ON SCHOLARLY METAPHORS, OR, WHAT IS DELIBERATIVE ABOUT DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY?

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INTRODUCTION

Many, if not all, sub-fields in academic scholarship have a standard object of study, and a standard operating procedure for studying it. For political science generally it is the relationship between political institutions and political behaviour, studied by means of large-\(n\) attitudinal surveys and other observable data (Dryzek 1990, 155). For deliberative democracy, the standard object has long been the deliberative minipublic, forums in which a selected sample of lay citizens are systematically informed about an issue and develop responses in light of arguments from peers and experts. The standard operating procedure is first to assess the minipublic against a set of ideal design criteria; and second to measure preference transformation: are the views brought into the minipublic transformed by the encounter with information and argumentation? While there are variations on these themes, and challenges from within and without the sub-field, the standard object and approach have become deeply entrenched in the way that partisans discuss deliberative ideas, and critics attack them. To say ‘deliberative democracy’ is, more often than not, to mean ‘minipublic’.

However, when one looks closely, it is not clear that minipublics are good instances of deliberative democracy. To begin with, their democratic credentials have long been questioned. There are many problems, but the key is that participants are such a tiny proportion of the relevant public, while the means used to bridge the gap between participants and the rest of the relevant demos are ineffective, confusing statistical representation with other kinds of representation; ignoring contextual factors; and putting unrealistic expectations on the media (Fuji Johnson 2015, Papadopoulos and Warin 2007, Parkinson 2006, Urbinati 2000). But increasingly their deliberative credentials are being called into question too. The majority of empirical work does not study deliberation directly but instead takes a ‘black box’ approach: if the standard participant selection mechanisms are deployed, appropriate institutions are set up, and participants are seen to change minds, then it is asserted rather than demonstrated that deliberation has produced the results. This is despite the fact that such an assertion is highly implausible given everything we know about the staging of authority and its psychological impacts on participants (Hajer 2005, Jennstål 2011); and that the best available measure of deliberative quality shows a negative correlation between deliberative quality and preference transformation (Baccaro, Bächtiger, and Deville 2014).

The plot thickens when considering one of the major alternatives to the minipublic focus, the deliberative systems approach (Parkinson and Mansbridge 2012). This approach explicitly claims that a deliberative system may include many sites and practices which are not deliberative, nor even directly include the mass of the citizenry, but which are nonetheless ‘functional’ for the deliberative health of the system as a whole. This claim, argue critics like Owen and Smith (2015), amounts to the embrace of an elite-focused pluralism, and the abandonment of both deliberation and democracy, under the cover of those very labels.
We seem, therefore, to have a situation in which the majority of deliberative democrats study neither deliberation nor democracy, but some other object entirely; that the label ‘deliberative democracy’ means something other than its component parts.

What, then, is deliberative about deliberative democracy? How has such a remarkable state of affairs come about? What are its consequences, both positive and negative? And what, if anything, can be done about the negatives? While there are some explanations for the focus on minipublics in the literature,¹ this paper makes a novel claim: that the fixation of deliberative democracy on a particular object can in part be explained by the power of its dominant metaphor, that of the forum; while its leading challengers are either being assimilated into the dominant metaphor; or undergoing their own metaphorical fixation, even ossification. The result is that much deliberative scholarship – by no means all, but a surprising amount – has become caught on a hamster wheel, asking the same questions of more-or-less the same processes, with potentially important challenges going unnoticed and, crucially, positive lines of development being ignored. The literature appears to have peaked and may be entering a decline (see figure 1), at the very time when new, creative intellectual possibilities are becoming available.

This paper argues that the solution to this situation is not less metaphor but more: to deploy metaphors which are not so obvious; which demand more of the imagination; which are discarded and replaced frequently; and thus resist ossification. It offers several metaphors which meet these criteria, and then demonstrates the usefulness of the

¹ Beyond claims about the inherent ‘rightness’ of the ideas and practices of deliberative democracy – claims which sceptics will always treat with suspicion – there are two more structural claims to do with the fit between minipublic prescriptions and particular public management imperatives (Parkinson 2004b), and the commodification of deliberation (Hendriks and Carson 2008). Other explanations might be sought in the sociology of academic inquiry and its professionalization.
approach by revealing possible solutions to two key controversies raised above – what is ‘deliberative’ about deliberative democracy, and what is the role of minipublics in deliberative systems? In particular, it uses novel, even jarring metaphors to show that how one answers these questions depends on whether one sees deliberation in additive or summative terms. Its call is not to abandon metaphor in political analysis – that is inescapable – but for more metaphorical awareness in order to build bridges rather than walls across academic divides. The more general claim is that some of the key debates in deliberative democracy are the result not just of principled objections, logics or evidential claims; nor even of some vague, ‘essential contestability’ of the concept; but of competing metaphors.

**METAPHORS AND REASONING**

The power of metaphor has long been recognised in critical policy studies. As Schön (1978) and Lakoff and Johnson (1980) recognised some years ago, when confronting a new situation or idea ‘A’ we make sense of it by categorising it as ‘like B’ or ‘C’ on the basis of some salient feature. This comparison then evokes a ‘system of associated commonplaces’ (Black 1962, 40), a chain of associations and meanings which have accreted around the comparator, functioning much like any other symbol (Hawkes 2003, Strauss 2011). This is why some metaphors seem more successful than others. By calling on a pre-existing system of associated commonplaces a metaphor provides a ready-made and shared conceptual map. A successful metaphor will be one whose associations are widely shared and which confront people with few disanalogies as they explore those associations; an unsuccessful metaphor will rely on associations shared by only a few, or whose disanalogies are many and obvious. However, the less familiar the situation or idea, the less obvious the disanalogies, which means that what may eventually come to be seen as a wildly inappropriate metaphor may not be seen to be so at first.

These features have important consequences. Metaphors are the initial spark which drives the construction of frames or paradigms, which in turn determine what kinds of evidence we look for and what kinds of arguments we accept or reject. They influence what we consider problematic or not and the subsequent search for solutions. They generate narratives, focusing on a particular cast of characters and a limited set of narrative ‘arcs’ which almost never perfectly track the complexities of material realities or peoples’ experiences of policy (Fischer and Forester 1993, Stone 2002). If we think of policy ideas emerging at a ‘window of opportunity’ (Kingdon 1984), we cannot help but imagine what opens and shuts that window, even though ‘opening and shutting’ might not capture something as fluid and multi-faceted as a moment in policy time. If we describe being caught committing an offence in terms of ‘strikes’ in baseball, we cannot help but imagine the consequences of missing the ball three times, even though that frames crime as an individual skill in a game rather than a more complex social phenomenon (Jones and Newburn 2006) – and even though the analogy seems to imply that success equals committing a really big crime and not getting caught.

Because of this combination of shared associations, the masking of disanalogies, and the exclusion of alternatives, metaphors can be self-reinforcing over time. They ‘establish a privileged perspective on an object or constitute ‘the’ object and, by doing so, disappear as metaphors’ (Carver and Pikalo 2008, 3). The more striking the metaphor at the start of our process of grappling with the new condition, the more it shapes our search for knowledge, especially if there are no competing metaphors; and then it fades from view as metaphor; we treat it as ‘the thing itself’. Until we recognise a metaphor for what it is,
the fewer opportunities there will be to find information which challenges the metaphor and the understandings it generates.

There are numerous sub-literatures on the influence of metaphor in policy and, to a smaller extent, international relations (Cienki and Yanow 2013). What is much less commonly recognised is that academic inquiry itself uses metaphorical reasoning.\(^2\)

Metaphor can be a powerful stimulant to thought, and provides a basis for theory-building: as Brown (1976, 170) put it, a scholarly model ‘may be thought of as a metaphor whose implications have been thought out’. But just as with any metaphorical reasoning, as the metaphor takes hold academics come to view the metaphor as the object of study instead of a metaphor. We point to data, arguments and evidence for our views, dismissing metaphor as the opposite of serious thought (Black 1962, 25), even while replacing the phenomenon allegedly under study with the naturalised metaphor and unconsciously selecting and deselecting material to bolster our prior, metaphorical starting points (Thibodeau and Boroditsky 2011, see also Cienki and Yanow 2013). There are innumerable examples, but one of the most important traditions in modern political theory rests on a naturalised metaphor - the social contract. There is no literal contract, not even for Hobbes who is seen as the modern founder of the tradition. It is a thought experiment whose consequences have been developed and turned into a set of models, but which nonetheless exclude important perspectives which took hundreds of years to surface (Held 1993, Pateman 1988). The point of the example is this: metaphors that start as aids to thought and understanding can become means by which thought is narrowed, meaning obscured and creativity dimmed. Metaphors, as Orwell (1946) insisted, are essential to bring an idea to life; but they quickly exert a dulling, conventionalising effect unless replenished or replaced. They need to be kept fresh through conscious creativity.

From that conceptual starting point, there are two major approaches one could take to metaphorical analysis: a micro-level linguistic analysis, or a broad-brush approach that takes its cues from the history of ideas (Maasen and Weingart 2000). This paper takes the latter route, largely because it wishes to challenge the standard, broad-brush, and rather misleading histories of deliberative democracy that pepper the literature, histories that obscure early metaphorical commitments. They almost all feature single, straight-line and somewhat teleological narratives, starting with the infancy of an idea to its allegedly logical elaboration in stages, turns or generations (Elstub 2010), proceeding in a direct line to a robust maturity (Bohman 1998), often omitting any implication of eventual decline and rarely including a sense of varied origins and competing schools (for partial exceptions, see Bächtiger et al. 2010, Dryzek 2010, 3-10, Rummens forthcoming). Ideas are always more complex than such narratives portray. They arise in rich contexts; their fortunes fluctuate; the more successful ones resonate in multiple contexts which means that instead of just one storyline every idea has several, with complex roots, stems and branches (Bevir 1999, Gordon 2014). Because it is so important for the explanatory story offered here, the analysis will concentrate on one of the original contexts, but it will touch on several others. As will be seen, those contexts matter for the question in hand – what is deliberative about deliberative democracy? – yet they are almost never mentioned in the standard narratives.

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\(^2\) Thibodeau and Boroditsky (2011). For explorations of metaphorical reasoning in politics, political science and theory, see Carver and Pikalo (2008); in economics, McCloskey (1994); in the ‘hard’ sciences, Maasen (2000).
Before beginning on the detail, it is important to insert a caveat and to deal with an objection. The caveat is this: while the analysis that follows is critical, the argument should not be taken to mean that the entire deliberative enterprise has been meaningless. On the contrary, I suggest that it has been a remarkable success partly because of the persuasiveness of its dominant metaphor in several contexts, moving from a peculiar plaything of a small group of democracy theorists to becoming an influential theory across numerous disciplines and an inspiration for renewed democratic innovation and institutionalisation around the world (Dryzek 2010). But the standard metaphors of deliberative democracy contain elisions and oversights which are being challenged with increasing sophistication by insiders and outsiders, including psychologists, cultural theorists, comparative political scientists and more. The standard operating procedure has reached a dead end; and its most important challenger is already showing signs of heading in the same direction; but by thinking more imaginatively scholars can find ways out of those dead ends.

The objection is this: why concentrate on metaphors as distinct from, say, models, theories, or any other ways of structuring and simplifying ideas for academic analysis? One answer is to invert Brown’s (1976) maxim and point out that only one of the metaphors discussed below has been developed to the point where it merits the label ‘model’ because their implications have not yet been thought out (although on the thought that model-making is an overrated activity, see Saward 2006). The one that has attained some model status is clearly, unequivocally metaphorical in its origins. A second answer is more critical, and that is to point out that academic inquiry is itself a social and linguistic enterprise. The aspiration to universality and objectivity are just as problematic for deliberative democrats as they have been shown to be for advocates of a science of policy, politics, democracy (Dryzek 1988, Forester 1984, Gunnell 1986) and yet deliberative democrats’ own use of metaphor goes unremarked. That lack of attention has important scholarly and practical consequences, to which I now turn.

DELIBERATION’S DOMINANT METAPHOR: THE FORUM

It is conventional to pinpoint the origin of deliberative democracy with Bessette (1980), but the way that label is used by Bessette is quite different from others who picked it up in the mid-late 1980s. For Bessette, deliberative democracy is a label for the argumentation processes that go on within a representative assembly. For Cohen (1989) and Elster (1986), ‘deliberative democracy’ was meant to be a better descriptive model of democracy relative to a set of concerns with then-dominant economic models, a description that promised to help resolve puzzles about public choice that arose in those models. Elster’s paper is particularly noteworthy because of his use of two metaphors, the market and the forum, to explain what became a commonplace.

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3 Some deliberative democrats like Gutmann and Thompson (1996) claim that the idea is even older, suggesting that it goes back to Dewey (1924) who rejected the sufficiency of definitions of democracy which focused narrowly on electoral processes. See Ralston (2010) for a spirited rebuttal of the claim that Dewey was a proto-deliberativist, distinguishing between Dewey’s ethical concerns and attempts to claim such ‘moral deliberation’ as a prophecy of later agendas.

4 The puzzles are most famously set out by Riker (1982); the best description, critique and resolution of the puzzles remains Mackie (2003), along with the extensive work of List and his collaborators (for example, List 2002, List and Dryzek 2003, List and Pettit 2004).
aggregative/deliberative distinction, with ‘aggregative’ being used to describe various vote counting devices and ‘deliberative’ used to describe all the processes in the public sphere that structured issues and preferences before they ever came to the vote. Now, Elster does not elaborate on his metaphor – he does not even discuss its metaphorical nature – but if we place his work in the context of that dispute about puzzles that arise in models that draw on the ‘market’ metaphor, then he is clearly offering an alternative that helps reveal different features of mass, large-scale democracy, a reading advocated most strongly by Chambers (2003).

This macro, descriptive reading is no longer the dominant reading of Elster, and has not been for some time. When more participatory democrats, especially those out of critical public policy and planning studies, communication and environmental politics, and some branches of normative political theory latched onto this and other founding papers they read them in different intellectual contexts which featured different salient questions, and thus brought their own understandings to bear. In particular, ‘the forum’ was taken not as a metaphor for an alternative view of large-scale politics but as a normative prescription for the direct involvement of citizens against the state, against the institutions that were legitimised by mass politics (see, for example, Fung 2003). Thus many scholars took the forum idea and said, in effect, ‘Oh, a participatory planning session is like that’ (Forester 1999, Renn, Webler, and Wiedemann 1995); or, ‘A town meeting is (a bit) like that’ (Fishkin 1991, Gastil 1993); or, in the classic difference democrat critique, ‘A university seminar is like that’ (Sanders 1997), which in turn provided justifications for a flowering of empirical work in which scholars went out to find – or even create (Fishkin 1991) – further real-world analogues of the forum idea.

In order to examine cases, empirical scholars needed analytic criteria, both as checklists of features against which to assess potential candidates (eg., Joss and Durant 1995, Smith and Wales 2000) or as sticks with which to beat the theory (eg., Doğanay 2004). They took the criteria from Cohen, Dryzek (1990), Elster, Manin (1987) and others but, addressing more street-level imperatives, stripped out the mass democracy context. Thus, as Carver and Pikalo (2008) would expect, ‘the forum’ had its metaphorical nature disguised in new intellectual contexts, becoming seen as a blueprint to follow rather than a metaphor to ponder. As a result, deliberative empirical effort was almost entirely directed towards small-scale institutions, or to small-scale deliberative moments within larger ones (eg., Uhr 1998).

The rush to the small, participatory scale was near-universal, long-lasting and very productive, revealing examples of innovative practice, lessons about good procedure, a revival of belief in the deliberative capacities of ordinary people and the benefits of involving them directly in solving controversies, reflection on and recasting of theory (especially the consensus criterion and the nature of deliberation within the forum, on which see Bächtiger et al. 2010), and a surge of experimentation with and, to a lesser but increasing extent, institutionalisation of participatory practices in day to day governance. There were demand-side reasons for this – deliberative ideas resonated with new public management ideas about rationalising public debate and building community legitimacy (Parkinson 2004b), and became seen as high status technologies of public engagement which strengthened the hand of peripheral government agencies locked in battles for resources with central governments (eg., Harrison and Mort 1998).

The forum idea was then picked up in a number of other disciplines, something which was possible because it already had meaning in those disciplines with strong street-level,
participatory traditions – to repeat Black (1962), it evoked a system of associated commonplaces in those contexts. So, for example, the planning discipline already had a pre-existing tradition of participatory, action research dating from the 1960s to draw on, some of which cited the same intellectual sources as the deliberative democrats: most obviously Diener, Renn and Webler in Germany (Renn et al. 1993) and Forester (1984, 1999) in the US who drew on Habermas’s theory of communicative action and participatory democracy from the 1970s, as did communication scholars like Gastil (1993), and public policy scholars like Fischer (Fischer and Forester 1993). One could tell a similar story about the resonance of the forum idea in environmental politics, in law, to some extent in development studies and increasingly in global politics. There were of course other strands – important ones, like the critical theory of Dryzek (1990), addressed in the next section. Otherwise, as is often observed in conversation among deliberative democrats, Habermas is much more cited than read, let alone followed.

The more successful the deliberative idea became the more its meaning became fixed on a set of participatory norms and administrative practices, which then was allowed to filter out other meanings and processes, at the same time establishing research practices which themselves became conventional and thus rarely questioned. One can see this conventionalisation in lists of deliberative criteria – informed, reason-sensitive, other-regarding, equal and inclusive discussion, originally oriented to consensus and preferably involving citizens directly – which focus on deliberation among relatively small groups while gliding over what should have been fairly obvious questions about the democratic aspects of deliberative democracy (Parkinson 2006). More obviously, and significantly for present purposes, one can also conventionalisation in lists of institutions which were said to meet the criteria, increasingly using the term ‘minipublic’ which further limited the range of what counted as a deliberative forum to those which deployed particular selection mechanisms (Fung 2007). Examining recent sources produces near-identical lists of three or four institutions – just taking four sources from a bookshelf produced:

- four mentions each of citizens’ juries and deliberative polls;
- three mentions each of citizen assemblies and consensus conferences;
- and two each of participatory budgeting and parliamentary debating chambers.

Most deliberative democrats, if asked, would likely reproduce the same lists. However, in the case of the citizens’ jury, the label has now become a more or less empty signifier, applied to consultation processes that have little to do with the original citizens’ juries created by Crosby (1995) and Diener (1995) and celebrated – cautiously – by Smith and Wales (2000). Similarly, the deliberative poll has been so long on the conventional list that the fact that its deliberative credentials are highly questionable has done little to dent its academic status (compare Fuji Johnson 2015, Grönlund, Bächtiger, and Setälä 2014, Mansbridge 2010, Olsen and Trenz 2014). The consensus conference process (Joss and Durant 1995) still appears on many lists (eg., Grönlund, Bächtiger, and Setälä 2014, 2, 12) despite the fact that it is rarely used – its originator, the now-restructured and re-named Danish Board of Technology, stopped running them after 2003, while lists from Participedia and the Loka Institute include no examples anywhere since 2008.6

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5 Elstub and McLaverty (2014, 7); Landemore (2013); Smith (2009) and Suiter and Reuchamps (2016).
6 See http://participedia.net and http://www.loka.org/TrackingConsensus.html. On deliberative polls, one reason for their academic status is that they are designed to answer academic questions about the transformation of preferences in light of information and discussion; their utility for answering questions of public policy is what is being ques
Further, there are a great many processes which meet many of the ‘forum’ principles but which never appear on the conventional list, some of them of quite long standing. These include the 
gram sabha (village assembly) in India, the Landsgemeinden in Switzerland, the less open but still deliberative National Public Policy Conferences in Brazil, Community Cabinets in Australia, and many, many other forums that should be well known to deliberative democrats but are not. The literature moved from a state in which the forum idea dominated, to one in which a restricted, conventional list of deliberative democratic practices become hackneyed and habitual.

This cliché-building process is associated with the two features of the mainstream deliberative democracy literature that have already been noted: a black box empirical approach, and the overstatement of minipublics’ democratic credentials. To recap, the black box approach treats deliberation as an input and outcome phenomenon bolstered by appropriate institutional settings (eg., Luskin, Fishkin, and Jowell 2002, Cook, Delli Carpini, and Jacobs 2007). There are exceptions, notably Steiner et al. (2004), Jennstål (2011) and Niemeyer (2011), as well as an emerging literature from rhetorics (eg., Lyon 2013), but conceptually and empirically sophisticated work that peers into the black box and studies actual deliberative dynamics remains rare. The second feature is that much of the empirical work has had little to do with democracy either. Scholars have overstated the democratic credentials of institutions based on selected samples of citizens, sometimes making legitimacy claims that properly belong to principal-agent representation rather than fully random samples, let alone the quota samples that are more often used in practice (Parkinson 2004a). They have taken such features as sufficient conditions for deliberative democracy instead of necessary (or at least desirable) ones, overlooking many other democratic conditions such as some act of endorsement and accountability of the decision-makers, publicity bonds between the selected deliberators and the rest of the citizenry, the consequent lack of legitimate decision-making power of most such processes, and the problem-definition and agenda limits which further restricted legitimacy. That is, they blurred the line between deliberation per se and deliberative democracy, taking them to be equivalent and embodied in a fixed list of practices. In more recent years there have been notable exceptions like Curato (2012), Fuji Johnson (2015), Hendriks (2011), Papadopoulos (2008) and Rummens (2012), but otherwise many empirical social scientists continue to study such processes out of an explicitly democratic context. As a result, the label ‘deliberative democracy’ has come to mean something other than the sum of its component parts.

The dominant metaphor may have reached the point where it is a constraint rather than an enabler, producing ever-diminishing circles of papers in which the same questions are asked of remarkably similar institutions in slightly different contexts, over and over again. The point of this paper is not to pick fights with particular scholars, especially not those relatively new to the field, and so does not provide a long list of what might be seen as ‘offending’ papers. Instead, two research assistants were employed to code deliberative democracy papers at four major politics conferences from 2010 to 2015 according to their fit with the metaphors presented here, and identify any alternatives. The conferences were the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, the general conference (not the joint sessions) of the European Consortium for Political Research, the annual conference of the UK’s Political Studies Association, and the global congresses of the International Political Studies Association. Conference papers were selected rather than published papers because they are more likely to reflect the current state of the play and more likely to capture more junior colleagues’ work prior to the
extensive filtering of peer review. Papers were coded according to whether they took a clear ‘forum’ approach without any contextualisation; a contextualised forum approach; or any of the other approaches discussed in the next section. The coding was done using an iterative method in which the theoretical categories produced an initial list of codes which were then supplemented in a more open method as the coders encountered new possibilities. Every tenth paper was cross-checked between coders to establish and maintain inter-coder reliability. The results are startling: of 157 papers coded, 39% (62/157) discussed deliberative democracy in decontextualised ‘forum’ terms, a third of which took an entirely ‘black-box’ approach to empirics. Another 24% (22 papers) discussed forums and one other approach in a more contextualised manner; 14% (22 papers) discussed discursive approaches alone; while the rest focused on one or more of the ‘macro’ approaches discussed below. In other words, work which equates deliberative democracy with micro-level analysis of the conventional kind is far and away the dominant approach at the major, international political science conferences, which suggests that it will continue to dominate the journal literature for at least a few years to come.

There have, of course, been reactions to this state of affairs, some from within the forum camp and some which draw on other metaphors. The next section focuses on the latter group, but before moving on to those alternatives, it is important to repeat the caveats. Deliberative democracy is not unique in its reliance on metaphor; the strength of its dominant metaphor is one of the reasons for its successful spread and its longevity; and the results produced have been highly stimulating and worthwhile, particularly as a corrective to the gloomy social-scientific orthodoxy about citizens’ capacities to engage in policy debate and democracy’s ability to synthesise their views that prevailed prior to the deliberative turn.

MACRO METAPHORS: DISCOURSE, NETWORK, SEQUENCE AND SPHERES

Challenges to the dominant metaphor have been around for some time, some for as long as the forum idea itself, but all share some degree of ‘macro’, large-scale focus rather than a micro one (Hendriks 2006), and a common use of the word ‘sphere’, although not
a common meaning of that term. The first is Dryzek’s ‘discursive democracy’ (1990) which concentrates on the reflexive, inclusive generation of discursive challenges to events and hegemonic understandings of the world. Such discursive engagement is democratic to the degree that it is broadly inclusive, under direct and thoughtful control of citizens; and that it is ‘consequential’ in some way: the ideal is that real acts of governance reflect the outcomes of reflective, discursive contests (Schlosberg 1995). Such democracy is sometimes characterised as ‘subjectless, decentred’, following Habermas (1984): once discourses are generated they can take on a life of their own, being transmitted around democratic societies through everyday communicative acts which do not require much in the way of institutional architecture to sustain them. Now, it might be difficult to imagine ‘discourse’ as a metaphor, although I would argue that it is: a specialised application to large-scale contexts of an everyday word that described small-scale, even individual communicative acts. Words are themselves symbols, after all (Hawkes 2003), a point that goes back to Saussurean linguistics. What is clear is that ‘discourse’ acts as metaphor, a symbol which evokes a system of associations (Black 1962) to direct thought towards what was 40 years ago a fairly new set of ideas: that government is a matter of intertwining communicative threads with which human actors have complex relationships; that, as a matter of empirical fact, they shape policy and governance in ways that reflect the balance of communicative power at a particular time and place; and that discursive democracy is in large part about equalising that communicative power. The analytic and empirical implications of such a view of democracy are clear: focus on the discourses, the processes and agents which produce them, their interactions (real or imputed) and their uptake in policy-making or the wider discursive environment (Dryzek 1997, Dryzek and Holmes 2002, Fischer 2003, Hajer 1993, Schlosberg 1995).

More recently, a second major group of challenges has emerged, collectively labelled ‘deliberative systems’ (Parkinson and Mansbridge 2012), along with a closely related competitor called the ‘deliberative capacities approach’ (Dryzek 2009). While there are clear differences in emphasis, all these alternatives start from the view that no one event, practice or institution can possibly match all the deliberative democratic criteria – they cannot be both maximally inclusive and involve actual citizens directly in deliberation for instance; deliberation, strictly understood, requires relatively small numbers while democracy requires relatively large – such that there needs to be a division of labour in any large-scale democracy, an economy of deliberation. The division of labour is between institutions and actors with different strengths and weaknesses, or which activate and incentivise different capabilities. Some of the elements in a system may inject more deliberation – minipublics, legislative committees, courts, some kinds of activist networks – and many do not. The latter – voting and elections, protest, some representative processes, symbolic and performative practices, even social research (Chambers 2012) – inject other necessary qualities into a democratic system, such as equality of influence; decisive popular voice; effective grounding in lived experience and public discourse; coercive and bureaucratic structures to ensure implementation and accountability; logical, principled and evidential testing; and visibility of the entire enterprise (Rummens 2012). Thus scholars started modeling the roles that institutions and actors should play in a democratic system such that collective decisions are made both legitimate and systematically responsive to better arguments (eg. Christiano 2012). But once again, scholars settled very quickly on a single metaphor with which to think about such questions: the ‘network’.
The approaches are very new, and there is little empirical work to go on here, but the implications for scholarship are clear. A network analysis would look at the sites of law and policy making, the connections between them, and perhaps what it is that passes along the connections. In other words, the analytic imperative is to map the network, whereas the earlier task was to measure deliberation (cf. Bächtiger and Parkinson forthcoming). In a more normative mode, a network analysis might advocate institutional arrangements and linkages to transmit proposals and preferences from the ‘communicative space’ of the public sphere to the ‘empowered spaces’ of binding collective decision making. However, what network metaphors can blind analysts to are time, agency and power. Network ideas privilege a largely static view of democracy, depicting deliberative systems in terms of fixed relationships between venues, sites and spheres, or between actors and roles. Everyday citizens and their representatives can come to be assigned somewhat limited roles in static models (cf. Owen and Smith 2015), sometimes in ways that appear obvious caricatures: citizens can be seen as bearers of values or ideas about ends, experts contribute means-ends knowledge, while representatives are conceived in standard principal-agent fashion as executors of popular will, connecting goals and means via public administration (eg., Christiano 2012). This can procedurally lock complex people and relationships into simplistic roles (Crenshaw 1991) – ‘the doctor, you patient’ to misquote the Monty Python sketch – with the result that the demos simply becomes a resource and means to state ends rather than the other way round. Ironically, this is precisely one of the weaknesses of forum-based models – the rigidity of the role assignments, especially with regard to agenda-setting, can allow the powerful to perform acts of democratic engagement while safely preventing citizens from producing any major challenges (Gaventa 2006, Milewa, Valentine, and Calnan 1998, Papadopoulos and Warin 2007).

An alternative way of thinking about deliberative systems picks out the dynamics of issues, actors and venues over time, and that is to use ‘sequence’ metaphors (Goodin 2005, Parkinson 2006, Rummens forthcoming, Steiner 2014). The sequencing of events, venues and roles can be crucial to the deliberative and democratic qualities of a system. For example, public deliberation should not be too early or too late into a process, otherwise agendas will be unnecessarily constrained, values will be overlooked, agreements undermined, and political legitimacy denied. A sequence perspective can alert us to the crucial importance of ‘plugging in’ democratic innovations, not just into formal empowered decision making space but also into the informal public sphere, the everyday lived experience of policy and politics and the public claim making that emerges from it (Parkinson 2012a). Again, it might be objected that there is nothing metaphorical about such sequences; the word describes how things are. However, any public policy scholar with a reasonable grasp of critical policy theory would know how little that is true. While many public policy textbooks continue to teach a policy stages or cycles model in which problem definition and agenda setting are followed by option generation, assessment, decision and implementation (eg., Howlett, Ramesh, and Perl 2009), and assert the analytic usefulness of those categories, there is a long tradition criticising such models as descriptive fictions – as metaphors which mislead. For example, solutions frequently precede problems; they have a life of their own, hawked by policy entrepreneurs who try to find or manufacture problems to which their tool is a solution (Kingdon 1984). Decisions are not just ‘path-dependent’ (Pierson 2004), they frequently precede analysis entirely, the analysis providing rationalisations for decisions already taken. In other words, sequences in politics are metaphors which alert us to dynamics, but which can lend an unearthly, instrumentally rational, step-wise glow to events which almost never proceed in such an orderly fashion.
Both sequence and network metaphors tend to focus on institutions of inclusion and decision. Those who use them are suspicious of the structurelessness and ad hocery that is celebrated by the discursive approach: if the venues and language of inclusion are dependent on inter-personal networks and are always changing, then only professional insiders, from full-time political advisors to well-resourced activists are able to gain access to empowered sites. Occasional engagers, the vast majority of citizens, look at such processes in bewilderment, wondering where the door is let alone how to get in (Parkinson 2012b, Papadopoulos and Warin 2007). In turn, discursive democrats are suspicious of the degree to which people empowered in institutions come to serve their own ends and resist or formalise the perspectives of outsiders, especially when the division of labour in a deliberative system is agent-based rather than site or institution based; that is, those that divide labour on the basis of alleged personal capacities rather than the strengths and weaknesses of different institutional designs, resulting in people in such systems becoming means to systemic ends rather than ends in themselves.

Despite these distinctions between the three macro metaphors there is a sub-metaphor which appears to link them: the ideas of ‘spheres’, in the form of public spheres, private spheres, even ‘intimate’ spheres (Tetsuki Tamura, cited in Stevenson and Dryzek 2014, 30), a metaphor long associated with Habermas (eg. 1989). One hopes that it is not necessary to spell out the metaphorical nature of the word ‘sphere’ here – we are clearly not talking about literal three-dimensional surfaces, all points of which are equidistant from a fixed point. Now, Habermas discussed ‘the public sphere’ as a relatively inclusive, single entity, and the discursive framework largely holds to that view, with communication flowing relatively freely around a democratic society. However, other deliberative theorists have accepted the argument from Fraser (1992) that the real world features not one public sphere but many, some of which are ‘empowered’ and some of which are not (eg., Bohman 2012); some of which are protected spaces in which groups can find refuge and develop common narratives – realms, spaces, refuges; one cannot avoid using metaphors – and others of which are isolated enclaves, cut off from mainstream discourse, or decision-making, or both. As a result of this recognition, the idea of ‘sphere’ can take on the connotation of a discrete, bounded and centred location of deliberation, as if we were back to the forum idea. Indeed, some in deliberative democracy – and outside it (Hénaff and Strong 2001) – take ‘spheres’ and ‘spaces’ to be synonymous, with a short step from that equation to treating spheres the same as venues and sites.

This bounded, centred spheres idea helps explain another remarkable fact of the deliberative literature: how little discussion there is about the linkages between sites or spheres and what is passed along those linkages; in short, discussion of mass communication, media and messages. Early literature treated small-scale forums as linking institutions – the ‘middle democracy’ of Gutmann and Thompson (1996) and Mansbridge (1999) – but that is simply to insert another set of bounded spaces in between the ‘big two’ of the informal and formal public spheres, and says little directly about transmission per se, nor what, exactly, it is that is transmitted. Dryzek (2009, 1385) sets out some broad features of communicative linkages but offers little nuance and detail: for him, transmission is about the ‘means by which public space influences empowered space’, through campaigning, social movements’ discursive activity, performances and personal communication. Parkinson and Bavister-Gould (2009) offer both a continuum of sites from formal to informal settings and a range of old and new media, and touch on issues with the nature of ‘news’, but again only skim over the
surface. What Parkinson and Bavister-Gould do, along with Bohman (2012), is to problematise what it is that is transmitted along the linkages. They point out that the classic deliberative literature focused almost exclusively on the idea of relatively well-defined ‘proposals’ for public action following Cohen (1989); the ‘preferences’ people held with respect to those proposals; and the reasons, evidence, and arguments used to back them up. However, real public debates are always more complex. They involve the exchange of situated, grounded ‘perspectives’ on events; even culturally-selected scripts (Hood and Jackson 1991); and follow narrative and dramaturgical conventions (Hajer 2005, Stone 1988) – they are themselves richly metaphorical. The fact that deliberative democrats almost never research these transmission processes nor problematise what is transmitted is simply astonishing unless one views the nature of macro deliberative questions through the bounded, centred spheres metaphor, something which directs the scholarly gaze within rather than between spheres.⁷

One of the best ways of summarising the metaphors and their analytic implications is to think about what disfunction looks like on each of them. In the discourse model, disfunction would be related to a lack of direct, popular, reflective control of discourse generation; or by discursive enclave building such that differently-situated people found it hard to make sense of each others’ claims; or by a disconnect between the outcomes of discursive contests in the public sphere and coercive acts of governance; or by the institutionalisation of the outcomes of discursive contests which themselves then lock in the cleavages of a particular time and place (Kriesi 1998), making revision difficult. The network metaphor identifies similar problems of enclave building but thinks of them in rather more institutional or agent-based terms, lacking an agreed account of transmission and thus what a good system might look like. The best available attempts to define this refer to achievement of substantive goals, influencing policy in a particular direction, although whose goals should be decisive is not discussed in any detail; and in terms of the authentic, undistorted transmission of perspectives from the public sphere to empowered space for consideration and action, although what is meant to happen then is anyone’s guess, as Rummens (2012) argues in his critique of existing literature. It is also unclear whether a good network is one whose constituent parts are closely bound to empowered space, or whether a critical distance is required by some venues (but not others?); detailed network architecture questions have not yet been addressed. Sequenced accounts instead look at the policy and decision-making process over time, and look at how institutions and venues feed into one another, although, again, what exactly it is that they are feeding in is not specified. Disfunction in sequenced terms is when perspective-generation and agenda setting is not connected to formal deliberation which in turn is not connected to decision-making sites, in that order, with missing feedback loops, scrutiny and implementation systems, although similarly the ‘stuff’ of deliberation is missing from the available accounts.

* * *

One could, of course, come up with other disfunctions and thus other markers of a well-functioning macro deliberative democracy, and high on the list would be the visibility or publicity criteria. However, the aim has not been to develop fully-worked-out models.

⁷ There is work which challenges this ‘sphere-centric’ view emerging from the field of political communication, especially Rousiley Maia and her lab, and Hartmut Wessler and his collaborators; although even they are being drawn into a focus on small-scale forums. See Maia (2012); Peters and Wessler (2008); and Rinke et al. (2013).
The aim has been to demonstrate that deliberative democratic scholarship is enmeshed in metaphors which change the meaning of the term ‘deliberative democracy’.

One might well think that the only reasonable responses to this situation are either to attempt to strip away the metaphorical language as if it were some invasive jungle plant obscuring a hidden temple of pure thought beneath; or to abandon deliberative democracy altogether in favour of some approach which has already cleared away the undergrowth. As set out in the previous section, both are vain hopes, because metaphor is one of the tools we use to reason – there is no ‘pure thing’ waiting to be discovered. Indeed, the problem is not that we use analytic metaphors; the problem is that we deny that we do so, hiding them from view, allowing them to lose vividness and immediacy, and allowing them to do their theoretical and empirical constraining work unnoticed (Carver and Pikalo 2008). If that is the problem, then the solution is to make our metaphors more explicit and, where they have become stale, choose fresh ones. Indeed, we should go a step further and make our metaphors deliberately jarring and unconventional so that they resist the tendency to fade from view; and to make it less easy to ‘run with’ or ‘over-stretch’ the metaphor in unhelpful ways. The rest of the paper shows how two new metaphors – one mechanical and one musical – can help reconcile some of the divisions between partisans of the existing frames, and at the same time reveals an entirely novel way of thinking about what, exactly, is ‘deliberative’ about deliberative democracy?

THE DELIBERATIVE QUALITY: ADDITIVE OR SUMMATIVE?

The metaphors thus far tend to treat ‘deliberative democracy’ as a conceptual unity. As was seen when considering the forum idea, what deliberative democrats study seems peculiar, to put it mildly, when the ideas of deliberation and democracy are taken separately – scholars appear to study neither of those things – but it makes more sense when one takes the label to refer to a particular kind of participatory practice and a set of analytic questions and approaches to those practices which have salience in particular scholarly contexts.

And yet prising apart the ideas of deliberation and democracy helps reveal the nature of a key disagreement between proponents of micro and macro models concerning the role of deliberative minipublics. This is where we ask, ‘What is deliberative about deliberative democracy?’ What is ‘deliberative’ adding, as an adjective modifying the noun ‘democracy’? To address that question, I apply two novel metaphors, one mechanical, the other musical.

Let’s start with the mechanical metaphor, which compares deliberative democracy to a car. If we call a car a ‘diesel’, we are describing it in terms of a salient feature – the fuel it uses based on the type of engine under the hood. The feature is salient because it makes an important difference in drivers’ daily interaction with the car. For example, we need to know that it’s a diesel when we pull up to the fuel pump, because if we get it wrong we won’t be pulling terribly far away from the pump. It matters to mechanics, of course, and it matters in policy terms too. As citizens rather than as drivers, it is important to know that some cars are diesel and others petrol-fueled or electric because of their collective impacts: they have different impacts on the environment; their noise levels have different health and safety implications.
But ‘diesel’ is far from a given car’s only quality. It applies to the fuel, fuel systems
(pumps, lines, ignition), the engine and exhaust systems, yes, but there is lots else that
‘diesel’ fails to describe: not just obvious physical characteristics like comfort, steering,
speed control systems and so on, but all the identity and affective meaning that cars
symbolize (Sheller 2004). And most of those qualities are held in common with other
kinds of car; the differences between diesel and petrol models are few.

Similarly, the label ‘deliberative democracy’ can refer to a kind of democracy that has a
salient feature, deliberativeness. At the small scale, a deliberative minipublic is an event in
which facilitators, agendas and rules of debate are used to inject deliberation into a
participatory discussion group. Minipublics are also themselves one way of injecting
more of this and other qualities like participation into a democracy, but there are other
means too, with different strengths and weaknesses. Equally, a deliberative process has
many, many other features than just deliberativeness: inclusivity, problem-definition and
information-production processes, the staging of the event and all its symbolic aspects,
the organisational and political aspects needed to connect an event with formal decision-
making (Gul 2014), and so on. At the larger scale, a deliberative democracy needs to feature
political equality and collective popular control as well (cf Beetham 1994, Dahl 1989,
Dryzek 1996, 4, Smith 2009), and all the processes which secure those goods.

Deliberativeness is just one feature of such processes, albeit a highly salient one; and
deliberative, pluralist, elitist and liberal democracies are likely to share many – perhaps
even most – of their features. A deliberative democracy will not be an entirely different
thing from a liberal one, for instance. It is likely to be a matter of emphasis.

Let’s try another metaphor which reveals some related features. A B♭ clarinet is so called
because its C is tuned to the absolute pitch of B♭ – the C on a clarinet is a tone lower
than the C on a piano or a violin. Does that mean it can only play the note B♭? No.
Does it mean it can only play in the key of B♭? No, of course not. But the tuning does
give the instrument a particular timbre, a character that balances the brightness of a C
tuning with the mellow depth of an A, something that has particular applications relative
to other instruments in an ensemble. Clarinets, regardless of what they are tuned to,
share a ‘woodwind’ quality; oboes and bassoons have elements of that too but their twin
reeds give them a, well, ‘reedy’ quality that clarinets downplay. Trumpets and horns
sound quite distinct relative to each other, but share the same brassiness compared with
woodwinds and strings. And lest we think this is all about traditional orchestral
instruments, it is not: guitarists have long been down-tuning their instruments, or raising
the pitch with a capo, to produce darker, heavier sounds with the former and bright,
jangling sounds with the latter, integrating those sounds into a musical palette. Music is
not just about melodies, harmonies, tempo and rhythm – it is also about putting timbres
together in sometimes-surprising ways.

Similarly, ‘deliberative’ can be used to describe a quality, a timbre that is brought to that
complex institutional orchestra called democracy. Does that mean that people in
deliberative processes should always be sitting and giving reasons mutually, respectfully,
inclusively? No. Does it mean that other kinds of process feature no deliberation at all?
No, of course not. But it does mean that deliberative democracies and deliberative
processes put special emphasis on a quality that other forms do not. We would notice
when that timbre is missing, although perhaps we would notice it most when it was used
only occasionally, overlooking it as much when it was omnipresent as when it was
absent; and we can think about how it relates with other qualities to produce something
that is more than the sum of its parts.
How can we describe the deliberative timbre? What makes a process or a system distinctively deliberative rather than aggregative, pluralist, elitist, or some other modifier? The answer is not terribly surprising: a deliberative democracy is one in which, ideally, collective decisions are sensitive to good reasons, produced by inclusive, public reasoning. It is something that arguments are tested in public, or at the very least in the presence of a reasonably comprehensive and diverse range of perspectives; and it is one which transforms merely symbolic opinions into more firmly-held, evidence or value-based positions (Bohman 2012, Niemeyer 2014). If we ask what makes a democracy deliberative, then it is one which marries the democratic values of equal inclusion, representation and decisiveness (or popular control, to use Beetham’s term; or consequentiality, to use Dryzek’s) with the explicitly deliberative qualities of publicity and an orientation to mutual justification which transforms agents, issues and perspectives.

The next question is, what institutions, or institutional arrangements, produce such a timbre? The car and music metaphors reveal two important possibilities: that we can think of deliberativeness as an additive quality or a summative quality. Deliberation in the additive sense is produced by specific methods or institutions which add it – like fuel injection – into the system more broadly. This is perhaps the view of those like MacKenzie and Warren (2012), Niemeyer (2012) and Owen and Smith (2015) who see citizen-led forums as essential elements of a deliberative democracy, partly because they see them as the way of adding deliberativeness to a democracy, not just one option among many; and partly because of other qualities like trust, fairness and the educative, capacity-building effects that they add at the same time (Renn, Webler, and Wiedemann 1995). Others, notably Rawls (1997) and Christiano (2012), think of other sites like courts, councils or legislatures as the most deliberative sites in a society; yet others, like Mansbridge et al. (2012), take a more open stance on the kinds of processes and institutions that add the deliberative quality; but also recognise that deliberativeness is just one of the qualities we want in a democracy. Which other qualities? To answer this would be to stray too far from the scope of this paper, but any discussion would, I think, have something of the character of the list of democratic goods from Smith (2009, 12-13), who has likewise broken away from considering recognisably deliberative institutions through a narrowly deliberative lens. To repeat, deliberation is just one quality of a democracy, albeit one that is highly salient.

This helps make some sense of an ongoing accusation that some partisans of minipublics press against the systems approach in particular. While it is certainly the case that the deliberative systems move is partly a reaction against thinking that deliberative minipublics are ‘deliberative democracy’, sufficient unto themselves, pointing out the limitations of minipublics does not mean that one condemns them as entirely useless; on the contrary, it could turn out to be a highly constructive move. Revealing the forum metaphor as metaphor allows for metaphorical experiment – even playfulness – which then could be used to highlight minipublics’ multiple roles in a deliberative democracy. More specifically, minipublics could seen to have multiple roles and benefits which are not dependent on a conventional ‘black box’ account of deliberation, an account that is seen as increasingly implausible (Bächtiger and Gerber 2014, Jennstål 2011, see also Morrell 2005, 2010). Put another way, the scholarly dismissal of that black box account need not imply the dismissal of minipublics’ multiple roles in a deliberative democracy. More specifically, minipublics could seen to have multiple roles and benefits which are not dependent on a conventional ‘black box’ account of deliberation, an account that is seen as increasingly implausible (Bächtiger and Gerber 2014, Jennstål 2011, see also Morrell 2005, 2010). Put another way, the scholarly dismissal of that black box account need not imply the dismissal of minipublics’ multiple roles in a deliberative democracy. More specifically, minipublics could seen to have multiple roles and benefits which are not dependent on a conventional ‘black box’ account of deliberation, an account that is seen as increasingly implausible (Bächtiger and Gerber 2014, Jennstål 2011, see also Morrell 2005, 2010). Put another way, the scholarly dismissal of that black box account need not imply the dismissal of minipublics’ multiple roles in a deliberative democracy. More specifically, minipublics could seen to have multiple roles and benefits which are not dependent on a conventional ‘black box’ account of deliberation, an account that is seen as increasingly implausible (Bächtiger and Gerber 2014, Jennstål 2011, see also Morrell 2005, 2010). Put another way, the scholarly dismissal of that black box account need not imply the dismissal of minipublics’ multiple roles in a deliberative democracy.
complementary, nested orientations which address different aspects of something more complex.

However, an intriguing possibility is opened up if we think about deliberation as a summative rather than additive quality. To think of the deliberative quality as summative is to think of it as being produced by the scale and complexity of a given system, and not simply an ingredient which goes into a system. There is no prior empirical work and precious little theoretical work to go on here,8 and so we are forced back to metaphors once again, and the ones that come to mind are biological. Biologists argue that life emerges from the complex interactions of organic but not ‘living’ material; and that in turn consciousness as we recognise it emerges from the interactions of living cells which are not themselves conscious. Reasoning from this metaphor, one can posit the possibility of a deliberative democracy in which none of its component parts meet all the criteria for deliberativeness but which expresses deliberativeness given a particular configuration of its constituent parts.

How might that be? Let us return to the definition of a deliberative democracy above, a democracy in which collective decisions are sensitive to good reasons, in addition to the democratic criteria of being systematically responsive (Goodin 2003) to the settled views of its members, considered as political equals (Beetham 1994, Dahl 1989). Reasons are ‘good’ when they emerge from a broad ‘pool of perspectives’ (Bohman 2012) and are connected with evidence, arguments, and values. That is, stretching Bohman’s ‘pool’ metaphor just a little, we want the pool to be not only broad (inclusive) but deep (rooted in lived experience as well as other kinds of evidence and argument) – and clear (meaning both that the linkages between claims and reasons are obvious, and that the processes are themselves public and transparent). One can imagine then a ‘constant feedback’ system in which acts of governance are constantly modified in response to immediate feedback from those affected (via social media, perhaps). The impact of those modifications would affect the settings, efficiency and effectiveness of the system – its costs, employment levels, energy efficiency etc – and those overall settings would be pushed back to citizens on a constantly updated basis, perhaps through an online or app-based dashboard, providing a feedback loop. Imagine this system being supplemented by tribunes, following Thompson (2010), whose job it is to identify missing voices and articulate their needs; even ‘auditors’ in the etymologically-original sense of that word – literally, those who hear.

A system like this has a certain market-like logic – it is responsive to a range of individual signals, the aggregate of which pushes the state in small ways and large – but is deliberative in the sense that it is grounded in everyday experience of policy; it says nothing about how those individual signals are generated, which might be the result of friends and family talking with one another; is connected to an instant feedback system in which the collective consequences of demands are made clear; and is supplemented by auditors who correct oversights. There are no ‘forum’-style deliberative elements of this system; but it produces a whole which is more than the sum of its parts.

There are already proposals in the literature which come close to this, among them Pettit’s republican model (2012) in which the state is directed by millions of small

8 Something like this idea is indicated by Bohman (2012, 83) who writes of inclusion via representation as being a ‘distributed property’ of a deliberative system rather than something that is concentrated (imperfectly) in a few institutions.
nudges, each intervention being equal and relatively minor but which collectively add up to the direct control of the state by the citizenry. Pettit’s model has a role for deliberative minipublics but he sees that role as one of norm diffusion (cf. Park 2006) rather than direct decision-making. The more that the deliberative norms of reason-demanding and giving are dispersed, the less need there is for actual minipublics, and he imagines such institutions withering away. Now, there are some important points of connection with deliberative democracy and some important points of departure – for discussion see Parkinson (forthcoming) – but the point is that here we seem to have a vision of a deliberative democracy in which deliberation starts off being significant but fades into the background as the society evolves.

There are likely to be many objections to these kinds of proposals. One is that a constant-feedback system might be good at delivering government in the ‘goods and services’ sense but not in terms of collective self-government and not in terms of services for which supply is inelastic. For instance, many kinds of health service provision can be very slow to respond to feedback, in part because of the very long time it takes to recruit and train practitioners. Still, the point is not the particular strengths and weaknesses of these proposals; the point is that it is possible to conceive of answers to Owen and Smith’s (2015) incredulity at the thought of a deliberative system whose parts feature no deliberation as commonly defined. While a healthy scepticism about the possibility is certainly warranted, it is one worth theoretical exploration, elaboration and empirical investigation, and should not be dismissed out of hand because it does not fit our metaphorical preconceptions. Changing the metaphor opens our eyes to new and surprising possibilities.

CONCLUSION

This paper has attempted to make sense of a curious feature of the deliberative democracy literature: that a large proportion of it continues to study neither deliberation nor democracy because the label means something else, something conventional, having been taken out of its original intellectual context and applied, with great success it must be said, to new ones. It then asked what is deliberative about deliberative democracy, and demonstrated how the question can be resolved by thinking creatively with metaphors. By employing new metaphors in place of a hackneyed label which disguises its metaphorical nature, the paper has recast the debate from one of conflicts about the ‘right’ way to approach deliberative democracy into a largely empirical question about the means of injecting the deliberative quality, among others, into democracy; and introduced an entirely new, ‘summative’ way of thinking about the deliberative quality of democracy.

This is an important enterprise, because failure to embrace metaphorical novelty will lead to the death of the model. The forum metaphor in particular has been in large part responsible for the spread of deliberative studies across a number of disciplines, but that which starts as vivid and inspiring eventually becomes an empty signifier. When the plausibility of deliberative democracy’s central story – that deliberation changes minds – is undermined by researchers who peer into the black box and find better explanations for the changing of minds from behavioural sciences, psychology and cultural studies, then the entire enterprise will crumble if scholars have not clearly distinguished micro procedures from deliberative democracy, an equation that is still remarkably robust in the emerging literature.
Along the way, numerous other issues have arisen. They include the surprising fact that few deliberative democrats study links between sites, or problematise what it is that is transmitted along those links. And they include numerous empirical cues that emerge from the competing macro metaphors, metaphors which have barely had their own theoretical and empirical implications worked out, let alone been subjected to comparative scrutiny of the kind that has been possible with the forum idea.

In short, it is high time deliberative democrats relinquished their commitment to a single, disguised and dominant metaphor, and started being more creative. Compelling new questions await.

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