-granted cultural practices and institutions, from juries to modern cinema. Finally, I hope to have shown how we can add to our best traditions some of the most advanced deliberative processes, from the Public Conversations Project to Citizen Assemblies. By simultaneously recognizing our most serious obstacles, strengthening our best existing practices, and embracing deliberative innovations, we can aspire not merely to achieve special deliberative moments but to establish a new tradition of deliberative cultural practices and public institutions.

Resources and References
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