

Elstub S, Ercan S, Mendonca R.

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Double symposium issue: Theory and practice of deliberative systems

Editorial introduction

Deliberative systems: The fourth generation of deliberative democracy

In recent years, the concept of “deliberative system” has gained renewed attention among deliberative democrats (Thompson 2008; Dryzek 2010a; Parkinson and Mansbridge 2012). The concept of deliberative system refers to an understanding of deliberation as a communicative activity that occurs in multiple, diverse yet partly overlapping spaces, and emphasizes the need for interconnection between these spaces. On this account, deliberation is not confined to the structured forums, which have been the focal point of attention for the scholars of deliberative democracy since the ‘deliberative turn’ in democratic theory in 1990s (Dryzek 2000). The deliberative systems approach entails three closely related ideas that, together, differentiate it from the prevailing notions of deliberation. The first is that it is an approach that conceives and promotes deliberation on a mass scale, the second is the special focus this approach places on a division of labour within a system, and the third is the idea of seeking criteria for ‘deliberation’ across this myriad of institutions and processes of contemporary polities.

The growing body of literature on deliberative systems outlines various merits of this concept in both theory and practice. It is claimed to offer promising solutions to some of the long-standing theoretical issues in the deliberative democracy literature. For example, it offers a way of scaling up legitimation, inclusion, representation (Parkinson 2006; Mendonça 2008), and opens up a new way of conceptualising the interaction between public opinion and decision-making moments of deliberation (Dryzek 2010b; Elstub and Mclaverty 2013). Beside its various theoretical merits, the deliberative systems approach also provides a new way of studying the practice of deliberation in contemporary democracies. It offers fresh answers to some of the prevailing questions including: how to understand and study the relationship between mini-publics and the broader system (Warren 2007; Hendriks 2004; Dodge 2009; Niemeyer 2014, Ercan et al 2015), how to conceptualise the connections and transmission across different sites of deliberative activity (Boswell 2015); and which standards to employ when assessing the deliberative quality of a system as a whole (Dryzek 2009; O’Flynn and Curato 2015).

Despite its conceptual and practical appeal, the concept of deliberative systems also entails potential problems and raises several questions that require attention. The most recent scholarly debates around this concept entail the relationship between the parts and the whole of the deliberative system (Owen and Smith 2015), the prospects of its institutionalization, and the methodological difficulties related to its empirical analysis (Ercan et al 2015). As the rejuvenated focus on deliberative systems is proving crucial for current developments in this field, the concept merits greater scrutiny and empirical investigation. This special double issue on deliberative systems will contribute to this endeavour by bringing together cutting edge conceptual and empirical research on the theory and practice of deliberative systems. It will seek to identify the key challenges against the concept and contribute towards its refinement.

The purpose of this editorial introduction piece is twofold. First, it seeks to present an overview of the themes explored in both issues emphasising the promises and limitations associated with the deliberative systems approach. Second, we seek to situate the deliberative systems approach within the broader deliberative democracy scholarship, which we believe is crucial for capturing the distinctive features of this approach., In doing so, we build on the generational argument made by Elstub (2010) that delineates the development of deliberative democracy into three generations. This enables us to demonstrate why the interest in the ideas of the deliberative system has developed in response to the previous generations' perceived limitations. Furthermore, we argue that the focus on deliberative systems has implications that are so significant for the examination of theory and practice that it heralds a fourth generation. While we appreciate these ramifications for bringing prospects with respect to conceiving deliberative democracy on the mass scale, we also draw attention to possible problems that this achievement could lead to, based on excessive concept stretching on what constitutes deliberation (Ercan and Dryzek 2015). We conclude this introduction by providing a brief synopsis of each article included in this symposium.

The transformation of deliberative democracy across generations

Deliberative democracy has never been a unified theory. Moreover, 'as deliberative theory has developed and matured, it has also become more internally differentiated' (Neblo 2007, 530). Deliberative democrats differ on the questions of what sorts of communication count as deliberative, where deliberation should take place, who should deliberate and how, and what should be the expected outcome of deliberation (Dryzek 2000; Chambers 2003; Gutmann and Thompson 2004; Thompson 2008). Besides significant philosophical differences among

different deliberative democrats, there are also variations in terms of *foci* throughout time, which allow us to consider the developments in this field in terms of four generations, at least for analytical purposes.¹ By identifying ‘discrete generational cohorts’ in deliberative democracy we aim to highlight their ‘distinctive constituent elements’, while avoiding the establishment of ‘artificial and divisive cleavages’ (Dean 2009). There are indeed considerable overlaps between the different generations and as new generations emerge this does not mean that previous generations become redundant. In addition, by generation we do not mean to separate specific sets of scholars across time. Many deliberative democrats have been part of more than one of these generations. The use of the term simply aims at distinguishing important trends in diverse moments. A generational analysis enables us to detail the considerations that have led to the recent focus on deliberative systems.

The first generation scholars of deliberative democracy can be best described through their emphasis on normative theorizing. Habermas (1996) had a very prominent role at this initial wave of thinking about deliberative democracy. He argued that legitimate decisions in a democratic polity could emerge only through a discursive procedure that allows all affected to have a say in the making of collective decisions. The normative theorising was also central in Cohen’s (1989) approach to democratic legitimacy, and in the early work of Dryzek (1990), which advanced a radical conception of discursive democracy allowing the projection of a transnational and non-anthropocentric view of democracy. These scholars articulated the need for deliberative democracy to occur on a mass/ system wide level. Nevertheless, they offered a largely normatively driven vision of deliberative democracy that the current generation of system theorists perceive as practically impossible to achieve on a mass scale as they paid insufficient attention to the challenges that contemporary complexity posed to the practice of deliberation. For example, some first generation scholars conceptualised exchange of reasons as the only applicable form of communication resulting in uniform preference change. This rather limited notion of deliberation was directly challenged by the rise of the second generation of deliberative democracy, which sought to offer ‘new and distinct interpretations of reason giving, preference change, consensus and compromise, and applicable forms of communication’ (Elstun 2010, 298).

¹ We use the term ‘generations’ here as an umbrella term that provides a narrative of change in deliberative democracy that is not linear, similar to the ‘wave’ metaphor in feminism. Our purpose is to bring a coherence and unity to a diversity of approaches to deliberative democracy.

The scholars of the second generation such as Dryzek (2000), Deveaux (2003) and Young (1996) expanded the definition of deliberation in order to make it more sensitive to the increasing plurality and complexity in contemporary democracies. They problematised the consensus and rational argument requirements of deliberation and brought deliberative democratic theory in close connection with several other fields including feminism, multiculturalism and environmental politics. Deveaux (2003), for instance, developed a deliberative approach to conflicts of culture. Dryzek (2000) challenged the liberal tone pervading deliberative scholarship influenced by Habermas, and developed a critical conception of deliberation, grounded on the idea of a contestation of discourses in the public sphere. Young (1996) offered a powerful criticism of the speech styles advocated by first generation deliberative scholars, arguing that, besides rational argumentation, deliberation should allow storytelling, rhetoric and greetings as legitimate forms of communication to enable greater inclusivity.

The second generation has acknowledged the normative nature of deliberative theory as well, yet the theoretical questions they have raised, particularly with respect to the capacity of deliberative theory to accommodate diversity and plurality in contemporary democracies, have helped to sharpen the critical edge of deliberative theory. In particular it raised issues with potential inequalities within discursive processes and paid attention to the possibility of instrumentalisation or strategic use of deliberation by powerful actors. In doing so, these scholars brought deliberative democracy closer to ‘real-world’ conflicts and dilemmas. Neblo (2007, 534) praised this orientation in deliberative theory arguing that these theorists ‘deserve enormous credit for making deliberation a more workable and fully developed ideal’ (see also Elstub 2010, 298, for a similar discussion).

However, the scholars of the second generation usually refrained from engaging in the specifics of detailed institutional design and empirical analysis of deliberative practices. The third generation emerged to correct this failing by promoting and researching the capacity of a number of institutional mechanisms that may be able to foster actual deliberation. It is, nonetheless, the revised, more practice orientated, theory of the second generation that they sought to institutionalise (Elstub 2010). After all, feasible deliberation required institutions that could cope with a variety of ‘real world’ issues such as cultural pluralism, self-interests, and social inequalities.

Therefore, the dominant trend within the third generation of investigations in deliberative democracy has focused on its feasibility, namely, the design of deliberative institutions and the empirical analysis of these. In doing so the scholars of third generation drew particularly on the growing body of literature on various participatory practices such as Citizens' Juries, Planning Cells, Consensus Conferences and Participatory Budgeting. In the 1990's, Fishkin (1995) advanced the idea of the deliberative polls, as a new way to conduct public opinion research. The debate, then, blossomed around the notion of minipublics and their potential to foster deliberative practice (Ackerman and Fishkin 2003; Fung 2003; Fung and Wright 2003; Gastil and Levine 2005; Avritzer, 2009; Elstub 2014; Grönlund et al 2014). Besides their strong interest in implementing deliberation in the context of 'real life' politics, the third generation scholars have also sought for suitable methods enabling the systematic and close investigation of deliberative processes and to determine the required parameters for institutional design (Sulkin and Simon 2001). In doing so, however, the third generation adopted mainly a micro approach to deliberation that isolated minipublics and other institutions from the broader discursive environment and macro context within which they operate (Thompson 2008; Chambers 2009; Dryzek 2010b; Mansbridge et al. 2012).

It is precisely in this context that the scholars of deliberative democracy have begun to pay renewed attention to the concept of deliberative systems. The starting point of the systems approach is the need to understand deliberation beyond isolated deliberative practices and to examine not only the relationship between different deliberative sites, but also 'the relationship between deliberative and non-deliberative practices in the political system as a whole and over time' (Thompson 2008, 500). Overall, the systemic turn in deliberative democracy can be characterised as an attempt to reconcile the insights gained from three preceding generations, namely the strong normative premises, institutional feasibility, and empirical results. As such, the deliberative system approach offers a new way of thinking about the theory and practice of deliberation, and the emerging research can be seen as heralding the fourth generation of deliberative democracy.

The systemic turn and the fourth generation of deliberative democracy

The term *deliberative system* was first coined by Mansbridge at the end of the 1990s. In her seminal article, Mansbridge (1999) argues that deliberation should be understood through broad lenses capable of grasping the complexities of discursive flows in contemporary societies. Such conception of deliberation, she notes, not only promises to be more inclusive, but also draws

attention to the conditions that help enhance the quality of public deliberation. Moreover, deliberation should not be reduced to face-to-face dialogue, but understood in terms of a wider discursive process. This impetus represents a significant change from some more traditional conceptions of deliberative democracy, where deliberation occurs in close proximity to binding collective decision-making (Cohen 2007).

The idea of a ‘system’ involving the interrelation of parts for the constitution of a deliberative process is not completely new. It had already been employed by several advocates of the deliberative turn. Most notably, the idea goes back to Habermas (1996)’ notion of dual-track model of deliberation. According to Habermas, deliberative politics depends on a complex system with a nucleus that needs to be open to the peripheries of discursive production. The wild communicative flows of the broad public sphere may be filtered so as to constitute a communicative power, which can be translated through laws into administrative power (Habermas 2005, 388). The idea of a broad *clash of discourses* is also at the heart of the work of Dryzek (1990) who has advocated an approach that is not centered on individuals, but focuses on the public contestation of discourses and its influence on decision-making. In his later work, Dryzek (2010a; 2010b; 2011) has focused on the normative conditions of deliberative quality at a system level, and suggested evaluating the deliberative system in its entirety. More recently, Mansbridge et al. (2012) outline the basic functions of deliberative systems, namely, the epistemic, the ethical and the democratic function. Denying the naïveté of the approach, the authors present some pathologies recurrent in real-world systems, such as the tight coupling of arenas, the decoupling of discursive spheres and the domination of the system.

Overall, the deliberative systems approach has three core notions that we think have been particularly important in terms of the evolution of deliberative democracy. The first is an attempt to conceive and promote deliberation on a mass scale, the second is the increasing focus on a division of labour within a system, and the third is an introduction of a continuum of criteria for ‘deliberation’ across this myriad of institutions and processes. When seen together, these attempts are sufficiently discrete from the previous generations, to represent a fourth generation of deliberative democracy. It certainly seems to be the case that systems theorists themselves believe their approach represents something like a new generation of deliberative democracy: ‘Our aim is to articulate an over-arching approach to deliberation that could signal a new and we think exciting direction for deliberative theory, but which is not

itself a free standing theory of deliberative democracy' (Mansbridge et al. 2012, 4). A nuanced analysis of this move, however, indicates various practical and methodological challenges. This is particularly true with respect to the relaxation of the criteria of deliberation, which may result in rendering it undistinguishable from other forms of communication, and consequently dampen the critical orientation that was at the core of the original, first generation, conceptions of deliberative democracy. To make this case we now consider each of the distinctive notions of the deliberative system in turn.

The aim to secure the norms of deliberative democracy on a mass scale and the understanding that we need to consider broader discursive structures to achieve this, is the first way that the systems approach demonstrates a break from the third generation, where the focus was on how specific and micro institutions and processes can promote democratic deliberation and advocating measures to improve this. As Chambers (2012, 54) explains it 'rather than focusing on single instances, institutions, or even spheres, this approach looks at the connections between instances, institutions, and spheres'. Similarly, Parkinson (2012, 152) indicates that the systemic turn seeks to address the democratic deficit of isolated minipublics. This impetus alone does not indicate that the systems approach represents a fourth generation of deliberative democracy, as the normative ideal of the first was also to have democratic deliberation on a mass scale. In this sense the fourth generation takes deliberative democracy full circle and back to its origins. Nevertheless, the renewed focus on deliberative systems does still indicate a departure from the third generation, while also being affected by the changes advanced by the second and the third generations. The fourth generation is not, hence, simply a return to the premises advocated by the first.

The second crucial element on recent deliberative systems research is the increasing focus on a need for a division of labour. Accordingly, 'the criterion for good deliberation should not be that every interaction in the system exhibit mutual respect, consistency, acknowledgement, open mindedness, and moral economy, but that the larger system reflect those goals' (Mansbridge 1999: 224). The suggestion is that that different parts of the system can supplement and correct the failings of other parts to form a mutually enhancing relationship (Mansbridge et al. 2012, 2f.). For example, Parkinson (2006) claims that different sites and different moments offer diverse contributions to public deliberation. In his approach, therefore, both the dimensions of time and space are essential if one is to understand the *modus operandi* of deliberative systems. At different phases of a policy process, diverse actors and various venues may have distinct

virtues and contrasting limitations. In all of these phases, informal, formal, and intermediate discursive settings should be considered (Parkinson 2006, 168). Utilizing a similar perspective, Goodin (2005; 2008) argues for a *sequencing of deliberative moments*, claiming that the deliberative task should be distributed. This division of labor helps in the thinking of deliberation as a totality. In the sequential approach, each arena has its virtues and the way to organize the sequence of deliberative moments matters, to ensure these deliberative virtues proceed in an appropriate order. Relatedly, Hendriks (2011) advocates an integrated model of deliberation, capable of hosting a multiplicity of arenas including macro informal debate, micro formal arenas, and hybrid (or mixed) mini-publics.

In some instances of current systems theorizing, the division of labour is extended to such an extent that parts of a system that meet none of the deliberative criteria when viewed in isolation, are seen to fulfill vital deliberative roles in the system (Dryzek 2011; Mansbridge et al. 2012; Bohman 2012). In turn, highly deliberative parts of the system can have detrimental effects on deliberation in the system as a whole. The existing institutions, Dryzek (2009, 1388) argues, ‘can constitute, and interact within, a deliberative system in intricate and variable ways. Seemingly low deliberative quality in one location (say corporatist state institutions) may be compensated by, or even inspire, higher deliberative quality in another location (say, a flourishing public sphere). Conversely, high deliberative quality in one location may undermine deliberative quality in another.’ We must therefore consider and evaluate an entire deliberative system rather than simply the constituent parts (Dryzek 2011, 226-227).

Owen and Smith (2015) are concerned that we could consequently have a ‘deliberative system’ where no deliberation actually takes place. Chambers anticipates this critique and argues that although the division of labour is required it should not be excessive as this could be dysfunctional. We therefore support Thompson’s (2008, 502) contention that the key is to ‘treat these other activities as part of a larger democratic process, rather than as instances of deliberation per se.’ This means they might be considered external to a deliberative system too. If this is accepted, then considerably more empirical evidence is required to establish that non-deliberative parts of the system do bring deliberative benefits to the system as a whole. Furthermore, we need to establish the ‘appropriate normative criteria for determining when deviations from deliberative norms are legitimate’ (Owen and Smith 2015, 225).

The third, more crucial, and perhaps concerning, impetus in the systems approach is the relaxation and more ecumenical view of what constitutes ‘deliberation’ and particularly

‘democratic deliberation’, to an even greater extent than was evidenced by the third generation. For example, Chambers (2012, 52) suggests that only a systemic approach to deliberative democracy can ensure mass democracy and that this ‘requires that we rethink some standard definitions of deliberation and deliberative democracy.’ In fact a ‘capacious’ definition of deliberation must be embraced. For Mansbridge (1999, 227). there is a spectrum of venues for deliberation including representative assemblies, public assemblies, the public sphere and everyday talk and ‘moving along this range entails moving along a similar range, from formal to informal, within the same standards for good deliberation.’ Therefore all instances of deliberation should still be judged on the criteria of reciprocity, publicity and accountability, for example, while not expecting the same level of the criteria in each venue (Mansbridge 1999, 213). It is precisely at this point that we find the seeds of the fourth generation of deliberative democracy as the notion of what constitutes deliberation is broadened and its criteria relaxed. Neblo argues that this need not take definitions of deliberative democracy ‘to the point of vacuity’ as we should still view everything through ‘the lens of deliberative theory’ (Neblo 2005, 11; see Thompson 2008, 513; 515 for a similar stance).

This seems to be an acceptable response, however, it is not clear that all approaches to deliberative systems do employ a deliberative lens in this manner. For example, for Parkinson (2012, 154), the key to utilizing a division of labour in the system is to increase ‘the pool of perspectives, claims, narratives, and reasons’, but ‘whether those perspectives, are generated deliberatively or not is neither here nor there.’ Owen and Smith (2015, 221) rightly critique this suggestion as it ignores the fact that authentic (see Dryzek 2010b, 23) ‘perspectives, claims, narratives, and reasons’ in a deliberative perspective, do not already exist, but must be formed and tested by running the gauntlet of public reasoning. Parkinson (2012, 159) nevertheless maintains that ‘deliberation on this account still has some analytical bite- it is not all things to all people.’ However, Neblo (2007, 529) acknowledges ‘that there is a danger in extending a concept to the point of vacuity. If deliberation and deliberative theory are to have any cutting power they must be contrasted with other forms of political interaction’ (see also Bächtiger et al. 2010, 48 for a similar suggestion).

Elstub (2010) has raised similar concerns about the danger of concept stretching within the deliberative literature. If the systemic approach makes deliberative democracy more practical and easier to achieve (through the division of labour between parts; the acceptance that all the norms of deliberative democracy will not be enacted in one place; the contention

that some parts do not need to embody any elements of deliberation; the suggestion that processes that are detrimental to deliberative quality can still be essential features of the system, and the overall loosening of the criteria of what counts as deliberation) it is also important to keep in mind that deliberative democracy is a regulative ideal (Ercan and Dryzek 2015). It should, hence, be employed to critique practice, as Mendonça and Cunha (2014) have claimed. For Neble (2007, 536) ‘realism, *per se*, is hardly a virtue in a regulative ideal. A too realistic ideal is merely an apology for the status quo.’ In other words, deliberative systems do not necessarily imply an accommodation to reality and must still work as a regulative ideal. Therefore, although a continuum of deliberative standards for assessing the parts of the system is inevitable, the standards to judge deliberative democracy at the system level need to be kept normatively robust and stringent.

In summary, the fourth generation of thought within deliberative democracy scholarship brings great potential and crucial problems to the theory and practice of deliberation. There is need of robust empirical evidence that establishes the claim that non-deliberative parts can fulfil vital systemic functions more effectively than deliberative ones. Moreover, an overly capacious set of deliberative criteria employed in the systems continuum might easily lead deliberative democracy towards vacuity and render it indistinguishable to any other approaches. The challenge then is to carefully consider, and empirically investigate, how deliberation on a mass level can be conceived and practically implemented, without excessively watering down the key tenets of deliberative democracy. The articles in this double symposium represent some important developments on this journey.

The main focus of the first symposium issue is the investigation of the implications of the systemic turn for deliberative theory. While all three articles welcome the move towards a more expansive approach to deliberation, they draw attention to various theoretical dilemmas that this approach faces. William Smith’s article addresses one of the key problems highlighted here, the suggestion that non-deliberative processes are integral to deliberative systems. For Smith this creates a boundary problem, as it becomes fuzzy as to which processes are internal and external to the system and this is hindering the normative and empirical development of the deliberative systems approach. In response, Smith offers an account of the constitutive features of a deliberative system based upon ‘deliberative action’. The utility of this for drawing clear boundaries to the deliberative system is illuminated through an application to disruptive protest.

Similarly, Ricardo Mendonça draws attention to several ‘systemic dangers’. He argues that the idea of deliberative systems may reinforce rather than alleviate political asymmetries, increase decision makers’ discretionary powers, and cover, rather than reveal, possible incompatibilities among different discourses. Having laid out each of these dangers in detail, he then considers how they might be mitigated. According to Mendonça, the key lies in establishing and strengthening connections across different discursive arenas. This goal makes three types of actors particularly relevant for the idea of deliberative systems: bureaucrats, media, and activists. He shows how each of them can serve as inducers of connectivity in the deliberative system, and help mitigate the risks previously discussed.

The third and final article of the first issue of the symposium addresses the division of labour issue that we raised above, that is central to all conceptions of the deliberative system. Alfred Moore particularly focuses on the problems a division of labour can create for democratic equality by focusing on the issue of expertise. For Moore, epistemic, and indeed all, divisions of labour in a deliberative system, must be subject to meta-deliberation, and he particularly highlights how epistemic communities, the public sphere, and mini-publics can promote and enable public judgement on expertise in deliberative systems. The first issue of the symposium on deliberative systems theory is concluded with insightful critical commentary of the papers by John Dryzek, who suggests that together their critiques could represent the seeds of a fifth generation of deliberative democracy, while also calling for more empirical studies of deliberative systems to assist in overcoming some of the problems of the theory highlighted by the papers.

Drawing on rich and original empirical material, the articles in the second issue, do just that, and engage with several issues that confront the deliberative systems approach in practice. In this contribution, John Boswell, Carolyn Hendriks, and Selen Ercan unpack the meaning of transmission within a deliberative system, and present examples of different transmission mechanisms at play. This analysis reveals how institutional and discursive context in a given society may foster or hinder transmission across different sites, and emphasizes the need for a contextualized comprehension of different processes if we are to take the agenda of scaling up deliberation forward.

The focus on connection continues to the second article of the practice special issue. Eleonora Cunha and Debora Almeida consider how civil society can enhance representation through the interconnection of different discursive spheres in deliberative systems. Using the

Brazilian Social Assistance System, which promotes many participatory and deliberative institutions and processes, as a case study, Cuhna and Almeida suggest that it is institutional design and the circulation of participants that were vital to promoting interconnection between discursive spheres in this context. However, they also highlight that their effects can be contradictory.

Drawing on the insights suggested by the network approach, Andrew Knops develops a normative framework to navigate the complexity of real world policy processes and assess the deliberativeness of these processes. Given that no single real-world deliberative exchange alone can cover all the issues faced by complex policy issues, Knops suggests understanding deliberation in terms of a 'network of deliberative exchanges'. Provided that each network is grounded in deliberative principle, he argues, the network model demonstrates that it is possible to scale up deliberation and make it relevant for the real-world decision-making processes. By using the concept of the network of deliberative exchanges as a benchmark, Knops discusses the poor deliberative quality of the key stages in the Thatcher government's decision to adopt a poll tax in the UK. The second issue of the symposium on deliberative systems in practice is concluded with astute critical commentary of the papers by Leonardo Avritzer.

Together these articles advance the agenda of research on deliberative systems in theory and practice, and deliberative democracy in general. Given their focus on a variety of controversial policy issues and process problems, the articles also have relevance for the study of policy making and the practices of policy analysis in contemporary democracies. For the scholars of public policy, the deliberative systems approach offers most notably a new normative angle to capture and evaluate the democratic quality of debates on controversial policy issues and to analyse the veracity of the policy process. It suggests a new way of mapping the sites and actors of policy processes by paying particular attention to the broader context of such processes. As such it is our hope that the articles in this symposium will also further the conversation and cross-fertilisation across different subfields of Political Science including critical policy studies.

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