Saving Relational Politics

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Do-It-Yourself Democracy: The Rise of the Public Engagement Industry. By Caroline W. Lee. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014. 304p. $29.95.

Making Democracy Fun: How Game Design Can Empower Citizens and Transform Politics. By Josh Lerner. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014. 275p. $29.95.

Billion-dollar presidential campaigns, corporate lobbying victories, and dysfunctional legislatures may dominate the headlines, but today is also a time of democratic innovation at a human scale. In carefully designed settings, everyday citizens encounter one another, express themselves, and work together on public problems.

Both books under review describe events and processes that, as Catherine Lee writes, aim to engage the public "in more intensive ways than traditional, one way public outreach" (p. 56). Lee focuses on dialogues, deliberations, and other organized, face-to-face *conversations* about public issues. Her scope is restricted to the United States, but she includes dialogues sponsored by for-profit corporations as well as those that originate with nonprofits and governments because she thinks that the for-profit versions influence the other cases. She is eager to establish the importance of organized "dialogue and deliberation," arguing that it attracts more than $100 million annually (p. 52) and employs thousands of specialist professionals. She asserts that these organizers are influential; indeed, they have "influenced democratic politics and work and community life beyond their wildest dreams" (p. 7). Their models have "metastasized across sectors and among vastly different groups of people" (p. 28).[1]

Josh Lerner's scope is geographically wider; his main cases come from Latin America and Canada. But he focuses on processes that in various ways resemble *games*. The essential behavior in these settings is play—talking and listening are less central. Although Wittgenstein famously claimed that the diverse examples of real-life games have no common essence,[2] Lerner says that all games are "systems in which players engage in an *artificial conflict*, defined by *rules*, that results in *measurable outcomes*" (p. 16).

An example that figures prominently in both books is Participatory Budgeting (PB), which originated in Porto Alegre, Brazil in the 1980s and has spread to thousands of communities around the world. Citizens collectively allocate portions of a jurisdiction's capital budget to projects that they have designed. When they seek their fellow citizens' votes for the ideas they have invented, they are engaged in an artificial conflict over scarce resources that is defined by the rules of the competition and that yields the measurable outcomes of funding for particular projects—in Lerner's terms, a game. At the same time, these competitions cause people to discuss "serious issues," such as criteria of "equity and democracy" (Lerner, p. 158). Thus PB is also an innovation in dialogue and deliberation.

Lerner's scope extends to practices like Theater of the Oppressed, invented by the radical Brazilian director Augusto Boal, in which citizens create and stage short plays on the spot. Although plays and performance art may seem far afield from the policy deliberations that are central to Lee's study, she observes that organizers of public engagement processes in the United States are also fond of "exuberant" displays of shared positive emotions (p. 25) and even "New Age whole body exercises" (p. 63). In other words, organized dialogues and deliberations do not merely involve citizens exchanging reasons and forming public opinion (per Jürgen Habermas); they are also opportunities for physical interaction, emotional expression, and group therapy. In short, these two authors are interested in an overlapping set of cases in which organizers invite finite numbers of citizens to interact on public matters in carefully designed processes in which participants use not only their minds and heads but also their bodies and emotions.

The main difference between the books is their basic evaluative stance. Lerner is certainly attuned to the limitations of game-like processes; among the many

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virtues of his book are its warnings about how games can go wrong. Nevertheless, he argues that by bringing the art of game-design into democratic politics, we can make participation a lot more fun and thus increase the number and representativeness of the participants, their satisfaction and willingness to persist in public life, the quality of their input, the popularity of the government, and the fairness of its decisions.

Participatory Budgeting provides a good example. When the PB process goes well, people enjoy it, they make wise decisions, and they come back for more. When it goes wrong, Lerner diagnoses the problem as a violation of game-design principles. For instance, as long as every project proposed by a citizen has a chance of being funded, PB remains fun for all the participants. Game designers know that games are enjoyable while "any player could still win or lose" (p. 69). But when participants are asked resolve a tie among a few remaining projects, only the contenders have a reason to engage, and Lerner observes others becoming bored and disgruntled. It would be better to resolve a tie randomly, because moderate amounts of *chance* represent another well-established game-design principle. That is why "dice, spinners, coin flips, [and] randomized computer feedback" are so common in everyday games.

Lerner's overall message is to take what has been learned about games that are fun and apply those lessons to the design of participatory processes, no matter how serious the latter are. Since the principles of game design are inevitably vague and can trade off against each other (or apply differently in different settings), there is no algorithm for designing the ideal game. Rather, designers should test and redesign, paying attention to how much fun the participants actually have.

Lerner addresses his argument to public officials and other leaders who can choose to make democracy more fun, employing the established principles of good game design to organize processes *for* citizens (pp. 189–90). He is well aware that leaders may not want to engage citizens: "For now, the strongest political players are often opposed to genuinely democratic games" (p. 207). Sometimes lower-level public employees create the obstacles, as when Socialist Party patronage appointees in Argentina worry more about their own paychecks than actually making a process fun for citizens (p. 140). Nevertheless, Lerner sees payoffs for leaders who apply game principles: more popularity, better input, and wiser choices.

Lee is much more critical of PB and the other processes she investigates. First of all, she isn't very fond of the game-like situations in which she finds herself as she conducts her ethnography of public engagement work in the United States. "My tolerance for 'get to know you' warm ups and group exercises has always been limited—and I immediately realized at my first extended stay among dialogue and deliberation practitioners that I would be in

for some mild discomfort" (p. 69). Lerner might wonder whether the specific exercises to which Lee was subjected were well designed. Some of the cases in his book sound like more fun to me—but tastes vary.

More fundamentally, Lee doubts the motivations of the organizations that fund and support citizen engagement in the United States, and she worries about the net impact of these deliberative events. She suspects that corporations and governments purchase deliberation to teach taxpayers, employees, or customers to solve their own problems through civil discourse while leaving larger structures alone.

To cite an example too recent for Lee's book, the city of Vallejo, CA gave citizens the opportunity to allocate $3.2 million in capital funding through PB, but Vallejo had just emerged from bankruptcy and had cut its core budget by many times that much.[3] Lee would treat this case as deeply problematic and yet characteristic of the dialogue-and-deliberation field. A neoliberal government reduces basic support and offloads the responsibility onto citizens while depicting citizens' safe—and game-like—interaction within the PB as ideal and the process of setting federal, state, and local budgets as remote and inexorable.

One principle of game design is to create a "Magic Circle" within which special rules apply (see Lerner, p. 57–9). Lee does not use that terminology, but for her, the fact that PB exists within a Magic Circle would show that it is not real politics. In fact, the more emotionally upbeat, fun, equitable, and engaging a specialized public participation process is, the less likely participants will be to participate in politics that really counts, because real politics will inevitably look worse than the enjoyable process. Lee concludes: "In the current context, public engagement simply is not the democratic tool that scholars have made it out to be—because it contains citizen protest so effectively and creates more of itself rather than more mobilization" (p. 28). Vallejo's citizens should be fighting the powerful in City Hall, in Sacramento, and on Wall Street rather than trying to enjoy the experience of allocating $3.2 million.

Lee acknowledges that the deliberation "industry" still encompasses politically serious activists who believe that deliberative processes exemplify a better social order that can be expanded and made more powerful. But they are only able to deliver sporadic deliberative events, paid for by clients, that communicate an unintended lesson. Participants learn that deliberation leaves the world alone and that they must be civil to their peers while accepting constraints. "I argue," she writes, "that what we take to be good engagement is itself the problem" (p. 28).

In my view, Lerner offers extraordinarily thoughtful and useful advice to leaders who are genuinely interested in engaging citizens, but he does not deeply address the question of motivations. Why should governments make democracy more fun, and what would cause them to do

so? As for Lee, she raises crucial questions about the net impact of hundreds of small-scale, safe deliberations on public life. Her critical observations are insightful, trenchant, and often humorous. But she does not really assemble empirical evidence that deliberative events reduce levels of protest politics at a large scale, and I believe she overestimates the impact and influence of deliberation.

For instance, Chapter 2 begins with an image of some leaders of dialogue-and-deliberation organizations meeting at the White House early in 2010. Lee thinks the fact that they were "rubbing shoulders in the West Wing" (p. 32) demonstrates their influence. Knowing all those protagonists well and having played a modest role in planning the meeting, I can testify that it was almost completely fruitless. The White House Office of Public Engagement meets with delegations from all kinds of professions and interests almost every day. If you have an organization and you really want to talk to that office, it's not that hard to get an appointment. The Obama Administration demonstrated no interest in actually promoting deliberation and had no incentive to listen to the field Lee describes. One of the organizations represented at that meeting, AmericaSPEAKS, went bankrupt in 2014 because so little funding was available for deliberation, and no major grantmaking foundation currently supports such work.

Despite their differences, the two books under review raise an essential question: how to increase the scale and real impact of relational politics at a time when politics is profoundly impersonal as well as unequal.

"Relational politics" (rather than "deliberation," "engagement," or "unitary democracy"[4]) seems the best term for the phenomena these books describe. Participants make decisions or take actions knowing something about one another's ideas, preferences, and interests. Relational politics does not depend on—or necessarily yield—consensus. People can have close political interactions with their opponents and critics. Games, indeed, are more fun when they are competitive. The defining feature of relational politics is mutual knowledge and influence. Lerner writes of "intimate face-to-face participation" (p. 206).

In contrast, impersonal politics yields decisions and actions *without* the participants having to know one another. Examples of impersonal politics include populations that vote by secret ballot, consumers who determine prices by the aggregate of their purchasing decisions, and rulers who issue laws, orders, or edicts that apply to unknown individuals. Each of these is an act of leverage in the Archimedean sense. As actors in impersonal politics, we can move distant objects, even if our impact is minuscule or outweighed by others.

Relational politics has characteristic drawbacks and limitations. For one thing, it would be prohibitively inefficient to govern a large polity or economy relationally;

such impersonal tools as votes, market exchanges, and laws are indispensable. One problem with relational politics is that it takes too many evenings, and even if Lerner's advice can make those evenings more fun, we still have other ways to spend our time.

Further, talking about politics can suppress conflict, discourage people from taking political action that may seem controversial,[5] give unfair advantage to participants who have special skills and status or longevity in the group,[6] and yield anxiety and discomfort or even fear.[7] One solution to such problems is to make political interactions *less* relational. Jane Mansbridge observes that, "when a polity has to handle many questions of conflicting interest, most people prefer a secret ballot and a method of combining preferences, like referenda or electoral representation, that puts some distance between them and their opponents."[8] Lerner does not address these problems in detail but might argue that good game design can mitigate them. Still, until persuasive evidence emerges, we should presume that relational politics has these drawbacks.

In the worst cases, personal knowledge can be used for evil instead of good. The phrase "office politics" has a negative ring because so many interactions in a workplace where colleagues know one another are manipulative, unfair, exclusive, or just tedious. The extreme case is torture, which is as relational an interaction as we can conceive. David Luban observes: "The torturer inflicts pain one-on-one, deliberately, up close and personal, in order to break the spirit of the victim–in other words, to tyrannize and dominate the victim. The relationship between them becomes a perverse parody of friendship and intimacy. . . ."[9]

Thus, I would argue not that relational politics is preferable to impersonal interactions, but that a society that runs on impersonal politics *alone* will leave a void. Many people want from politics not only liberty and equality but also fraternity, which is akin to such concepts as Aristotelian friendship, solidarity, reciprocity, or the "sisterhood" of Second-Wave Feminism. Relational politics is indispensible to yield those virtues.

Relational politics may also be necessary if the impersonal systems, such as representative democracy and market exchange, are to function well. If citizens regard one another purely as strangers and rivals, then they will be tempted to demand unfair outcomes when they have the power to get what they want, to withdraw their consent when they lose, or to become free riders. Democracies, systems of law, and markets depend on the webs of constructive relationships among citizens that have been called "social capital."[10]

Relational politics can boost the participation of disadvantaged people in the impersonal forms of politics, such as voting. Talking to people individually and developing personal trust encourages them to participate in formal politics.[11]

Relational politics can manifest the virtues of friendship. A voluntary group risks falling apart as soon as it encounters conflicting interests, because some will have to sacrifice to resolve the disagreement.[12] But solutions are available. The winners can acknowledge the losers' sacrifice and credit them for preserving the group. They can manage conflicts offstage to avoid public votes and decisions that leave one side clearly defeated.[13] If they are concerned with the continued relationship as well as the outcomes, they are acting as friends. Danielle Allen argues: "Trust only grows through experience; habits of citizenship are fashioned only through actual interaction." Citizens, she writes, "must take risks together in shared decisions making with real consequences, if they wish to solidify a politics based on political friendship."[14]

Citizens gain not only friendship but also agency when they relate to peers. In a presidential election in the United States, 100 million citizens may vote. Each voter exercises Archimedean leverage over the government, but very little of it—so little that rational-choice analysis suggests it is irrational to vote at all.[15] If agency is valuable, then people need spaces in which they can hope to influence peers and see results.

Finally, we can *learn* from relational politics, seeing the world from other perspectives and enlarging our mentalities. To be sure, we can also learn from statistics and impersonal arguments, but the experience of actually interacting with another person on matters of common concern seems indispensable for moral growth.

For all these reasons, societies that run on adversarial politics see recurrent efforts to recover fraternity by developing methods of decision-making that are relational. A wave of such experiments derived from the New Left of the 1960s, whose inaugural Port Huron Statement declared that "Human relationships should involve fraternity and honesty. . . . Personal links between man and man are needed. . . . Loneliness, estrangement, isolation describe the vast distance between man and man today."[16] The era's experiments included, among many others, the citizenship schools of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), consciousness-raising groups in the women's movement, and co-ops and communes. These new formats joined traditional venues of relational politics, such as New England town meetings.

Most of these opportunities have shrunk. New England municipalities are giving up on town meetings,[17] communes have largely vanished (unless one abandons the terminology and stretches the concept),[18] and food and housing co-ops often function now without much relational politics—they are just forms of incorporation. In comparison to the 1970s, a smaller proportion of Americans today say that they attend meetings and work with neighbors to address community problems.[19]

Nevertheless, the impulse to develop relational forms and spaces has not vanished. Lee (p. 76) notes that many leaders of today's professional field of dialogue and deliberation began their careers in the New Left of the 1960s. Several of the important cases in Lerner's book originated in Latin American movements of the same era. A more comprehensive study by Sirianni and Friedland traced the paths of people who learned relational politics in the 1960s and 1970s and later developed the forms that persist today.[20]

In addition to deliberative democracy, an important example is community organizing. The Industrial Areas Foundation began under Saul Alinsky's leadership with a preference for confrontation and a stark distinction between the people and government. But the modern IAF now teaches a "'relational' view of organizing and of power."[21] The leader of the modern IAF, Ernesto Cortes, began his work in San Antonio by holding at least 1,000 "one-on-one" interviews to build relationships.[22] Scott Reed, the executive director of the PICO organizing network, told me that he and his colleagues strive "to develop relational capital." "We invest lots and lots of time to connect with people and develop relations." It's an "art of inviting people to share what they think they want to work on, put them in relation to each other, then connect them to [political] opportunities they might not know about."[23]

Still, these examples remain marginal. For every deliberative citizens' meeting, countless decisions are made by companies, bureaucracies, or courts. Organizers of relational politics often hope that their small projects will serve as inspiring examples, teaching the participants about better ways to interact. Their ultimate goal is to spark some kind of civic renewal. But Lee suggests that partial success may be worse than nothing at all. If citizens merely encounter sporadic and inconsequential moments of relational politics—for example, an occasional community meeting that leaves major policies untouched—they may conclude that their own engagement is ineffective. In other words, one of the best ways to turn people away from relational politics would be to allow it to occur sporadically.

Lerner implies a strategy for increasing the scope, prevalence, and impact of relational politics: study how to make engagement more fun and appealing, and then impart those lessons to the decision-makers who choose to engage citizens. Likewise, the strategy that the influential management consultants Jeffrey Badrach and Abe Grindle recommend for dramatically expanding the scale of any social intervention is to identify the elements that lead to success, test them in randomized experiments, and disseminate the findings—much as drugs that are shown to cure diseases are mass-produced.[24] Lerner acknowledges but does not explain how to solve an obstacle to that strategy: Large and powerful institutions lack incentives to promote relational politics and may even be threatened by it. As Albert Dzur has asked, "Who will

spark public deliberation, where will it take place, [and] how will the strong counterdeliberative forces in American political life be kept at bay?"[25]

A related strategy is social entrepreneurship: building nonprofit or for-profit enterprises that can find and expand markets for relational politics. Lee's book is a sharp critique of that strategy. She thinks it allows the powerful organizations that pay for public engagement to distort and control it.

A third strategy might be to use impersonal means (votes, boycotts, lawsuits, and the like) to force powerful organizations to engage with citizens. Then relational politics could be a byproduct of mass adversarial politics. Lerner notes (p. 125) that the Argentine city of Rosario engages residents in planning processes because otherwise the poor would rise up in violent protest. If the poor were quiescent, the city could make decisions unilaterally. Similarly, a large employer has no incentive for real discussions with its workers unless the latter can strike or otherwise exercise power.

It seems unlikely, however, that countervailing power will yield valuable opportunities for relational politics unless some organizations also attend to the ways that competing interests engage: the formats, methods, and virtues of dialogue. In other words, even under conditions of more equal power, we may still need the engagement "industry" that Lee depicts and the kinds of innovations that Lerner proposes. Further, when competing interests reach an accommodation, we cannot tell whether that outcome is a mere function of the balance of power or a genuinely satisfying agreement unless the parties discuss values and ends.[26] But it is unlikely that they will choose to do so unless they have formed relationships in settings that encourage dialogue, trust, and mutual understanding.[27]

Thus a final strategy worth consideration is to launch a social movement that explicitly strives to improve and expand opportunities for meaningful civic engagement. If its only goal is to reform civic processes, it will not ignite much enthusiasm. But nineteenth century American populism, the labor movement, the Civil Rights Movement, Second Wave Feminism, and environmentalism, among other examples, have combined substantive economic and social demands with innovative forms of relational politics, from Grange Hall meetings to food co-ops. Although their utopian hopes are always frustrated,[28] they have left behind the forms of relational politics that still engage us. A new such movement may be our best hope for civic renewal.

Notes

1 Francesca Polletta concurs: "bottom-up decision making seems all the rage" as "participatory democracy has gone mainstream. Polletta, pp. 40, 48.
2 Wittgenstein, §65–6.
3 Samuels, 2014.
4 Mansbridge.
5 Mutz, , pp. 112, 118; Elisasoph, p. 42.
6 Mansbridge, pp. 161, 186–9.
7 Mansbridge, p. 149–62.
8 Mansbridge, p. 34.
9 Luban, p. 1430.
10 Putnam.
11 McKenna and Han.
12 Allen emphasizes sacrifice as a core feature of democracy, and friendship as the appropriate response.
13 Mansbridge, p. 67.
14 Allen, pp. 182–3, 174.
15 Downs.
16 Students for a Democratic Society.
17 Zimmerman.
18 Boal, Stone, & Watts.
19 Levine, p. 95.
20 Sirianni & Friedland.
21 Warren, p. 68.
22 Warren, p. 50.
23 Interview with the author, 5/8/14.
24 Bradach & Grindle, pp. 3–4.
25 Dzur, p. 40.
26 Habermas, p. 112.
27 See Allen, pp. 56–66 on Habermas.
28 Morone.

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