

Book Review

Deliberative Environmental Politics: Democracy and Ecological Rationality

By Walter F. Baber and Robert V. Bartlett, 2005, The MIT Press, ISBN 0-262-0258706, 276 pages

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Walter F. Baber and Robert V. Bartlett begin their book *Deliberative Environmental Politics: Democracy and Ecological Rationality* with a review of the scathing indictments that have been made by environmentalists against a view of democracy typically described as “interest-group liberalism.” Charged with using language that is “stunted and shallow” (p. 1) and being “virtually obsolete” for the environmental movement (p. 2), how can democracy be rehabilitated from its less than stellar performance in handling the world’s most pressing problems? In other words, is green democracy theoretically possible? For Baber and Bartlett, the answer is yes.

Trained in the fields of Public Policy Studies and Political Science, respectively, Baber and Bartlett attempt to bridge the gap between theory and practice that has plagued environmental politics for so long. For these authors, democracy must take a deliberative turn if it is to avoid being relegated to the trash bin of useless ideas. In chapters one and two, Baber and Bartlett follow others in their respective fields who believe a deliberative approach is “the only way to overcome the failings of interest-group liberalism,” contending deliberative democracy has the potential to produce better environmental policy decisions (p. 6). Although Baber and Bartlett acknowledge that “deliberative democracy” is difficult to define, they argue it is a school of political thought that presumes the essence of democracy is “deliberation rather than voting, interest aggregation, or rights” (p. 6). For deliberation to work, participants must also be politically equal and engage one another in the “weighing, acceptance, or rejection of reasons” (p. 6). Of course, the authors also attempt to argue that Horkheimer and Adorno’s observations about instrumental reason in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* can be addressed by deliberative democracy scholars. In chapter three, realizing different conceptions of deliberative democracy have drastically divergent assumptions, Baber and Bartlett wisely take three models of deliberative democracy as their “points of departure.”

In chapters four, five and six, Baber and Bartlett explore the ideas of deliberative democracy as it has been articulated by John Rawls, Jürgen Habermas, and thinkers such as Amy Gutmann, Dennis Thompson, and James Bohman. Rawls represents the “public reason” approach to deliberative democracy, Habermas the “ideal discourse” perspective, and Gutmann, Thompson, and Bohman the “full liberalism” version. It is in these chapters that the authors are at their best. Baber and Bartlett tackle complicated material and make it accessible to readers

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who may be encountering it for the first time. Rawls's "initial position" and Habermas's "public sphere" are carefully and concisely addressed. Attempts to join Rawlsian and Habermasian ideas in "full liberalism" are also explained. Based on these three points of departure, Baber and Bartlett go on to argue how deliberative democracy has implications for institutions (chapter seven), expertise (chapter eight), citizenship (chapter nine), and social movements (chapter ten). In their attempts to explore the implications of deliberative democracy the authors encounter a number of problems.

In chapter eight, Baber and Bartlett explore the role of rhetoric in deliberative democracy, claiming that they somehow redeem it. After noting how deliberative democracy scholars like Rawls and Habermas view rhetoric as being "the negation of reasoning" and a concept that can only "distort the deliberative process" (p. 143), the authors attempt to illustrate how "rhetoric and rationality cannot be disentangled by complex human beings who are always simultaneously rational and emotional" (p. 144). Rhetoric "poses difficult challenges to deliberative democracy," but the authors position themselves as the ones who "recovered" and "rescued" rhetoric (p. 162). A more accurate observation would be to say Baber and Bartlett are engaging rhetoric in a way rhetoricians would find acceptable. Baber and Bartlett's claim that they "rescue" rhetoric is overstating their contribution.

Another limitation of this work appears in chapter eleven, where the authors take a step back from specific theories of deliberative democracy to offer a bird's eye view of their project. Turning to Bacon, Baber and Bartlett argue that the Enlightenment still holds promise for environmental politics if we can avoid the Idols of the Mind. From the start Baber and Bartlett were honest about their faith in Enlightenment ideals and chapter eleven further illustrates their level of their devotion. After all, they conclude, "deliberative democracy is (at least in part) an effort to realize more fully the dreams of the Enlightenment" (p. 7). However, this book could have done more to engage authors who have been critical of the Enlightenment project. This lack of engagement may make some readers with postmodern affinities a bit uncomfortable.

In their final chapter, the authors conclude with an optimistic view of future politics. Turning to three cases, Baber and Bartlett attempt to illustrate what deliberative approaches to decision-making would emphasize in real situations. In one example, the authors describe an article written by Thomas Friedman following the destruction of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001. Friedman describes a conversation he observed involving a Pakistani friend and the friend's children. Apparently, the children returned home after hearing rumors that the 9/11 attacks were part of an elaborate Jewish conspiracy. The father engages his children to dispel the myth by giving them all of the practical reasons this was not a possibility. Baber and Bartlett offer this story as an example of how careful critical engagement has the potential to steer us toward proper understandings of the world. The authors also turn to land-use planning in the Pacific Northwest and polling in Connecticut to illustrate their point. However, these examples are minimally engaged. All three examples occupy approximately six pages. Readers who expect to see deliberative democracy in action will find this book's use of examples and textual analysis disappointing.

Overall, my reaction to Baber and Bartlett's book is generally positive. These authors have written a book that does an excellent job of explaining and engaging three perspectives on deliberative democracy, and I would still say that for anyone who wishes to find out more about deliberative environmental politics, the first six chapters are definitely worth reading. However, for readers who are interested in the rhetorical components of deliberative democracy, the

postmodern response to Enlightenment ideals, or how political theories are put into actual practice, this book will be of limited use.