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Discursive Democracy: Politics, Policy, and Political Science

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Discursive Democracy: Politics, Policy, and Political Science. By John S. Dryzek. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990. Pp. x, 254. \$39.50 cloth.)

In just more than 220 pages of text, John Dryzek has effectively and provocatively addressed a remarkable number of problems important to the discipline of political science and to United States and international political practice. Drawing on and synthesizing an extensive array of contemporary works, including several of his own published articles, Dryzek's aim is nothing less than "a coherent, integrative, and attractive program for politics, public policy, and political science" that "looks forward to a world of free and congenial political interaction" (ix), in the face of "widespread pessimism about the possibilities for effective public policy" (3). This normative program, termed "discursive democracy," combines elements of the classical Greek notion of the polis with strong participatory democracy, communicative rationality in problem solving, and critical theory.

The problems and crises faced by citizens, policy analysts, and political scientists in the contemporary world have a common cause according to Dryzek's diagnosis—the postenlightenment hegemonic development of instrumental rationality and objectivism. Instrumental rationality dominates the political economy and has colonized Jürgen Habermas's "lifeworld"; it is antidemocratic, repressive, too narrow to address the increasing complexity of social problems, and undercuts the ability of political science to be truly scientific and critical. Objectivism, or the idea that all choices about fact and value should be made through appeal to a set of objective standards, leads to adoption of a false model of science which is also politically repressive and constrains the "progress" of political science.

The common cure for these political and professional problems is the abandonment of objectivism as an ideal and the deployment of communicative rationality, or "uncoerced and undistorted interaction among competent individuals," as a limitation on instrumental rationality in politics, public policy, and political science. Dryzek adopts Habermas's concept of communicative rationality and argues convincingly that something like Benjamin Barber's strong participatory democracy is the political form most compatible with the resulting mix of instrumental and communicative rationality. In such a system, policy analysts and political scientists would be participants and facilitators rather than technocratic elites, and the policy process would become "pedagogical, discursive, concerned with public rather than private ends, and demanding in terms of active citizenship" (119).

Dryzek argues that the contemporary discipline of political science, because of its adherence to a "scientific" methodology based in instrumental rationality and epitomized by the opinion survey, winds up reinforcing the dominant discourse of society and legitimating the status quo. The use of opinion surveys (and perhaps multiple-choice exams?) functions "in a particularly subtle and unexpected way to reinforce a prevailing political order of instrumental domination and control, which treats mass politics in terms of individuals who are mostly passive and only occasionally and minimally disposed to participate to political life" (153).

The critical argument of the three chapters on political science will be familiar to any professional political scientist who has been at least minimally alert during the methodological debates of the past 35 years, but Dryzek's proposed remedy may not be so familiar. Dryzek proposes Q methodology, as developed by William Stephenson and Steven R. Brown, as an empirical, quantitative, and interpretive technique for the study of social and political life that is consistent with his ideas on communicative rationality and critical theory; and he discusses a variety of interesting applications of Q by himself and others that he thinks merit the "tentative approval" of the technique. More broadly, in order to become policy relevant in modern conditions of conflict and complexity, political science must adopt the canons of communicative rationality, be more tolerant of diverse research traditions, and dedicate itself to "multifaceted and relentless critique" (221) in order to facilitate the emergence of discursive democracy.

Dryzek argues strongly that discursive democracy, with its critical theory and communicative rationality, is ultimately preferable in terms of both political principle and policy effectiveness to its feasible alternatives. The currently hegemonic political system of instrumental rationality is clearly hierarchical, authoritarian, and technocratic. The most attractive alternative, the "critical rationalism" of Sir Karl Popper's "open society," with its ideals of policy experimentation, piecemeal social reform, and liberal democratic polyarchy is shown to be based on a problematic narrow view of human nature and to depend ultimately on a governing elite of scientific manipulators. Neither the administrative state of instrumental rationality nor the liberal polyarchy of critical rationalism is capable of dealing with the complex social problems facing the modern polity. Only the reasoned consensus on public problems and their solution produced by the egalitarian and communicatively rational processes of discursive democracy is likely to moderate the increasing conflict of modern political life.

In a discipline long on description and critique and short on remedies, Dryzek's book is a refreshing change. He combines abstract conceptual and philosophical diagnosis with specific curative recommendations. A common criticism of critical theory is that it is overly abstract and concentrates on critique to the exclusion of remedies, and Dryzek addresses this lack with his idea of "discursive design." Briefly, discursive designs are social institutions "around which the expectations of a number of actors converge" (43) and which therefore serve as sites of communicative interaction. "Individuals should participate as citizens, not as representatives of the state or any other corporate and hierarchical body." No one is excluded, and some processes might be devised to make sure that everyone with an interest in an issue is included. A discursively designed structure is problem specific, nonhierarchical, free of formal rules, operates by consensus, and constitutes "a public space within which citizens associate and confront the state." Dryzek's cogent discussion of the requirements of discursive designs appropriate to a communicatively rational political and policy process is a real contribution to the literature of critical theory, which in the past has relied on idealized abstractions or vague remedial notions such as "new social movements."

Dryzek argues that discursive democracy is not a utopian ideal (though it is premised in a counterfactual ideal speech situation and a nonexistent public sphere). He finds real-world approximations to discursive democracy in the “incipient discursive design” of dispute mediation processes in labor, environmental, and other fields; processes of “informal justice”; regulatory negotiation; and problem-solving workshops. Though these processes are all subject to various forms of manipulation and cooptation, Dryzek believes that their use is growing, and that the complexity of the modern world facilitates the development of discursive designs.

Discursive Democracy is clearly written and remarkably free of jargon for a book addressing such complex conceptual and philosophical issues. It is an appropriate supplementary text for advanced undergraduate courses in policy and social science methods, and it should be required reading for graduate students in political science.

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Democracy and Deliberation: New Directions for Democratic Reform. By James S. Fishkin. (Yale University Press, 1992. Pp. 133. \$17.95 hard.)

James Fishkin's book, *Democracy and Deliberation* is a contribution to an increasingly important avenue of inquiry in democratic theory: the attempt to provide an adequate account of democratic political judgment and the contexts in which such judgment may be exercised. This task is especially daunting at present since the very structure of large democratic states seems to discourage the realization of some form of genuine democratic deliberation. Fishkin tries to resolve this dilemma by showing that even in a large state, any defensible justification for democratic equality must also include access to democratic deliberation. This argument will serve as the basis for a rather forceful criticism of contemporary liberal democratic politics as well as providing a justification for his by now rather well-known proposal for a “deliberative public opinion poll.”

Although Fishkin's book is explicitly meant to advance his practical proposal for a “deliberative public opinion poll,” it largely rotates around his critical account of democracy. Fishkin's criteria for a defensible justification for democracy, though a bit thin, seem on the surface eminently sensible. Any defensible justification of democracy must minimally realize for its citizens political equality, opportunities for deliberation, and protection against majority tyranny. Of these three features of democracy the first and most basic for Fishkin is political equality. All other ends must be instrumental to this one. At the very least this requires that each person's vote must count equally, which means each citizen must have an “equal probability” to determine the outcome of an election. But, on Fishkin's account, political equality is more than this. It also requires that socioeconomic inequalities not impinge upon political participation and above all, that all significant interests that command a following get an “effective hearing” (31–33). The problem with