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# Response to Den Herder-Thomas and Ryan

Martin L. Gunderson

*Macalester College*, [gunderson@macalester.edu](mailto:gunderson@macalester.edu)

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## Response

Martin Gunderson

### I. Introduction

Taken together, the essays by Clare Ryan and Timothy Den Herder-Thomas offer a comprehensive approach to environmental citizenship that ranges from the education of children to student activism to participation by all concerned citizens. The essays do not present contrasting views of environmental citizenship. Rather, Ryan's paper can be viewed as sketching the sort of education that is needed for the ecological mind-set and open-space governance that Den Herder-Thomas defends. The articles are visionary, idealistic, and, at the same time, practical. It is important that the papers are both visionary and practical, as vision without practicality risks descent into mere ideological cant, and practical suggestions without vision risk insensitivity to important environmental values.

### II. The Engaged Environmental Citizen

Den Herder-Thomas seeks radical participatory governance, which he calls "open-space governance." In fact, he believes that it is "fundamental to the future of human civilization." He gives us an idea of how open-space governance will function through his own example in working with ARISE (Alliance to Re-Industrialize for a Sustainable Economy) and CERF (Clean Energy Revolving Fund). Open-space governance relies on the "participation and guidance of many partners, including local labor leaders, affordable housing advocates, transit planners, city officials, and local residents." This is basically a version of deliberative democracy in action, and Ryan is correct to note how well deliberative democracy fits with environmentalism. We can shed light on Den Herder-Thomas's open-space governance by examining the theory of deliberative democracy and noting some of the problems faced by that theory. I believe that the work being done by Ryan and Den Herder-Thomas can be viewed as making a contribution to the theory of deliberative democracy, while deliberative democracy can be viewed as providing insight that can contribute to their visions.

Deliberative democracy is a political theory according to which political decisions are legitimate to the extent that those affected by

*Civic Forum 2008*

the decisions have a voice in appropriate deliberation regarding those decisions. Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson claim that deliberative democracy is based on three principles: reciprocity, publicity, and accountability.<sup>1</sup> Reciprocity requires that those engaged in the deliberation seek decisions based on reasons that are mutually acceptable. Publicity requires that the reasons that justify decisions be public. Accountability requires that the interests of all those affected be taken into account.

It is clear that deliberative democracy turns on the consent of the governed. In fact, it provides for governmental legitimacy by making consent central. It is therefore ironic that Den Herder-Thomas states that open-space governance is not done by the consent of the governed, but by awareness of participants of their role in government. What deliberative democracy tells us is that consent is ensured by the action of participants in governance. Where Den Herder-Thomas is correct is that governance is not merely representative governance in which representatives act with the consent of those represented. Consent is secured by direct participation in open-space governance.

All philosophical theories are faced with problems, and deliberative democracy is no exception.<sup>2</sup> It has been objected, for instance, that deliberative democracy fails to take account of important legal processes, such as litigation, and important political processes, such as demonstrations and voting. This is true, but Den Herder-Thomas and Ryan have shown that the deliberative process they advocate nonetheless works well in a variety of areas where crucial environmental decisions are made. This is especially true at the local level. Still, the questions are worth pursuing of when litigation is a better route to take than deliberation, and when environmentalists should resort to such political tactics as mass demonstrations. When, for example, should one abandon the deliberative approach of open-space governance and bring suit under the Environmental Protection Act? What, in short, are the limits of open-space governance?

It has also been objected that deliberative democracy excludes the voices of groups that have been marginalized in society. To be effective, deliberation requires a fairly high level of education and sufficient common values. Ryan's description of environmental education helps to address this objection, and Den Herder-Thomas is careful to include all citizens who will be affected. Nonetheless, it is worth raising the question of who will actually be able to participate successfully in the deliberative ideal described by open-space governance.

*Martin Gunderson*

Some have claimed that deliberative democracy is utopian and not suited to actual political decision making. To the extent to which Den Herder-Thomas and his colleagues can make organizations such as ARISE work, this criticism will be undermined. In this respect, their activities can be seen as an experiment-in-progress to determine the extent to which their form of deliberative democracy can be made to work.

### **III. Educating Environmental Citizens**

The type of educational system advocated by Ryan fits nicely with the new politics and ecological mind-set advocated by Den Herder-Thomas. Den Herder-Thomas advocates open-ended political action that requires much in the way of skills and little in the way of a predetermined ideology. The education of children advocated by Ryan supports this stance. Ryan advocates an educational system that enables students to learn by making choices and experiencing the consequences of those choices. The educational system she defends would de-emphasize imparting an environmental ideology to the next generation. She is right about this. Stressing ideology would actually undermine the sorts of processes advocated by Den Herder-Thomas. Ryan does, however, state that education cannot be value free. Her description of environmental education emphasizes the importance of learning by doing, the developing freedom of children, and respect for individual choices. A question worth considering is how to distinguish teaching the sorts of values stressed by Ryan from imparting an ideology.

I would also like to put in a word on behalf of the importance of science education for environmental citizenship. Ryan's ideal of environmental education does not place a central emphasis on science. She worries about the sort of passive learning and mere measurement skills sometimes emphasized in traditional science classes. I believe, however, that the pursuit of science fits well with the sort of model advocated by Ryan and is, in fact, fundamental to environmental education. Science education can be done in a way that emphasizes student activity and choices. Students can engage in scientific experiments, for example, that allow them to make decisions and experience consequences. Students can also be encouraged to ask questions about the world and then reflect on how they might carry out an investigation to find the answers. In short, science education can be active in the way that Ryan advocates. It is true that science education requires assimi-

Civic Forum 2008

lating a great deal of information, but it is much more than that. In this respect it does not differ from education in other areas. The acquisition of skills in general requires that one have a background of information. In general it is not possible to develop the skills needed for the sort of activism Den Herder-Thomas envisions without significant knowledge.

It is also important to remember the extent to which science has made us aware of ecology and the need for environmental action. Scientists have been able to pinpoint environmental problems long before they become obvious to non-scientist citizens. The social sciences as well as the physical sciences are crucial. Den Herder-Thomas's program, for example, requires sensitivity to community concerns, and social science techniques can help us to be aware of those concerns while providing insight into how local political power structures actually operate.

#### IV. Conclusion

The essays by Den Herder-Thomas and Ryan present complementary visions of what is needed for environmental citizenship. Their visions can draw from work on deliberative democracy while also providing a contribution to that theory. They present practical courses of action that point us in a promising direction.

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#### Notes

1. Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson, *Democracy and Disagreement* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1996), chapters 2-4.
2. For critiques of deliberative democracy with replies by Gutmann and Thompson, see Stephen Macedo, ed., *Deliberative Politics: Essays on Democracy and Disagreement* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).