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REVIEWS

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Rational Choice and Democratic Deliberation: A Theory of Discourse Failure, by Guido Pincione and Fernando R. Tesón, 2006, xi + 258 pages.

Over the last twenty years democratic theory has taken a deliberative turn. Some view the theory of deliberative democracy as an essentially leftist project (Fung and Wright, 2003) that carries on the tradition of participatory democracy. As a response *Rational Choice and Deliberative Democracy*, uniquely in the literature, provides a strong critique of deliberation from a libertarian perspective. Pincione and Tesón set out to offer a "sustained critique of deliberative democracy" (p. vii). They come as relative outsiders to the deliberative democracy literature and as a result they are able to give a new perspective on the theory, using insights and drawing examples from economics. They primarily contest the argument that political deliberation leads to epistemically better outcomes, although in later chapters they also address whether deliberative democracy could be justified on other grounds such as autonomy or justice.

The authors' main argument is set out in the first three chapters of the book. They observe that politics suffers from systematic discourse failure, which they define as "the public display of political decisions that are traceable to truth-insensitive processes".

Discourse failure can take various forms. Firstly, scientific theories are often opaque, counter-intuitive and difficult to understand. They explain events using invisible hand explanations, where outcomes are caused by general processes, such as market forces, rather than specific individuals. These theories are less easy to understand than vivid theories which assign causation to actors that are easily observable and use recent facts that are still universally remembered. Discourse failure often results from the use of vivid theories in politics when the correct theories are opaque. Explaining social situations using obscure and abstract, although deeply ingrained, images, such as national interest and sovereignty, is another form of discourse failure.

Discourse failure also occurs when people confuse zero-sum with positive-sum explanations. When benefits and losses are easily visible, many will use zero-sum explanations when social science offers a positive-sum explanation. For example in finance interest rises can be blamed on greed rather than impersonal supply and demand forces. Conversely people sometimes believe that there is a positive-sum explanation for something that is in fact a zero or negative-sum event. This is often the case when costs are dispersed and benefits are highly concentrated, such as in the case of farming subsidies. In both of these cases vivid theories triumph over opaque ones.

According to Pincione and Tesón discourse failure is a result of three main factors. Firstly, ordinary citizens have an incentive to remain rationally ignorant. Getting informed is costly and cheaply available information is usually the result of truth-insensitive processes, most often vivid theories. This mirrors standard rational choice arguments about political ignorance. Secondly, politicians have an incentive to use vivid arguments in public for political and personal gain, even when they know that these are false. Not only will citizens understand such arguments more easily, thereby making them appear more credible, but they also give the impression that it is individual politicians rather than invisible hand mechanisms that control events. Thirdly, the first two factors are strengthened by the existence of a wide redistributive state. Such a state gives politicians and citizens' groups an incentive to posture and worsen discourse failure to further their own goals.

The authors argue that rather than eradicating discourse failure, political deliberation will further perpetuate it, as deliberative processes do nothing to change the underlying issues of rational ignorance, political posturing and redistribution. Even after deliberation people will favour vivid theories, as these are more accessible and serve their interests better. While vivid theories can sometimes be correct, this is not a reason for supporting deliberation. As a result deliberative democracy fails to work as a normative ideal of epistemically rational discourse which actual democracies can approximate.

The mechanism through which discourse failure is perpetuated is closely connected to the authors' underlying concept of rationality. Pincione and Tesón apply the usual definition of rational agents as those who hold complete and transitive preference orderings and whose choices satisfy the independence condition under conditions of risk and uncertainty. But in addition instrumentally rational agents will also hold instrumentally rational beliefs (IRB). These are beliefs which individuals have come to hold as a result of a personally cost-effective investment in information and reflection (IIR). IIR is cost-effective if and only if the marginal benefits and marginal costs of performing IIR are equal given the agent's goals. As a result IRBs are not necessarily true or even the best beliefs available, but it would not be rational for agents to become

any better informed than they already are. Thus instrumentally rational agents are likely to engage in discourse failure, even if their intentions are sincere. The authors argue that for most agents the cost-effective level of IIR lies beneath that required to form beliefs consistent with reliable social science, which explains the systematic discourse failure that can be found in politics. This is a well-argued definition which provides a solid basis for the authors' arguments in the rest of the book.

Less convincing is the argument that this theory of rational belief formation is not inconsistent with epistemic rationality, which is concerned with arriving at beliefs using valid rules of inference rather than cost–benefit analysis and which should be at work during deliberation. Pincione and Tesón argue that the two frameworks can be reconciled if we assume that epistemically rational agents will simply use a different form of cost-effective IIR. However the conceptual differences between the two types of rationality cannot be overcome through this simplification.

Much of the rest of the book responds to possible counter-arguments that could be put forward by supporters of deliberative democracy. Firstly the authors deal with the claim that deliberative institutions could be designed in a way that will reduce discourse failure in politics and show that these are unlikely to overcome the appeal of vivid theories. While here they focus almost exclusively on the deliberative polls designed by Fishkin, their arguments could be extended to other practical deliberative institutions as well. Secondly they claim that deliberation cannot be a normative ideal of civic virtue either, since the persistence of discourse failure will undermine the primary aim of deliberation. They also reject defences of deliberation based on Bayesian grounds or the Condorcet jury theorem.

A whole chapter is devoted to countering the argument that political behaviour is symbolic or expressive, rather than epistemic in nature. Thus individuals might support a policy to show their adherence to a principle, even if they know that that policy might be harmful to their ultimate goal. This is not an argument normally advanced by proponents of deliberation and is rather a possible response to the arguments found in this book. The authors posit that such counterproductive behaviour is still instrumentally rational, and that it is the result of ignorance of causal processes or posturing or trying to appear to be on the right side on an issue and that in effect this is just another instance of discourse failure.

Pincione and Tesón also reject the argument that the results of deliberation are not factually correct outcomes, but morally improved ones. The authors forcefully argue that this is not the case as there are very few genuinely moral decisions in politics and the ones that exist will be affected by rational ignorance of a moral kind. Finally the authors go on to reject non-epistemic arguments for deliberation, such as arguments based on increasing autonomy, legitimacy, equality or reducing social conflict.

The final chapter serves to set out the authors' own solution to discourse failure, which involves getting rid of redistributive politics

through the introduction of a framework contractarian society (FCS). A FCS is made up of voluntary communities (VCs) of likeminded people. The role of FCSs would be limited to enforcing contracts, protecting civil rights and making sure that citizens have a right to exit from VCs. Within VCs individuals would be free to practice a more ideal form of deliberation or to redistribute their resources. Alternatively they would be free to join VCs based on religious or authoritarian beliefs.

Pincione and Tesón expect to find less discourse failure under these arrangements, as citizens would have an incentive to get informed and shop around for different VCs and would be able to hold them accountable if they do not deliver on their promises, as the relationship between VCs and their members would be contractarian. This would eliminate discourse failure resulting both from rational ignorance and political posturing.

VCs would also eliminate the need for societies to reach collective decisions on controversial issues, as each VC could adopt its own policy on these. Given that citizens would be free to choose which VC they belonged to, no group would impose its own views on another group. The need for compromise would also be eliminated. The judicial framework of the FCS would ensure that no citizen would be forced to do anything he did not consent to.

The authors admit that readers who will find their earlier theory of discourse failure attractive might still reject the proposals in the final chapter. They also freely admit that their theory is utopian in the sense that a fully contractarian society may be unattainable. However they also hold that unlike deliberative democracy it is attractive as a regulative ideal that actual societies try to approximate.

I fail to find the authors' vision of a FCS convincing. One major obstacle is that while they stress that individuals would be free to exit VCs, they say little about the individual costs of doing so. Yet these costs would likely be high if we take into account the sunk costs of joining a community and the costs of breaking individual ties to it. As a result many people would not leave VCs even if they were theoretically free to do so. A FCS is also unrealistic as the state has other basic roles apart from enforcing contracts, like providing public goods such as defence.

The main aim of this book is to critique deliberative democracy on the grounds that it will not solve discourse failure. The last chapter can be seen as an extension of this aim, as it posits that the sources of discourse failure, posturing and redistribution, should be eliminated instead. In this context it is forgivable that the theory of FCS is not developed in greater detail. Yet this chapter in many respects is the weakest part of the book and does not match the insight of earlier chapters.

Rational choice arguments have of course been applied to deliberative democracy before in the literature (Miller, 1992). However this is the first time that they are set out in the length of a book in such detail. The authors' approach is highly pragmatic, which is welcome in a field where many of

the theories are purely normative and are often accused of utopianism. Given that they write so extensively about the power of vivid arguments, the authors appear to understand the need for vivid examples of political arguments that should be familiar to all. The arguments set out in what I take to be the core chapters of the book are well-written and clearly articulated. The book provides an important contribution to the literature and constitutes a critique of deliberative democracy that its supporters need to take seriously and need to respond to.

Pincione and Tesón expressly state that their argument is purely theoretical and while it should be empirically verifiable, their aim is to provide a theory that might lead to further empirical work. They also argue that their claims are supported by ample evidence from real world politics. Throughout the book the authors underpin their claims with results and theories from cognitive psychology, such as the confirmatory bias, heuristic shortcuts and other cognitive errors caused by motivational and social factors. While this could have been potentially problematic, as the mechanisms described might not necessarily apply to all deliberative settings and it is possible to pick theories selectively to support one's argument, they seem to avoid these traps, mainly by making sure that all references made to such theories are firmly connected to examples and political phenomena that are well-defined and clearly set out. Yet in order to ultimately provide proof for the validity of these arguments, empirical testing is still necessary. An analysis of vivid as opposed to opaque arguments provided during an actual deliberative debate may be of particular interest.

Perhaps the most surprising thing about this book, given the sustained critique of deliberative democracy that it offers, is how little it engages with the existing literature. The arguments set out in this book could have become a lot more powerful if the authors had shown more clearly how they relate to the ideas of other scholars.

For a book of this length, only a very limited amount of deliberative democracy literature is directly cited. No mention is made of what Dryzek (2000) calls difference democrats, such as Iris Marion Young (2000) or Seyla Benhabib (1996). These authors provide an account of deliberation that is much less epistemically driven than the version presented by Pincione and Tesón. Deliberative outcomes in the literature are often assumed to be qualitatively different rather than simply epistemically better. Deliberation is seen to promote values such as justice, autonomy, legitimacy and equality.

While the authors touch on non-epistemic justifications of democracy briefly, these are definitely relegated to a second place and are not given the weight that they receive in the rest of the literature.

Furthermore relatively little attention is paid to the growing empirical literature on deliberative democracy. While the deliberative polls organized by James Fishkin are mentioned (95–8), this is by no means the only such work. Empirical studies of various deliberative practices, both of town

hall meetings and newer deliberative institutions, are the fastest growing area in this field and their findings deserve more attention. In particular the authors fail to show how these findings relate to their own theories.

One way the authors could have made their position within the existing literature clearer is by providing an unambiguous account of what version of deliberation the target of their critique is and even more importantly, what is not. In this case they might even have been able to forgo the arguments against non-epistemic justifications for deliberative democracy, which given the depth of these issues is not adequately discussed in this book. Making their intentions clear in this way would have allowed Pincione and Tesón to make stronger claims within a niche of the deliberative democracy literature.

Given the radically different solution they advocate in their final chapter this may not have satisfied the authors' intentions, as they may have desired a more whole-sale rejection of the deliberative ideal. However for such a rejection the non-epistemic arguments would need to be stronger than they are at the moment. As it is, they might argue that framework contractarian societies offer a better solution to discourse failure than democratic deliberation, but they cannot argue the same on grounds of equality, autonomy or legitimacy. This is why the final few chapters of the book feel so much weaker than its first half.

One of the more controversial points made in the book is no doubt the close link between redistribution and discourse failure. Even if we accept the argument that the jostling for resources associated with redistribution contributes to discourse failure, we can still argue that in this case discourse failure is an unavoidable evil, a position which the authors do not consider in detail. Pincione and Tesón argue that the only way to reduce discourse failure is to reduce redistribution and the size of the state up to the point of the entirely minimal role it plays in a FCS. But as Harold Lasswell famously put it, politics is about who gets what, when and how, and is naturally redistributive, whether it redistributes money or power. Thus the authors' solution could be reduced to eliminating discourse failure through eliminating politics – hardly an attractive proposition when we take into account that politics can also be a means of solving problems as a society.

Despite its shortcomings this book is a unique contribution to the rapidly growing literature on deliberative democracy due to the authors' critical stance towards deliberation and their libertarian approach rooted in economics and it should be of interest to all scholars of democratic theory. It can enrich our understanding of the challenges deliberation faces, but cannot be a complete critique of it, since it ignores many of the issues the literature raises.

Zsuzsanna Chappell
London School of Economics and Political Science

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A Brief History of Neoliberalism, David Harvey. Oxford University Press, 2005, vii + 247 pages.

David Harvey has written an important book, which seeks to explain the rise of neoliberalism to those who mistakenly believe that the core of modern right-wing political doctrine still resembles the classical liberalism of Adam Smith or John Stuart Mill. Such clarification is long overdue in the American context, where both the term and the theoretical examination of neoliberalism have lagged behind usage in European and Latin contexts, in no small measure due to the efforts of the neoliberals themselves. This book is aimed at a general audience, and attempts to weave together recent economic history and history of political theory into a single narrative of the ascendancy of the neoliberals throughout the world, in a short nontechnical text. The economic history component covers the restoration of income and wealth shares of the top 1% of the US population to pre-WWII levels, the erosion of real wages, offshoring and the boom in overseas profits, globalization, and the decline of the welfare state. Harvey is especially good on moving from the US to other national contexts, such as Sweden, Mexico and South Korea as components in a global political economy. Indeed, the chapter on Chinese neoliberalism is one of the best short summaries available of an increasingly important but poorly covered phenomenon. These all attest to Harvey's skills as a geographer.

Nevertheless, Harvey aspires to something grander than that in this book: he seeks to demonstrate how the theory and practice of the political economy of neoliberalism have mutually informed and promoted one another on a global scale. He aims to show that the theory exists in tension with political practices it has promoted (chap. 3), especially when it becomes apparent that the movement has been more successful in global redistribution rather than the creation of wealth (chap. 6), and has thus prompted "exploitable contradictions in the neoliberal agenda" (p. 203).