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Democratic Governance in the Anthropocene

Equivocal, Experimental, Equitable, Empowered, Embedded

The complexity and interpenetration of the environmental problematique, the impact severity of some crucial environmental trajectories, and the unfathomable diversity of humans and human cultures combine to make governing interaction with earth's natural systems the most daunting challenge humans will ever face. The challenge is doubly daunting because of its urgency: Many of the most frightening and irreversible trends in the environment – as seen globally, regionally, and locally – are driven by deeply imbedded forces that cannot be altered, stopped, or reversed in the short term of a few years or even a few decades. Time is of the essence for beginning and accelerating the obviously needed transformations, even as knowledge about the world remains grossly inadequate to light very much of any path that global society must start down (Linnér and Wibeck 2019). The processes that must be confronted and reflexively transformed lie at the heart of modernity, notably the forces and relations of economic production, the ways that risk is managed, and the processes of knowledge generation and dissemination (Christoff and Eckersley 2013, 30; Dryzek 2014; Dryzek and Pickering 2017; Eckersley 2017). If it is ever going to be possible for humans to undertake successful environmental governance simultaneously at multiple levels as required, it must be by embracing principles and adopting rules for complex institutions that can effectively and justly exercise responsibilities for protecting the rest of nature (in all its complexity) from humans, and humans (in all their diversity) from themselves.

In the Anthropocene, environmental governance must be effective both within and across identities, while the inescapable *equivocality* of democratic governance means that discussions can never be closed; they can merely be transformed as old problems and concerns give way to new. This means that the *experimental* quality that effective environmental governance must possess cannot be a transient quality but, rather, must be a permanent feature of the landscape of democratic decision-making in which success is realized in a context of identity politics. For these

processes to take place without distortion and without posing systemic disadvantage on parties who identify as minorities, and for intergroup differences to be accommodated, substantial *equality* of access to decision-making and *equitable* allocation of fundamental capabilities are essential prerequisites. They are prerequisites that can only be ensured by institutional arrangements that provide for *empowerment* of those whose identities are otherwise ill-favored by the political and economic status quo and for the *embeddedness* of environmental decision-making in the communities of fate where people actually determine their shared life experiences. Moreover, the circumstances of the Anthropocene call for building some considerable measure of ecological rationality into the processes and structures responsible for environmental governance (Dryzek and Pickering 2019).

More than just democracy in the form of aggregation of votes, deliberative democratic practice is a prerequisite for the learning, local knowledge, and engagement required by enlightened environmental governance under the conditions associated with the concept of the Anthropocene.¹ Effective governance institutions and rules must be grounded in widely shared understandings, created by those they address, applicable equally to all, capable of learning from (and adapting to) experience, rationally grounded, and internalized by those who adopt and experience them (Baber and Bartlett 2015, 1–11). Deliberative democratic practices are especially well suited to these challenges.

The underlying premises of this claim and their conceptual history point us to the environmental governance promises of democratic deliberation (Gunderson 1995, 46) but also to the very real perils of deliberation – both as a form of politics generally and as a strategy for environmental protection. Both conceptually and in practical experimentation, deliberative environmental democracy has evolved significantly in recent decades, yet further progress is urgently needed in our understanding of this marriage of democratic theory and real-world, global-to-local problem-solving in a world that is getting smaller while some political and social distances increase (Baber and Bartlett 2005, 2009a, 2015; Dryzek 2017a; Dryzek and Pickering 2017).

1.1 Promise

The environmental promise of deliberative democracy was born, and continues to be borne, by the realization that under purely aggregative mechanisms of democracy, environmentalists do their cause little favor when they frame it in moral or ethical rather than political terms (Gunderson 1995). The moral insight that “we are all in this together” is obviously a valid one and certainly implies a level of mutual environmental obligation (Feinberg and Willer 2013). But nothing

about that obligation suggests that nominally democratic forms of interest aggregation (polling, referenda, representative elections) either capture its normative content or identify its most appropriate institutional form. Deliberative environmental democracy, however, is more promising in several specific ways.

First, as a general matter, deliberative democracy is thought to have both an inclusive and rationalizing influence on environmental politics. Its open and participatory character promises a form of knowledge mobilization that is potentially inclusive of all knowledge systems and, through reciprocal dialogue, allows for the negotiation of knowledge quality in terms of credibility, salience, and legitimacy (Baber and Bartlett 2005; Bremer 2013; Curato et al. 2017) . Even though the most diverse deliberative body is unlikely to contain within its participant group the entire range of potentially meaningful discourses regarding any given environmental issue, the presence within a deliberative body of a variety of individuals provides a far wider conduit for the complexities of the real world to influence policy outcomes than can any form of elite decision-making (Baber and Bartlett 2015; Dryzek and Pickering 2017) . A poster child for this promise is the prevalence of deliberative partnerships in the area of watershed management (Baber 2010; Hardy and Koontz 2009; Leach and Pelky 2001; Lubell et al. 2002). In this context, deliberative democracy's potential for giving voice to historically neglected populations has been commented on in particular (Cronin and Ostergren 2007; Curato et al. 2017) . This aspect of deliberative democracy's promise is centrally related to the fact that it conceives of political representation in discursive terms rather than as a matter of demographics, interest groups, or ideology (Dryzek 2017a; Dryzek and Niemeyer 2008).

Second, deliberative environmental democracy offers an opportunity for environmental decisions to profit from the uptake of local knowledge. Especially in the international context (Baber and Bartlett 2009a; Dryzek 2017b), it is vitally important that centrally adopted policies reflect the understandings of the people living in the ecosystems that those policies are intended to protect. In the area of climate adaptation, for example, local communities are likely to be uniquely valuable sources of information regarding issues such as land and water management, physical infrastructure, livelihood strategies, and social institutions (Lebel 2013). This insight about the capacity of deliberative environmental democracy to provide for a decentered form of policy-making has been deployed in the rangelands of Arizona (Arnold and Fernandez-Gimenez 2007), the mangrove forests of Brazil (Glaser and Oliveira 2004), the plains of Kenya (Mburu and Birner 2007), the coastal zones of the Asia-Pacific (Lebel 2013), and the global climate arena (Bäckstrand 2011). Moreover, this form of deliberative environmental democracy is potentially self-reinforcing, because decentered democracy is strengthened when multiple linkages are created to connect local

forms across time and space (Curato et al. 2017; Hayward 2008). The decenteredness of deliberative environmental democracy, which can be thought of as a second form of inclusiveness, also leads naturally to a third promise of deliberative environmental democracy – that it produces policies that are more just than those of mere aggregative democracy.

As a third potential advantage to environmental deliberation, the idea of justice carries considerable freight. For example, environmental policies are sometimes a form of normative pre-commitment, employing a deliberative procedure to specify in advance the just course for a society to take if certain environmental challenges arise. For instance, the US Endangered Species Act uses a species listing procedure to trigger a robust standard for species protection when the threat level reaches a specified threshold (Baber and Bartlett 2005).

However, frequently the question in environmental politics arises as the result of an inequitable distribution of environmental goods or harms. Whether environmental injustices arise from racism or poverty, the strongly inclusive character of deliberative environmental democracy makes it an especially welcoming form of governance for those who would seek to redress such grievances (Baber and Bartlett 2009b). Advocates for environmental justice are able to exploit the dialogic character of deliberative environmental democracy by using their “storylines” to shift the dynamics of deliberative systems and to advance their own interpretations of environmental problems and policy-making processes. Specifically, these storylines can be used to set (or reset) the agenda on environmental hazards, to construct the form of public deliberation, to change the rules of the game, to construct the normative content of public deliberation, to shape meanings related to environmental policy, and to couple or align forums, arenas, and courts across the system (Curato et al. 2017; Dodge 2014).

A fourth important promise of deliberative environmental democracy is, to put it bluntly, better environmental decisions. Elite decision-makers sometimes flatter themselves to think that they produce the best environmental decisions when they can pursue their highly sophisticated work without much interference from others. This ignores two fundamental problems. The first is that environmental policies that fail to enjoy broad-based support cannot achieve ecological sustainability because they will fail to be politically sustainable (Baber and Bartlett 2005). Perhaps more important, the underlying premise of elite environmental decision-making is mistaken. Elite decisions are, more often than not, inferior to decisions made by deliberative environmental democracy, as an example will show. Environmental politics increasingly faces human-made risks in many domains (technology, environment, energy, food, health, security, etc.) that pose new challenges of risk governance – involving as they do variables whose values are irreducibly indeterminate. The resulting conditions of uncertainty and ambiguity

impose evaluative, cognitive, and normative problems. Solving those problems requires an interplay between the state, experts, stakeholder groups, and the public at large. This environment of risk governance confronts us with a question: How can societies develop political institutions and processes for governing risk more effectively and how can members of a society be better involved in risk governance? A deliberative system (Dryzek 2017a; Parkinson and Mansbridge 2012) with a functional division of labor that assigns specific tasks to and recognizes the specific competencies of experts, stakeholder groups, and citizens can facilitate an appropriate integration of scientific and experiential substance. The integration of expertise and experience can be promoted by such a process of differentiated deliberation by experts, stakeholders, and the public, which can produce better outcomes than the classical risk analysis approach found in many regulatory systems (Klinke and Renn 2014).

Finally, deliberative environmental democracy holds the promise of environmental decisions that are more consensual and, for that reason, more legitimate. The relationship between consensus and legitimacy has long been a topic of contention within the community of deliberative democratic theorists (Baber and Bartlett 2015, 2020). Some have argued that consensus is an essential byproduct of epistemic deliberation, in cases where the issues at stake are epistemic, and that we have reason to regard a broad range of political issues as epistemic because doing so is crucial to explaining the value of deliberative contestation about political matters (Fuerstein 2014). Others have suggested that the defining objective of democratic deliberation should be “meta-consensus,” which is to say a consensus about the nature of the issue at hand and an agreement on the domain of relevant reasons or considerations (involving both beliefs and values) to be taken into account in the decision process (Niemeyer and Dryzek 2007). Still others have argued that the ideal of consensus (as agreement based on reasons that all could accept) should be abandoned in favor of a form of deliberation guided by a framework of civility that takes account of the complexity of every tradition and of every *actual* person’s views in pursuit of tenets that all believe will provide a basis for agreement (Bohman and Richardson 2009). This debate can be counted on to continue, because the concept of consensus is central to the understanding of what it means to claim that governance decisions are legitimate because they represent the consent of the governed (Moore and O’Doherty 2014, Baber and Bartlett 2015, Curato et al. 2017).

1.2 Perils

Dissents from the deliberative democracy orthodoxy are “perils” because outright rejections of this form of democratic practice are few (consisting mainly of

agonistic democrats and democracy rejectionists). Critics of deliberative democracy find it difficult to defend aggregative democracy as somehow preferable to the more deliberative forms of governance. With the growing literature on successful deliberative democracy experiences, rejectionist arguments sound increasingly like claims that bees should be aerodynamically incapable of flight. Little is lost by ignoring the rejectionist fringe because few of their substantive arguments have found their way into more measured appraisals of deliberative democracy.

Perhaps the most central peril of deliberative environmental democracy is that public deliberation can turn out to be less inclusive than it hopes and pretends to be. At the simplest and least theoretically interesting level, subgroups within the population whose views are substantively important to the issue under deliberation can be excluded in some way. This is the same problem of group representation that plagues both polling and aggregative voting, but it cuts deliberative democrats more deeply because their aspirations are higher. As an example, many have argued that political discourse generally privileges the beliefs, experiences, and speaking styles of Western, white, well-educated men at the expense of others. Moreover, by associating ideal deliberative procedure with the virtues of autonomy, self-determination, rationality, and a clear boundary between public and private life, deliberative environmental democracy has adopted a masculinist perspective (Lövbrand and Kahn 2014). Empirical research, however, suggests a more complex picture. For instance, using experimental data with many groups to investigate the links between individuals' attitudes and speech, Karparowitz, Mendelber, and Shaker (2012) find a substantial gender gap in voice and authority. But the gap disappears under circumstances of a unanimity rule and the presence of a few women participants, or under majority rule with many women participants. Deliberative designs can, therefore, avoid inequality by fitting institutional procedures to the social context of the situation. The gender inequities of which we are all aware do not present an insurmountable obstacle for deliberative environmental democracy. In fact, deliberative theory provides a procedural solution for precisely that sort of problem, a solution inherent in the realization that the point of inclusiveness in deliberative democracy is discursive rather than demographic. People are empowered, not by being in a particular room in particular numbers but by hearing their own stories told within a larger narrative.

A second form of deliberative peril has to do with the promise of integrating local knowledge into environmental decision-making. There is evidence to suggest that technical experts are prone to a particular pattern of conceptualizing the value of public knowledge. In the context of local air quality management, for example, expert understandings of the potential benefits of technological citizenship and what status they accord to lay knowledge relative to their own roles suggest a

continuing expert-deficit model of lay knowledge. Experts suspect that the public misunderstands environmental issues. Although they recognize the need for public “buy-in” to the solutions to problems such as air pollution, this does not translate into a more proactive engagement of lay knowledge in the assessment of such issues. In fact, experts seem to be personally challenged by such notions (Petts and Brooks 2006). This obvious need for a cultural shift in expert understanding of the value of lay knowledge, supported by a move away from an oversimplification of the need for (and value of) public participation, is not a product of deliberative environmental democracy. It is, rather, a reflection of preexisting attitudes that have actually been picked up and problematized by deliberation. As orthodox approaches to environmental decision-making (relying solely on ecological expertise) continue losing legitimacy, greater attention will be given to integrated and participatory approaches (which draw on multiple sources of knowledge in order to accurately describe complex socioecological processes). There is growing recognition that environmental management requires a strategy that can accommodate the multiple and often competing needs of contemporary and future stakeholders. These conceptual advances suggest a number of cognitive criteria that deliberative environmental democracy must meet, including (1) accurately understanding complex socioecological system processes, (2) focusing on “slow” variables, (3) integrating multiple scales of analysis, (4) integrating multiple stakeholder perspectives and values, (5) ensuring that future generations are fairly represented, (6) ensuring that less powerful stakeholders are fairly represented, and (7) integrating local and scientific knowledge (Whitfield, Geist, and Ioris 2011). Deliberative democracy’s critics do not argue that merely aggregative, agonistic, or participatory forms of democratic politics stand a better chance than deliberative environmental democracy of achieving this degree of embeddedness in environmental decision-making.

A third criticism of deliberative democracy claims that it does not live up to the normative standards of political equality and fairness – environmental justice – because members of socially disadvantaged groups (even though represented) are often incapable of effectively participating in deliberations. It is often suggested that deliberative democracy reproduces inequalities of gender, race, and class by privileging calm rational discussion over passionate speech and action. But this criticism ignores the considerable extent to which passionate argument is already an integral part of deliberative democracy practice (Hall 2007). For example, empirical data from a study of six citizen conferences fails to support the thesis that deliberative practices invariably replicate social inequalities (Lin 2014). Investigators used six dimensions of discursive interaction to measure deliberative inequality, including frequency and time of speech, dialogic capacity, initiating new topics, making rational arguments, and influencing conclusions. They found

that, because of procedural factors instituted to approximate the ideal situation of speech, deliberative inequalities were not significant in the deliberative dimensions of making rational arguments and influencing conclusions. Inequities in the four other dimensions of discursive interaction depended on the nature of issues under discussion. For less complex issues that had greater impacts on citizens' daily lives, most citizens showed that they possessed the "situated knowledge" needed to participate effectively in discursive interactions. Deliberative inequalities were not significant for these kinds of issues (Lin 2014). If additional studies continue to indicate that members of previously disadvantaged groups are able to participate effectively in appropriately structured deliberations, the complaint that deliberative environmental democracy will merely replicate social and economic inequities will lose much of its force. This is a question that requires significantly greater attention, however, because the environmental justice narrative is a critical element of environmental citizenship. It offers a twofold path toward transformation of environmental governance – providing both a *vocabulary* for political opportunity, mobilization, and action, as well as a policy principle that environmental decisions must not disproportionately disadvantage any particular social group (Agyeman and Evans 2006). To the extent that environmental decisions are genuinely democratic, they will prove to be sustainable only if they are also equitable.

A fourth peril facing deliberative environmental democracy is the risk that its effectiveness (and, ultimately, its legitimacy) will be undermined by elites who view deliberation not as a form of public participation but, rather, as a technique of political cooptation. For instance, in a study of the approach of the US Department of Defense (DOD) to public participation in the cleanup activity of contaminated military facilities in Fort Ord, California, Szasz and Meuser (1997) contrasted the concepts of policy design and policy implementation and related them to democratization and cooptation. They studied the implementation of cleanup activity through observation of community Restoration Advisory Board (RAB) meetings and interviews with community representatives. They found that democratization was often cited but the practice of cooptation was clearly applied. Murphree, Wright, and Ebaugh (1996) found, however, that early success at cooptation by elites can be undone. In their study of a waste-siting decision, cooptation eventually failed when local environmental activists (who had not been part of making the original decision) lost confidence in the negotiating process and accused participants of "selling out" to corporate interests and compromising the interests of the community. As a result of protests and citizen awareness campaigns, the opposition forces successfully convinced a regulatory agency to intervene. Although cooptation theory helps to explain the short-lived success of corporate cooptation during the early stages of negotiations, it must also account for the dynamics of failure in the long run. As Dryzek (2000) observed, cooptation

of dissent by elites predates the advent of deliberative democracy, and the difference democrats who are among those most concerned about the problem show no confidence that deliberation's aggregative complements or alternatives offer a better option for dealing with the problem. In fact, in the new environment of post-normal risk governance, cooptation is not a rational strategy for anyone in the long run – the resulting loss of policy effectiveness serves the interests of no one (Klinke and Renn 2014).

Finally, a criticism that could be made of deliberative environmental democracy is that it can be, in a peculiar way, too successful. The gist of this argument is that a paradox lies at the heart of deliberative democracy practice. This paradox involves a tension within deliberative democratic theory: the fact that deliberative opinion formation ideally aims to reach consensus, yet a consensus (once established) will be likely to degrade the conditions for further rational public discourse (given the limitations of human reasoning with which we are all familiar). Therefore, over time, deliberative democracy, to the extent it prizes consensus, actually risks undermining both its own theoretical justification and the quality of the decisions that it produces. Proponents of this view suggest that there are at least three cognitive and sociopsychological mechanisms by which consensus might hamper the rationality of public discourse. First, after an agreement, participants cease to develop and evaluate new arguments because none appear to be needed. Second, subscribers to a consensus tend to forget the existing arguments for it – and their limiting conditions. Third, there is a natural fear of deviating from the social norm that promotes conformism over critical reasoning (Friebert-Fernros and Schaffer 2014). To the extent that existing research has neglected to study how consensus in decision-making affects future public deliberation, the seriousness of this peril is unknown and deliberative environmental democracy remains insecure both in theory and in practice.

In order to avoid undermining its own effectiveness, consensus must be equivocal to a considerable degree. “Equivocal” is evoked deliberately here, drawing on more than one of its meanings, including being indeterminate, ambiguous, or of uncertain nature, and having a multiplicity of equally appropriate voices or significations (note that the meaning of “equivocal” is itself equivocal). This uncertainty across different meanings is normatively invaluable. To take advantage of an almost unfathomable human diversity to arrive democratically at what can only ever be tentative and contingent governance choices, amid what is and will remain a changing, ultimately unknowable, and indeterminate environment, will always require a healthy degree of equivocality. Democratic decisions must remain open-ended from a procedural point of view and open-textured substantively – allowing for the possibility that their norms can be revisited, their policy designs revised, and their requirements reinterpreted at the stage of

implementation. Equivocality, then, is a crucial norm for democratic earth system governance.²

1.3 Progress

The available evidence supports the view that the environmental promise of deliberative democracy far outweighs its attendant perils. But further progress needs to be made in our understanding of this marriage of democratic theory and real-world problem solving. After all, democracy, including deliberative democracy, can be fully adequate from a political perspective and nevertheless produce ecologically irrational results (Goodin 1992). The most ecologically sophisticated policies imaginable will prove unsustainable if they fail the test of democratic legitimacy. So deliberative democracy is a necessary, although not sufficient, element of environmental sustainability. The previous discussion suggests clearly why this is so.

Questions regarding inclusion and representation abound in deliberative democracy. The discursive character of deliberative practice suggests that what it is important to include is the narratives of all, rather than the votes of all. The point of inclusiveness is, ultimately, individual *empowerment*. Because there is no discursive-theoretic reason to weight narratives according to how many peoples' lived experiences they describe, few things could be more empowering for the individual than to say that deliberation is fully democratic to the extent that everything worth saying is said. In pursuit of that goal, it will often make sense to violate – contingently and in the context of a larger system of deliberation – many of deliberative democracy's operating rules of thumb. For instance, a diverse range of participants is thought to be vital to produce deliberative results of value. But where politically disadvantaged populations are concerned, the effective development of their narratives may require (at least preliminarily) enclave deliberation that allows participants to develop, assess, and refine their own narratives in a relatively homogenous environment before exposing them to the rigors of the market place of ideas (Karparowitz, Raphael, and Hammond 2009).

Likewise, with regard to the importance of integrating local knowledge into environmental decision-making, the last word has not been said – nor is it ever likely to be. To be deliberatively effective, knowledge (lay or expert) must be not merely local, but fully *embedded*. Recent field research suggests that the development of democratic deliberation depends more on whether participants situate and link their knowledge than whether the knowledge is local or expert in origin. This suggests that, for scholars who wish to better understand which ways of knowing enable environmental deliberation in participatory processes, a useful concept is grounded knowledge – embedded knowledge actively linked by