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Symposium: Habermas and Deliberative Democracy: Introductory Remarks

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This symposium was organized in response to an article written by Jürgen Habermas for *Communication Theory*: "Political Communication in Media Society: Does Democracy Still Enjoy an Epistemic Dimension? The Impact of Normative Theory on Empirical Research." Based upon a plenary lecture delivered at the 2006 International Communication Association Conference in Dresden, Germany, the article distinguishes the deliberative model of democracy from liberal and republican models as "the cooperative search of deliberating citizens for solutions to political problems takes the place of the [liberal model's] preference aggregation of private citizens or the [republican model's] collective self-determination of an ethically interpreted nation" (Habermas, 2006, p. 413).

Fundamental to the deliberative model are demanding communicative processes that must necessarily be in play if political decisions and courses of action are to earn legitimacy: There needs to be inclusion and equal opportunity for citizen participation in deliberative arrangements that are public, transparent, and premised on expectations of reasonable outcomes produced by means of contested and redeemed validity claims. Considered together, these processes are indeed demanding, but Habermas maintains that the payoff is high; for, as citizens participate in deliberative arrangements, their knowledge as a key characteristic of public-will formation and decision making may improve by way of self-correcting learning processes.

Habermas then considers hindrances to increased realization of the deliberative model—primarily pathologies of political communication that militate against open and transparent procedures of argumentation, weaken trust between interlocutors, and so undermine legitimation of deliberative procedure and result. Such pathologies, which tend to be bound up with corporate control of mass media as well as with the media's close relations with special interest groups and political elites, may be offset to some degree by two normative requirements: an independent and self-regulating media system that links political communication in the public sphere with both civil society and elites who occupy the political center, and an empowered

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citizenry who suffer no insuperable obstacles to genuine participation within deliberative democracy's communicative processes.

The contributors to this symposium seem to support Habermas' endorsement of the deliberative model of democracy, and each in his own way seeks both to deepen our understanding of the model and to extend it. Gerard Hauser directs our attention to the important role of public opinion within deliberative democracy, with special emphasis upon what he terms "considered public opinion" that emanates from reasoned, public dialogue. The deliberative aspect of democracy here is paramount for Hauser: "[C]onsidered public opinion" is not a product of aggregating nose counts as presented in public opinion polls, but rather emerges out of individuals' participation in a weblike structure of associations wherein a polyphonic conversation lights on issues that intersect with participants' lived lives. On this view, opinions are not simply elicited in response to closed-ended questions as found in pollsters' surveys, but are formed and transformed within ongoing dialogue such that individuals' experientially grounded claims of knowledge and value receive consideration no less than those advanced by institutionally legitimated elites. In this regard, the Internet is claimed to have great potential: Because it is not beholden to power, it may be used to destabilize otherwise entrenched, uncontested views of political elites; and as a source for public participation, "that includes the vernacular rhetoric ordinary citizens often use to make arguments," it may improve the epistemic dimension of public involvement.

James Aune claims that deliberation has a rhetorical dimension that calls for greater attention than Habermas seems to have given it, as throughout Habermas' work, there appears to be a certain distrust of persuasion, its virtues, as well as its techniques. Following Gadamer, and drawing upon the rhetorical tradition of the Renaissance, Aune considers cultural values, the common sense and aesthetic tastes of audiences, and modes of judgment that flow from civic solidarity, and goes on to note the tension these provide when considered alongside logos-centered rationales for deliberative democracy such as privileged theoretical discourse, a distancing from common sense, and emphasis upon subject-based critical examination and self-reflexive speech. Aune's suggestion—as implied also in Hauser's emphasis upon the vernacular rhetoric of diverse speakers—is that together both universal reason as well as (local) arts of persuasion, world citizenship as well as cultural membership, might achieve a more integrated coexistence: Universal reason—theoretical, critical, self-reflexive—might benefit from paying greater heed to personal, culturally informed forms of knowledge and emotion; and the limits of cultural bias or emotional excesses of local rhetoric might be tempered by universal reason of the sort most deeply explicated by Habermas.

James Bohman expresses optimism regarding prospects of deliberative democracy though he, too, not unlike Hauser and Aune, claims that the "presence of multiple perspectives is a necessary condition for the epistemic improvement of deliberation" in that the condition reduces cognitive errors to which homogeneous groups tend to be vulnerable. Citing the psychological literature on deliberation

appealed to by Habermas, Bohman stresses that he is not referring simply to diversity of opinion but rather diversity of perspective as experiential source of opinion. Although opinions are valuable in themselves, they cannot easily be detached from a group's social position or the collective memory of its own historical experiences; and to ignore the intimacy of this relationship is likely to diminish the full worth of public opinion, its roots in culturally shared knowledge, its multilayered textures, and how it can be articulated distinctively through rhetorical modes of expression. In order to enhance such expression, Bohman endorses the idea of minipublics as they provide opportunities for empowered participation and thereby perhaps offset tendencies of the media monolith to privilege some voices at the expense of others. Especially fertile in this respect is Bohman's idea of an "epistemic difference principle" whereby "the diversity of perspectives … ought to be maximized in order to improve the condition of the least well-off deliberators."

My own response proceeds in ways that are consistent with a number of themes developed by contributors Hauser, Aune, and Bohman, especially regarding the stated importance of diverse perspective and voice and, alongside Bohman's "epistemic difference principle," the idea that subaltern voices wailed from the bottom of the well may convey a greater truth value than voices securely situated at the top. The means by which subalterns express their voice may, for reasons bound up with historical structuring of power, take on distinctive rhetorical forms that have been either ignored or aggressively devalued. In this regard, Hauser's and Aune's calls for greater sensitivity to local people's vernacular voices, as well as Bohman's recommendation that diversity of perspective be maximized so as to enhance prospects of least well-off deliberators, may lend support to my suggestion of (further) state-regulated inclusion of perspectives across the media landscape, such as guarantees that minority views as expressed in Black press news commentary and analyses be provided space within mainstream venues for the benefit of otherwise unheeding (mainstream) audiences.

Habermas' article and the responses to it as discussed in this symposium also point up the need for further research and dialogue on several matters relevant to deliberative democracy. One such matter is the role of media—which has been treated with some ambivalence as early as Habermas' influential *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Habermas, (1962/1989), and which has since been cleared up to almost no one's satisfaction. On the one hand, modernizing media have been instrumental in popular struggles for greater democratizion; but on the other hand, insofar as the media have remained intertwined with and beholden to state and capital, it is not clear whether they can facilitate public dialogue in ways that adequately meet public demands for genuinely deliberative democracy. Beyond obvious questions of description and analysis—that is, to what extent media power either promotes or militates against the formation of informed public will—there remains a need for theoretical interventions of a normative cast by which to critically assess the media's institutional limits and to delineate ways by which they might best accommodate diverse voices.

A second consideration is that of the role of rhetoric in deliberative democracy. Habermas' own position on this matter has been clearly spelled out for some time now. As early as 1985, he argued how in everyday language use as well as in theoretical enterprises such as philosophy, rhetoric does not gain independence from expressive, regulative, and informative functions of speech but rather distinguishes itself as a set of tools tethered and subordinate to the higher functions (Habermas, 1985/1998). Nevertheless, there appears to be a growing uneasiness among many of Habermas' readers: The so-called higher functions may be necessary to the communicative forms and processes of deliberative democracy but perhaps not sufficient—especially in domains of action where speakers find their expressive, regulative, and informative functions systematically blunted. In consideration of deliberative democracy and prospects of theoretical interventions, therefore, some are convinced of a need for a theory of rhetoric that might be made compatible with Habermas' theory of communicative rationality, whereas others believe that the theory may itself need to be emended.

Third, Habermas' theoretically informed commentary seems to be directed primarily, if not exclusively, toward agents who already are well situated within the political public sphere. In one respect, this directional emphasis may be understandable. It is already democratically enfranchised agents who, from a structural standpoint at least, are perhaps best positioned to reorganize institutional forms so as to make them more responsive to public will, and their degree of participation in public sphere practices may indeed have contributed to an enhanced epistemic dimension of their deliberative practices such that they exemplify progressively greater receptiveness to diverse knowledge and value claims. It is less clear, however, how Habermas' ideas might best redound to the advantage of agents who are excluded from the centers of power but desire some participatory entry and stake within existing deliberative arrangements. Are the disempowered to wait until empowered citizens come to eventually bend to the moral weight of arguments that may or may not reflect their condition? Or do they have access to communicative strategies by which they might best pursue justice where pathological communicative processes are currently organized against them?

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