A NATION THAT (SOMETIMES) LIKES TO TALK

A Brief History of Public Deliberation in the United States

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The creation of this book is a testament to the strength of a new deliberative democracy movement. Chapters Two through Eighteen document the many ways in which people in the United States and other countries have developed the idea of deliberation into real methods for public discussion and self-government. Some of the programs detailed in this volume have refined their techniques over decades, whereas others represent a new wave of deliberative experimentation.

Although the following chapters reveal important differences in approach and method, all of the deliberation programs that are described share a set of premises. Advocates of deliberation presume that it is worthwhile for diverse groups of citizens—not just experts and professional politicians—to discuss public issues. Civic discussions, moreover, should have an impact on something important—usually law or public policy but sometimes mass behavior, public knowledge and attitudes, or cultural practices. Even in a representative democracy, direct, participatory democracy plays an important role in emphasizing and furthering public discussion, dialogue, or deliberation and thereby addressing public problems in ways that respect diverse interests and values.

After reading the chapters that follow, one might conclude that American democracy has taken a bold new step forward by adding civic deliberation to its repertoire of institutions and practices. This conclusion would fit comfortably with the conventional view that democracy has consistently improved in the United States as the electorate has expanded and citizens have won new political rights.

Many modern nations share a mythology emphasizing their linear, inexorable progress toward civic perfection.

The reality is more sobering. There is nothing inevitable or irreversible about the deliberative democracy movement, and irrational exuberance about deliberation could lead unwary readers to overlook countertrends that could undermine recent advances. In this chapter, we hope to demonstrate that the deliberative mode of democracy can ebb and flow under changing circumstances. As broadly as we can, we discuss the rise and fall of deliberation in the United States from 1910 to 1940, then consider what recent events have caused it to rise (and might cause it to fall) once again.

History and Democracy

To plan for democracy's future, we need to know its past. Some might fear that such ruminations could trigger paralytic self-doubt and undermine the United States' campaign to win the world's allegiance to democracy; they believe that the romantic version of the story is more palatable. Yet a historical perspective could help Americans recognize that our own historical journey remains unfinished, and this modest self-appraisal could prevent the reckless export of unpolished democratic ideology.

According to its authorized biography, the United States has progressed through a succession of cultural and institutional improvements. Just as the rise and fall of the stock market has occurred within a steady long-term ascent, so has this nation moved, in fits and starts for over two hundred years, toward an increasingly democratic polity. The adoption of the Constitution, followed quickly by the Bill of Rights, set the process in motion by bringing together a nascent nation and equipping it with a set of rights now taken to be fundamental to any democracy. The power of the electorate has grown through the popular election of senators (ratified in 1913), which removed a barrier between the expression of popular will and the creation of national policy. In the same period, many states began to implement direct democratic devices, such as the initiative and recall, which are practiced with greater fervor (and controversy) today than ever before.

Some changes have gradually increased the number and kind of people who can and do vote. The eligible voting public was enlarged by the passage of women's suffrage in 1919, the admission of African Americans (officially, anyway) to citizenship after the Civil War, and the increasing attention to enfranchising minorities as a consequence of the civil rights movement. Lowering the voting age to eighteen in 1972 expanded the franchise further. Since then, there have been reforms designed to enlarge the electorate even more by making voter reg-

istration easier; expanding absentee voting, early voting, and voting by mail; and making participation more accessible to people with disabilities.

Beyond expanded voting rights, many other recent changes have enhanced the scope and quality of citizenship. These advances include the explicit rejection, in the last half century, of government intrusions on the right to assembly, such as those perpetrated by the House Committee on Un-American Activities or COINTELPRO, the counterintelligence programs of the Federal Bureau of Investigation. The amount and variety of information available to voters has increased through expanded freedom of the press (by means of the Freedom of Information Act and the precedent set by the publication of the Watergate papers), in addition to voter information guides, many of which are now available on-line.

These changes and many others caused democratic theorist Robert Dahl to suggest that the history of the United States is a roughly linear movement through stages toward ever-higher levels of "polyarchy" on the road to democracy. More and more groups of people (or their representatives) have a seat at the table, and nearly every issue is (or could be) on the public's agenda.[1]

Yet some changes in the political landscape suggest a nonlinear history. These anomalous historical sequences suggest that the process of democratization can have a cyclic character or even fall into steady decline. Some modern trends and events appear to be weakening democratic institutions. The news media, from newspapers to television, have undergone massive technological changes since the early nineteenth century that have coincided with their changing business structure. Many Americans worry today, just as they did in 1900 (but not in 1850 or 1950) about increased concentration of media ownership and how it could affect the democratic functions of the fourth estate.

Every time the United States goes to war, restrictions on civil liberties spring up; 2001's Patriot Act is only the most recent example. Jay Martin has recently argued that John Dewey's objections to World War I stemmed mostly from his fear that democratic reforms would not survive the inevitable authoritarian fervor that surrounds a war. Dewey was worried not only about institutional changes, such as restrictions on the press, but also about changes in the public's civic attitudes and habits during a military campaign. Dewey was concerned about the vitality of the nation's civic culture—its tolerance, sense of duty, public spiritedness, and political efficacy.[2]

These cultural threads of democratic life are difficult to trace across time. It is possible that as we craft ever more democratic public *institutions,* we may be losing or weakening important cultural habits and traditions. In *Democracy in America,* Alexis de Tocqueville described in detail the cultural aspects of American life in the 1830s that he thought provided the substructure that held up America's prized

democratic institutions.[3] One of the most popular academic books in recent years is Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone,* which documents a precipitous decline in "social capital"—the social networks and mutual trust that sustain democratic institutions. Although others have disputed his findings, his book resonated with many readers who sensed a steady decline in social trust and civic engagement.[4]

Rather than see the history of democracy in America as a linear story of either progress or decline, it might be more helpful to view it as a succession of experiments in different places on a continuum ranging from populist democracy to modest republicanism to elitist republicanism. Populist democracy, or radical democracy, emphasizes the inclusion of as many citizens as possible in voting on decisions; referenda are a characteristic tool of populist democracy. Representative forms of democracy emphasize deliberative institutions placed at a remove from the ebb and flow of public opinion, institutions where elected representatives can deliberate carefully. In our view, the United States has oscillated between populist and representative democratic traditions, periodically renegotiating the balance originally struck between the federalists and the democrats in the Constitution. Sometimes the United States has been more populist, such as in the 1820s or in the Progressive era. At other times, the nation has been more elitist, such as during the founding era or the Gilded Age.

Institutional safeguards both in the federal government and in the relation of the states to federal power have been set up to prevent succumbing to either the sins of mobocracy or the vices of oligarchy or plutocracy, but even these safeguards have been amended, dismantled, shored up, and rebuilt at various times. Cultural trends have tended sometimes toward populist and sometimes toward elitist conceptions of citizenship and politics, shaping our social practices as much as our public institutions.

These changes represent more than the changing democratic fashions and tastes. Sometimes unambiguously democratic habits fade or disappear altogether, representing a genuine move away from the ideal. When this happens, it is essential that we study such fragile democratic practices so that we might reintroduce them to the political system. Accordingly, in this essay, we will trace the emergence, decline, and reemergence of one particular democratic art, public deliberation, which has begun to reemerge after fifty years of dormancy.

Late Twentieth-Century Deliberation in the United States

Deliberation is a commonplace word, used most often to describe the process used by juries, councils, legislatures, and other bodies that make decisions after a period of reasoned discussion. Slowly, over the past twenty years, this humble term

has taken on a more precise and demanding meaning when used to designate a particular form of democracy. In *Beyond Adversary Democracy* (1983), Jane Mansbridge explains that there are two contrasting models of American democracy—one adversarial and one unitary. The former has dominated our political culture, but there is also an oft-forgotten unitary tradition represented by town meetings and the pursuit of consensus. In the unitary mode, a public engages in respectful deliberation, weighs conflicting evidence and sentiments, and arrives at an enlightened understanding of the general will.[5] In the aftermath of the 1960s, it was common to indict the unitary model as a covert sort of conformism that inevitably stifles dissent and difference. More recent scholarship, such as Francesca Polletta's *Freedom Is an Endless Meeting,* has begun to rehabilitate the democratic experiments of that era.[6] At the time of Mansbridge's book, however, it was revelatory to discover anything of value in tedious discussions that sought to reach consensus.

The next year, in 1984, Benjamin Barber published *Strong Democracy,* one of the best-selling scholarly books on democratic theory.[7] For Barber, a democracy built on representative institutions, adversarial competition among conflicting interests, and the protection of private rights was weak compared to one that gave equal or greater emphasis to community action, public talk, and civic responsibility. Barber recommended a complex array of reforms, many of which have since reappeared in the hundreds of subsequent academic articles on deliberative democracy in political science, communication, and philosophy journals.

Of all the ideas advanced by deliberative theorists, one has received the most attention—the deliberative poll, first suggested in a 1988 *Atlantic Monthly* essay by political science professor James Fishkin.[8] In 1996, Fishkin and a team of nonprofit foundations brought a random sample of over four hundred American citizens to Austin, Texas, to deliberate on pressing national issues, interview prospective presidential candidates, and record their opinions. Fishkin dubbed the event the National Issues Convention, and it was his hope that the postconvention opinions expressed by the attendees would have a "recommending force" and that for the first time, the nation would hear the voice of a *deliberative* public. (See Chapter Five for more on deliberative polling.)

The National Issues Convention received considerable press, and many of its sessions aired on PBS's public television stations. It may even have had an impact on the formats of that year's presidential debates and other media events, which incorporated quasi-random samples of the public as questioners and discussants. The outcomes of the deliberative poll, however, had no clear impact on the election. When another national deliberative poll was held in January 2003, it received little notice. Despite its relevance at the time, policymakers and the media did not notice the surprising shift in participants' opinions; as they deliberated, more of them came to support a United Nations–sponsored solution to the Iraq crisis.[9]

The renewed impulse for deliberation has had other dramatic manifestations, such as President Clinton calling for a national dialogue on race. Delivering the commencement address at the University of California, San Diego, on June 14, 1997, Clinton announced a plan to "promote a dialogue in every community of the land to confront and work through these issues, to recruit and encourage leadership at all levels to help breach racial divides."[10]

Clinton's reference to *dialogue* rather than deliberation emphasized that in addition to encompassing reasoned policy analysis, talk about race must confront differences in experiences and perspectives, requiring as much emotional as intellectual labor. "Honest dialogue," he acknowledged, "will not be easy at first. We'll all have to get past defensiveness and fear and political correctness and other barriers to honesty. Emotions may be rubbed raw, but we must begin." The ultimate impact of the dialogue on race eludes measurement, but the point here is that a sitting president thought it appropriate to launch an initiative promoting public deliberation and dialogue. Such an action indicates that something—whether political or cultural—was needed beyond the thirty years of civil rights legislation.

Beyond dramatic events such as the racial dialogue and deliberative polls, innumerable programs, organizations, and local initiatives have been undertaken in the name (or spirit) of deliberative democracy over the past fifteen years. Many public officials, lay citizens, activists, and academics are interested in increasing the quality of deliberation that takes place in public settings and creating more venues in which citizens and policymakers can meet and talk intelligently and honestly about values and policies.

A sampling of the different deliberative activities initiated in recent years might include the National Issues Forums, a program organized by the Kettering Foundation but convened across the country by a decentralized network of community organizers, local leaders, public officials, educators, and public-spirited citizens (see Chapter Three). These forums bring together communities, church groups, prisoners, adult literacy students, and others to talk about current issues in a distinctive format that breaks issues down into three or four choices and emphasizes the trade-offs of each approach.

Another program that has gained in popularity over the past decade consists of a variety of study circles and community dialogues assisted by the Study Circles Resource Center (see Chapter Fourteen). The study circles approach seeks to improve the quality of public talk by combining open dialogue with focused deliberation and, using community organizing techniques, attracting a large and diverse body of participants. Local organizers adapt study circle processes to achieve a variety of outcomes ranging from shifting individual attitudes and behaviors to sparking collective action to engendering institutional or public policy changes.

The Internet has made possible a new generation of deliberative discussions, such as those convened by meetup.org, MoveOn.org, and e-thePeople.org (see Chapter Fifteen). Thousands of chat rooms, listservs, moderated discussions, and other on-line processes bring together people from across the country (and, in some cases, across the globe) to discuss public issues with one another in a way that was not possible before the widespread adoption of the Internet. Some innovators have created software, such as UnChat, that is specifically designed to facilitate careful deliberation rather than the ranting cross fire that takes place during the less sober on-line exchanges.

The U.S. government has recognized the potential benefits of harnessing public deliberation in its rule-making processes and has created an infrastructure for this purpose. Although public hearings have existed for many decades, on-line versions of these hearings have made it possible for a broader public to participate. They have also made it easier for agencies to give participants direct feedback, including explicit references to on-line input in amended policy documents.

Bodies as diverse as the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, public utilities, state transportation departments, and school districts have experimented with face-to-face deliberative methods to improve the quality of public input. For example, in 1998, the Orono Board of Education, located just outside Minneapolis, Minnesota, convened a Citizens Jury to learn why citizens kept rejecting school bonds. The jury, composed of a representative sample of the electorate, drafted a novel bond proposal, which the board then placed on the ballot. The bond passed, but only after its proponents campaigned with the Citizens Jury as a key justification.[11] (See Chapters Seven and Eight for more on citizens' juries.)

Though diffuse in their methods, locations, and goals, the theorists and practitioners of deliberative democracy are sufficiently connected that one might say there is a nascent movement to make deliberation a central feature of our political culture and, perhaps, our institutions. A greater quantity and quality of public dialogue and deliberation would likely make the United States more democratic, but it would be a mistake to assume that the deliberative turn represents yet another sure step in the steady march toward the democratic ideal. After all, this is not the first time this country has celebrated the virtues of deliberation.

Early Twentieth-Century Deliberation in the United States

Deliberation emerged as an important cultural force in the early part of the twentieth century. This earlier appearance of deliberation was not just another peak in a cycle that repeats every fifty years, and this historical emergence was different from the more recent reemergence in important ways. It is necessary to revisit this

earlier period to understand what characteristics were shared with today's emergence of deliberation, what was different and, ultimately, what causes the deliberation movement to appear and disappear periodically. We can learn by revisiting the past with our contemporary concerns and constraints in mind.

By the second and third decades of the twentieth century, both the public and academics were aware that the New England town meeting, the model of democracy that was sentimentally favored in the public imagination, was no longer viable. (And never mind that those meetings never were the ideal sites of populist democracy that legend had made them out to be.) Not only had the industrial transformation of the U.S. economy moved the majority of the population from farms into rapidly expanding cities, but this population was increasingly diverse. No longer secluded in isolated rural communities, Americans in cities were confronted with just how many of their fellow citizens spoke a different language, ate different food, or worshipped at a different church. The nation lacked the small size and homogeneity that both Pericles and Jefferson had assumed to be necessary for democracy. The connectedness provided by newspapers and radio only served to demonstrate the vastness of the geographical distances that separated different communities, because reliance on them meant surrendering the face-to-face traditions of civic communication. People knew that others, all over the country, were listening to the same broadcast, but couldn't know or speak to one another. The Populist mentality of the late nineteenth century seemed to have foundered on the sheer scale of the populace, in terms of geography, numbers, and diversity.

Progressive reformers at the turn of the century had responded to the crisis of the Gilded Age by increasing some means of direct representation (the direct election of Senators and the ballot initiative are artifacts of this period); at the same time, they increased the size and complexity of public bureaucracies, thereby distancing citizens from government. But as Kevin Mattson showed in *Creating a Democratic Public,* urban governments across the country developed techniques for opening up government to popular participation. In addition, many of the characteristic Progressive civic and nongovernmental institutions sponsored deliberative practices, as Peter Levine has documented. Settlement houses and community centers sponsored debate clubs and forum series, and granges provided places where farmers could discuss the issues of the day.[12]

One of the new methods of citizen involvement was the "open forum." In spurts from about 1900 onward, the open forum movement (later called *the forum movement*) gained ground, especially in urban areas. The word *open* designated the (then) novel idea that such discussion would not be limited to private clubs but would be open to the general public. The open forum reproduced a Chautauqua practice in which a speaker on a current topic would take questions from the audience and a *discussion* would ensue. For many people, this sort of discussion

seemed to exemplify the democratic spirit of the town meeting. Such discussions didn't directly lead to laws or policies, but they embodied the spirit of deliberation in a public setting.[13]

One of the most memorable examples of these deliberative institutions was Ford Hall. In 1908, George Coleman opened the Ford Hall Forum in Boston, based on a bequest from recently deceased local philanthropist Daniel Sharp Ford. Coleman met Ford's wishes by providing a diverse and often working-class audience with a place to hear speakers and respond to them. The original handbills "were printed in English, Italian and Yiddish." No one imagined that this was in fact *direct* democracy; a 1930 account of the Ford Hall Forum was subtitled "A Demonstration in Adult Education." Yet it seemed to fit with an emerging sense of expanded political participation. In a 1915 article in the new *Quarterly Journal of Public Speaking,* "The Forum as an Educative Agency," Rollo Lyman of the University of Chicago claimed that the most valuable part of the Chautauqua was not the entertainments but the educational part, the forum. He recommended that forums be detached from the singing, theater, poetry, and oratory and that they be sponsored by colleges in their local communities.[14]

Lyman voiced a widely felt sentiment, and forums spread across the country. In 1920, the League for Political Education opened the Town Hall in New York City; in the wake of the Nineteenth Amendment, the pro-suffrage forces sought a place where newly enfranchised women could obtain a political education that would equip them to cast enlightened votes. Town Hall specialized in forums open to the general public as well as educated women, and they also ran short courses on topics of current interest.[15]

Many people in the early part of the century blamed the problems of democratic communication on the evils of debate as practiced both by legislatures and competitive college teams. In a 1915 *Outlook* magazine essay, Teddy Roosevelt explicitly attacked the model of debate taught in the colleges. By the 1930s, speech departments at universities across the United States began to teach "discussion" courses. An outgrowth of (and in some cases, an alternative to) courses in debate, discussion courses focused on cooperative small group problem solving. Explicitly grounded in the writings of John Dewey, they aimed at equipping students to participate in forums, and they emphasized techniques of reasoned exchange, mutual respect, and equal participation.[16]

The highlight of the forum movement was the Federal Forum Project. In 1932, the Carnegie Corporation of New York gave a grant to John Studebaker, superintendent of schools in Des Moines, Iowa, to run a two-year series of forums as an experiment in continuing adult civic education. Studebaker's innovations included using public school buildings (since they were empty at night anyway), as well as having weekly forums at the neighborhood elementary school (where

people would meet with their immediate neighbors), monthly forums at the high school to bring together several elementary school groups, and twice-yearly city-wide forums. Studebaker recruited high-quality speakers, and the forums were very successful. When Franklin Roosevelt tapped him to be U.S. commissioner of education in 1934, Studebaker set about replicating his success on a national scale. Beginning with eight (and eventually eleven) well-funded *demonstration forums* in big cities, the U.S. Office of Education sponsored dozens of forums all over the country. For some forums, the office contributed relief workers; to others, the office gave no more than *The Forum Planning Handbook* and speaker lists. The groundswell of interest in the forums during the Depression still astonishes: by 1938, more than a million people per year were participating in these forums, which were all free of charge and held at least once a week during the school year.[17]

Whereas some of the forums consisted of little more than polite middle-class audiences listening to a speaker and going home, many had diverse audiences, and interesting discussion might follow the speaker's presentation. In contrast to the orchestrated public relations events that often pass for forums today, the forums of the early twentieth century involved speakers (usually academics) who were deliberately neutral and audiences that were encouraged not to be. The goal of these forums was sometimes cast as voter instruction, but Studebaker and others often envisioned a loftier goal—adult civic education.

The point was not merely to educate the public about the issues of the day but, rather, to develop a cultural habit of democratic talk. As Studebaker (1935) makes clear in *The American Way,* deliberation is not important only when done by legislators; all citizens should form and test their views in collaborative interaction with other citizens: "If we are to have that trained civic intelligence, that critical open-mindedness upon which the practical operation of a democracy must rest, we must soon take steps to establish throughout the nation a . . . system of public forums. . . . We should be as thorough in our provision of educational machinery for the development of civic intelligence among adults as we are in our plans for teaching the three R's to children."

Part of what the forums taught was a method of democratic discussion whereby diverse and divided communities might nonetheless engage one another. (Today, this goal typically is cast as "the need for dialogue.")

In 1932, educational philosopher and forum advocate Harry Overstreet invented the *panel discussion,* a now-familiar form in which panelists discuss issues with one another on the stage before the audience joins the discussion. Overstreet realized that not everybody would automatically understand and practice appropriate forms of democratic communication, and he wanted a format that would allow educators to model best practices. Little of this mentality remains; today's Sunday morning talk shows have reduced Overstreet's idea to a parody, and the

viciousness of talk radio reveals the popularity of a decidedly nondeliberative form of citizen participation.

The Federal Forum Project disappeared as the priorities of the federal budget shifted to preparations for World War II, and despite the fervent beliefs of forum advocates, nothing on a national scale took its place. Given so much continuity in the language, ideas, and practices of deliberation between the early and late twentieth century, what happened in the interim? We can easily endorse the goals and the methods of the forum movement, but why are we just now rediscovering them? Why did the forum movement mostly disappear, except for the versions that migrated to television and radio? This is important to know because it is a key to understanding the demise of deliberative practices, their resurgence, and the potential for sustaining them in the twenty-first century.

The Mid-Twentieth-Century Decline of Deliberation in the United States

Broadly, we think that a variety of forces in the period from the 1940s to the early 1960s eroded deliberative norms and institutions. The intensity of anticommunism did not provide fertile ground for open debate. Combined with a suspicion (which was partly justified) that there was something potentially subversive about the status quo in all this open debating (some forum activists of the 1930s, though not Studebaker, had been leftists), the Cold War strategy generally favored state-run censorship and propaganda over the marketplace of ideas. The House Un-American Activities Committee, for example, did little to encourage a diversity of voices. At the same time, the rise of new and complex technologies, especially mass communication technologies, drew attention away from the face-to-face context of democracy. Localism was also waning due to a renewed emphasis on urbanization and connecting the nation through a federally designed infrastructure of highways, agencies, and laws. In this growing nation, hurtling into a tomorrow made better through technology, could the quiet tradition of the school board meeting really exemplify efficient and rational governance?

In addition, as a host of B movies made clear, scientists became the exemplars of rational leadership. Science was allied, of course, with democracy and capitalism, and the persistence of a mythology of expertise was not likely to encourage ordinary Joe and Jane Citizen to believe that they had a fundamental role in the larger democratic picture. The emergence of think tanks, especially the RAND Corporation, embodied Walter Lippmann's view that the work was too complex to be run by democracy. Leaders needed experts more than citizens, a policy elite more than an active public.

After World War II revealed our capacity for succumbing to fascism, even the public itself doubted its capacity for reason. Works such as *The Authoritarian Personality* (1950) and Stanley Milgram's experiments on obedience to authority in the 1960s held a mirror up to a public that some regarded as too malleable and impulsive to self-govern.[18] Open-ended public discussion might just as soon percolate madness and sweep tyrants into power as produce anything resembling a reasoned public voice. In the shadow of the communist threat, the old Jacobin arguments were brought out in new garb: "We cannot trust and must control those who question our way of life. This may mean that we cannot trust ourselves."

Finally, the political scene was populated with new actors. Interest groups, representing coalitions of people with common cause, exerted influence, increasingly through the use of professional lobbyists; those with access to the halls of power broadened from the traditional insiders but only to a new elite class—the professionals. If Mr. Smith went to Washington now, he had better know whom to hire as his lobbyist. By the end of this period, people were thinking and talking about democracy as a pluralistic system in which professional planners and politicians adjudicated competing private wants and needs. The only deliberation that might take place would be among the elite, who depended on the public for legitimation and labor rather than leadership. The most democratic movements of the 1960s and 1970s raised new and important voices, but for the most part, they aimed to change the balance of power more than the means by which power was exercised.

Explaining the Deliberative Renaissance

What led to the reemergence of deliberative democracy was a confluence of many of the same factors that had led to its decline—technology, culture, and politics. Over the past thirty years, the worlds of computing, networking, and telecommunications have changed dramatically. In *Emergence,* Steven Johnson explains that in the modern world, people connect and coordinate through loosely coupled networks and local signals rather than a centralized system of command and control.[19] The widespread adoption of the Internet in the United States has lowered the cost of deliberating across geographic borders and even within communities. City hall is now in the kitchen, the office, or wherever you have a computer. E-mail, cell phones, and instant messaging not only facilitate quick one-to-one exchanges, but they also make it much easier to convene virtual and face-to-face meetings. The old problems of distance and communication have radically changed.

No significant discourse would fill these virtual public spaces, however, if the larger society eschewed deliberation. The cultural force behind renewed deliberation is a confluence of multiculturalism and a renewed civic impulse. Rapid glob-

alization and the growing ethnic diversity within the political borders of the United States have pressured companies, government agencies, communities, and other social systems to improve their understanding of cultural differences. The metaphor of the melting pot has given way to that of the complex multicultural stew, and Americans are now expected to leverage difference rather than ignore it, deny it, or melt it away. Dialogue and deliberation can be tools for eliciting, appreciating, and utilizing differences to arrive at collective decisions. In this spirit, Clinton's dialogue on race was not simply a means to resolve an ongoing problem but a process by which people can grow and a society can become stronger. Certainly, there are countertendencies, but there remains a powerful impulse to steer between what Benjamin Barber describes as the stark cultural battles of "Jihad" and the totalizing nonpolitics of "McWorld."[20]

Coupled with this move toward diversity is a renewed civic spirit. At least as interesting as the decline in social capital documented by Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone* is the acclaim that Putnam's writings have received from both the left and the right of the political spectrum. Referring to Putnam's original article in the 1995 issue of the *Journal of Democracy*, William Galston observed, "Seldom has a thesis moved so quickly from scholarly obscurity to conventional wisdom. By January 1996 the *Washington Post* was featuring a six-part series of front-page articles on the decline of trust, and Beltway pundits had learned the vocabulary of social capital."[21] Social capital may or may not have been waning, but the timing was certainly right for Putnam's thesis.

In the years since, critics have found other wellsprings of public spirit beyond the more traditional civic activities that Putnam traced over time. Charitable giving, volunteerism, and more diffuse civic networking may be supplanting lodges, PTA meetings, and bowling leagues. After September 11, even Putnam acknowledged that the national tragedy may have provided the very spark needed to reignite the public's passion for civic life.

The modern political context also includes new civic actors, such as the Kettering Foundation and The Pew Charitable Trusts, that are committed to promoting public deliberation and dialogue. Whereas most think tanks continue to advance particular political agendas, these new civic foundations and organizations promote a vigorous civil society and deliberative politics rather than a particular partisan outcome. This civic mission sometimes sounds more revolutionary than reformist. The Kettering Foundation describes itself as not looking "for ways to improve on politics as usual." Rather, according to its mission statement, "We are seeking ways to make fundamental changes in how democratic politics are practiced."[22] If the authors of the chapters in this book realize their vision of a deliberative democracy, then deliberation will become the answer to Robert Dahl's 1970 book title, *After the Revolution?*[23]

When deliberation goes wrong, it can degenerate into clumsy compromise or meaningless dialogue that masks the uninterrupted workings of political and economic elites. But deliberation—or mediation or alternative dispute resolution or any number of common forms of dialogue through difficulty—can be so much more than this. When Athenian critics of rhetoric pointed to its potential for misuse, Aristotle replied that the same could be said of strength, health, wealth, and generalship; these powers are not good or bad in themselves, only in the uses to which they are put. Successes from the 1920s and the 1990s alike have demonstrated that deliberation can be a robust process for finding solutions across differences of faith, value, culture, or life experience. Sometimes this means the discovery of an overlooked consensus position, but more often it means arriving at an informed, reflective accommodation of conflicting cultures, or it means parties finding provisional solutions that work within continuing disagreements. It is true that power differences make deliberation more difficult. But they don't make it impossible, and they don't make it useless.

Looking Forward

The conditions may be right for deliberation today, but one point of this essay is to help us recognize the fragility of this particular democratic practice. Changing conditions might sweep it away just as surely as they brought it back to us. But the ebb and flow of history is partly of our choosing, and a quick glance at the present helps us understand what forces could sustain or undermine the present movement toward a more deliberative democratic process.

The shifting international context has proven a factor in the emergence and disappearance of deliberation; no current account of democratic deliberation can ignore globalism the way Federal programs did in the 1930s. The present context is complex in this regard. President George W. Bush has set course for a unilateral, preemptory approach to foreign policy, but even within his administration, there are many who favor a more multilateral approach—one that is more auspicious for the give-and-take of deliberation. In the economic realm, entities such as the World Trade Organization might be taken as signs of ever greater concentration of power in the hands of elites who are accountable only through multiple layers of delegations and trade representatives appointed by executives. At the same time, global activism from Seattle to Prague to Cancún suggests that as the economy globalizes, pressure is likely to increase for more deliberative international bodies that take into account the concerns of a diverse global population.

The physical infrastructure of the modern era might seem more unambiguously felicitous for deliberation. The Internet's reach is only going to grow, and the cost of entering the global village drops every year. The creation of open-source

software, such as the Linux operating system, not only has provided cheap, high-powered software to the world but also models the deliberative process in its rigorous exchange of code among equals in public venues. Yet equality of access, either in the United States or other parts of the world, remains a distant goal. Those with Internet access are still disproportionately white and well-off.

In addition, innovations in interactive software provide new opportunities for talking and working together through electronic media. On-line games, in particular, may carve out a virtual space in which the avatars that human players control clamor to become citizens. In a medieval fantasy gaming environment, it does not take one long to discover the need for rules, and players may ultimately want to wrest social control away from the game designers, drafting their own on-line Magna Carta. From the bloody fields of battle may arise public arenas designed for deliberation rather than combat. Players may become accustomed to negotiating the rules of the game, and those lessons cannot help but transfer to the larger public realm, where disputes simply concern different sorts of public goods.[24]

A countervailing trend, however, is the move toward media concentration and market differentiation. Congressional action in 2004 stopped, for the moment, the further relaxation of rules that limit how many media outlets can be owned by one company, but the issue is far from settled. Beyond ownership, the danger remains that the public will be dissipated into little more than segmented audiences who passively consume media content as isolated individuals. Although they may have a varied menu available to them, viewers and readers may become increasingly selective, seeking only political content, for instance, that suits their tastes. The creation of the new radio network Air America, with host Al Franken, is, in this sense, an attempt to create a space for liberals to hear liberals on the air, just as conservatives can cuddle up to Rush Limbaugh. The market for more balanced, thorough reportage may shrink as these ideologically delimited spaces grow, as Cass Sunstein has argued in his book *Republic.com*.[25] Nestled among ideological siblings, we may use interactive technology to cheer one another rather than take part in a more diverse deliberative experience.

In cultural terms, the struggle continues between fundamentalism and cultural relativism and between a withdrawal from public life and an eagerness to join a community. Modern forms of religious extremism remain intolerant of many of the diversities native to public life in a secular democracy. Gated communities remain skeptical of the value of the commons, supplanting public schools with private academies, public parks with members-only fishing holes, public safety with private security. Concerns about terrorism and safety push people further within their homes and their smaller kinship networks.

Against all of these and similar trends, however, are stubborn trends toward tolerance, which seem just as much a part of American culture as *Leave It to Beaver*'s patriotic conformity once did. One can take heart in the ever-increasing (albeit

gradual) representation of minorities and women in professions, as well as the widening range of social roles available to people of varied backgrounds and interests.

More directly encouraging is the continuing proliferation of individuals, organizations, and associations committed to promoting public deliberation. Two large civic networks have formed, the Deliberative Democracy Consortium and the National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation. These networks bring together thousands of efforts, such as the Public Conversations Project, America*Speaks,* Information Renaissance, and other names that evoke the public-spirited associations of the 1920s.

These observations are of interest to more than the historian and futurist. The cycle of demise and rebirth need not be repeated, and it is possible at this moment in history to intervene in meaningful ways to sustain the momentum toward deliberative democracy. By promoting the most positive trends and monitoring and countering the negative ones, deliberative democratic practices may be sustained and continually developed well into our future.

Notes

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