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War, Manipulation of Consent, and Deliberative Democracy

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For many in the social sciences, the 2004 U.S. presidential and congressional elections have become oft-cited examples of the limits of procedural democracy. Pulling on public opinion from before the election as well as other data, political scientists, sociologists, social psychologists, and specialists in communication have sought to explain the results of these elections (which guaranteed a continuation of the Iraq War) in terms of elites framing the political discourse; emotional, media, and rhetorical manipulation; appeal to ideology; dissemination of bad or inaccurate information; and existential triggers. That each of these causal factors in the election bypasses rational and public deliberation, that none results from inquiry into the truthfulness of the political opinions regarding the war and its justifications, and the subsequent public opinion data showing that the public has changed its opinion on the prosecution of the war and on the legitimacy of its rationale, may signal that there are fatal problems with American democracy.¹ If anything, the aftermath of the 2006 congressional elections when Democratic and antiwar majorities were elected to both houses and Iraq policy failed to change may be seen as confirmation of this judgment that democracy conceived and practiced as the aggregation of preferences for representative candidates is deeply flawed.

While the social scientists mentioned above do not usually go so far in their analysis, since the 1980s political philosophers have been arguing that it is precisely these types of deficiencies that can be remedied by the adoption of deliberative democratic norms and procedures. Being in agreement with the majority of deliberative democratic theorists who argue that the adoption of deliberative norms for political decision making will make for more democratic outcomes, this article will examine the practical obstacles that deliberative democracy may not be able to overcome. Though it does not argue that deliberative democracy is, because of these obstacles, untenable, impracticable, or unworthy of pursuit, this essay does claim that one of the *factors* identified by social scientists and philosophers as compromising the legitimacy and practical value of political judgment is ineliminable. Perhaps surprisingly, the conclusion is not drawn from this observation that deliberative democracy is a practical impossibility. Instead, it is argued that one of these factors, ideology, is a hindrance to deliberative

democracy as well as a prerequisite for it and, therefore, that we should not strive for its elimination from the deliberative space.

Given the tendency of electoral, representative democracy to produce political outcomes that fail to reflect the public's will and its idea of the good, proponents of deliberative democracy have championed deliberation as that practice by which the public can come to feel responsible for its constitution and laws. Departing from Rousseau's (1987, 149, 204) insight that deliberation is the necessary process that facilitates this formation, most theorists of deliberative democracy theory have taken as their project the challenge of ensuring the legitimacy of the decisions reached by deliberation, where "legitimacy" is understood as the production of a decision that everyone can accept (Bohman 1998a, 402). This emphasis on ensuring the legitimacy of political decisions has led to a focus on the normative and procedural aspects of deliberation. Driven by these concerns and inspired mostly by the work of Rawls and Habermas, political theorists have attempted (a) to define the pure procedural structure that best allows such consensus formation, (b) to delimit the decisions that can be the subject of political deliberation, and (c) to define the type of individual that can participate in deliberation. Though there is disagreement among theorists about the specific content of each criterion for effective and fair deliberation as well as about their respective necessity, a rough consensus has developed about what deliberation requires. These criteria include, first, an institutional space or arrangement that guarantees neutrality and protects against the manipulation of the discussion and of the discussants. Second, effective and fair deliberation needs the participation of individuals who (a) are aware of the relevant features of the political world, (b) can reason about political ends, and (c) can look past their own immediate political preferences to rationally and freely choose the general good. Put succinctly, democratic deliberation requires a noncoercive space and free discussion between autonomous, informed, and rational individuals.

Even as the consensus detailed above was in the process of developing, political philosophers and theorists began to think about how to apply these insights so as to reform democratic practice. Comparing existing institutions and citizens to the deliberative democratic ideal, it was obvious that one or both were insufficient to guarantee fair and good deliberation. Thus was born the discussion of deliberative democracy's feasibility (Bohman 1998a, 401), which asked questions such as whether such reform is possible, how much reform is needed, and what specific reforms are necessary for deliberative democracy to come into being. Within the literature that judges deliberative democracy to indeed be feasible, there is a bit of a split. While some theorists such as Joshua Cohen and Jürgen Habermas focus only on the need to create noncoercive spaces in order to allow already sufficiently autonomous, informed, and rational individuals to deliberate on the public good, others suggest not only that our existing forums are insufficient for democratic deliberation but that existing citizens are insufficiently autonomous, informed, and rational to deliberate about the public good. Though

the philosophical literature that makes the latter suggestion only sometimes pulls on this evidence to make its point, in recent years there has been a growing body of research in the social sciences that reinforces these speculative conclusions about the ability of citizens to make informed, free, and rational decisions.

Drawing on this literature as well as on the insights offered by participants in the feasibility discussion, this article will catalog the practices, institutions, and psychological proclivities that have been cited as obstacles to the realization of a deliberative democratic politics. After this survey, it will separate those obstacles that are remediable from those that are not. Because most of the irremediable obstacles are those that compromise the rationality, autonomy, and knowledge of citizens, this separation will have the effect of forcing us to rethink the promise of deliberative democracy as well as the means for its instantiation.

The first obstacle this essay will address is that having to do with institutions. Because the legitimacy of a democratic decision rests for deliberativists on it being the result of a fair procedure in which individuals reason and decide without constraints about the public good, an institutional space or arrangement that guarantees neutrality and protects against the manipulation of the discussion and of the discussants is a necessity. This is the case because deliberations are fair only if each of the participants has an equal ability to reason about and then argue for his or her idea of the good. However, as Iris Marion Young and many others have pointed out (Sanders 1997; Young 1996), there are many people who are ill-equipped to provide reasons in a public forum for their idea of the good. For these people, any institutional structure that sets this type of discourse to be the norm is a nonneutral space in the sense that it privileges those who can argue in rational terms for their idea of the good.

In addition to this institutional bias, there is also the problem of preference change (or decision making) resulting not from reasoned deliberation about the good for oneself and others but from the persuasive effects of fellow deliberators. This result may come about from a fellow deliberator's elite status, from a claim to unique knowledge, or from a claim about expertise in some area of public life. It also may come about simply because some deliberator or deliberators have developed superior rhetorical skills. Contrary to earlier studies, which hypothesized that a subject's perceived social status and expertise have little influence on public opinion, there is a growing body of evidence that suggests that this effect is far from negligible (Shapiro 1998). For instance, studies of the effect of rhetorical tropes used by the Bush administration to encourage support for the Second Gulf War have shown public opinion to be malleable by such devices (Kellner 2007; Stuckey and Ritter 2007). Given these effects, a space that protects against the manipulation of the discussion and of the discussants would be one that prohibits claims to authority, expertise, or superior knowledge and the display of rhetorical skills. For fair procedures, this may be necessary, and, indeed, some have argued that rhetoric be banned from the deliberative space (Dryzek 2000, 67). It is easy to see why we might also wish to decrease the influence of elites in any deliberative

process. However, for a deliberation that wishes to arrive not only at fair but also at good results, the banning of experts and their expertise may prove undesirable. This problem and its solution will be discussed below.

Institutional prejudice and suasion by rhetoric or claimed superiority of judgment during the course of deliberation are not, however, the only manipulations that deliberative practice has to worry about. In addition, there is the concern about the manipulation of opinion that has always already taken place before formal deliberations about the public good are inaugurated. The persuasive effects of authority, expertise, and rhetoric mentioned above can achieve this manipulation. Without the constraints of an institutional space designed to ensure fair deliberation, these effects may be amplified by the media, by public sentiment, and by group polarization (Josly 1997; Talisse 2004, 109). With this amplification, the number of options entertained in deliberation about what is good for the public is limited, and premature consensuses can be formed. To give an example of this narrowing, one recent social psychological study has shown how the major news media in the United States accepted and amplified the “War on Terror” rhetoric of the Bush administration and used it as a “shorthand device to summarize a wide range of complex issues and events” (Lipschultz 2007, 21). Synthesizing and summarizing the results of similar empirical studies on the impact of media coverage on political thought, Richard D. Anderson has concluded that “the media’s impact on the American citizen appears to be baleful for democratic deliberation. Media coverage of elections encourages citizens to think about . . . personalities, not about issues, . . . to focus on their feelings of intimacy with the candidate, not on reasoned considerations . . . [and to] . . . shift people’s attention from issues they would otherwise consider important to the issues they see on the screen” (1998, 481).

Thus far, this discussion has focused on those obstacles to deliberative democracy that hinder a citizen’s ability to reason well and to decide fairly about political ends. It has not yet focused on those obstacles that, when deliberation is put into practice, compromise individual autonomy. By virtue of bypassing their reason entirely, these sorts of obstacles prevent citizens from being “authors as well as subjects of the law” (Cooke 2000, 955–56). There have been not a few recent social scientific studies on this subject, with some seeking specifically to explain how Bush maintained political support through the 2004 elections despite major domestic and foreign problems as well as turmoil internal to his administration. Based on experiments that showed a correlation between awareness of one’s own mortality and support for charismatic and conservative leaders, one group of social psychologists hypothesized that Bush benefited from the frequent recollections of the terror of 9/11 made by candidates and by the media during the run-up to the election. When this specific hypothesis was tested, the test showed a correlation between reminders of mortality and of 9/11 and increased support for George W. Bush (while the opposite correlation was revealed for John Kerry [Landau et al. 2004]). Using different methodologies, recent studies in sociology

and political science have also suggested that the emotions of fear and shame played a large part in shaping political conduct since 9/11 (Burkitt 2005; Lanning 2005). If such correlations are confirmed, then there is more and more reason to suspect that passion and not reason plays a deciding factor in choices about the public good.

Another factor that compromises autonomy is ideology. This compromise is obvious if one understands ideology as it has been classically formulated as false consciousness of one's actual existential situation and of the world that has been produced by economic or social causes. Even if we reject the idea that there is a "true consciousness" that can be found by social scientific research, critique, or revolutionary activity and reformulate ideology functionally as that necessary set of beliefs held by groups of individuals whose effect is to guarantee the reproduction of certain socioeconomic relations (Althusser 1971, 132–33, 1995, 274; Lewis 2005), there is still in this minimal definition a recognition of a compromise of autonomy. This is true even if we go with the extremely thin definition offered by Adam Przeworski, who holds that to recognize ideology one does not need to attribute any causality for it but simply to recognize the empirical fact that "individual beliefs are endogenous with regard to the distribution of income, [and] with regard to political institutions" (1998, 155). This is the case because one of the features of ideology is that certain ends and certain reasons seem intuitively reasonable or unreasonable when presented to a subject operating from within a specific ideology. In that they depend on the subject's own reason, decisions made on the basis of ideology are, in a certain sense, autonomous. However, the fact that this reason and the understanding of the world that this reason works with may serve ends other than that of the subject's or the public's good reflects, fundamentally, a compromise of autonomy. Therefore, though deliberations might seem to engage the faculty of reason and decisions might appear to the subject as freely made, what seems reasonable to a particular subject is always already somewhat or largely predetermined.

Though for the last few decades the psychological literature has, like the Anglo-American philosophical literature, been skeptical of the position that people are inclined by ideology rather than by self-interest (Jost 2006), there have been a number of recent studies that support the points made above about ideology and its effect on reason. This is the case even if the functional explanation for its existence is psychological rather than socioeconomic (the two explanations are not incompatible). For example, a study that recently appeared in the *American Psychologist* shows that voters' self-identified traits and values are decisive in political choice (Caprara and Zimbardo 2004), while another from the journal *Social Psychology* registers a correlation between groups differentiated by their shared values and these groups' "support for pro- and anti-war action" (Bluic et al. 2007). Most impressively, a series of studies conducted by John T. Jost and others have suggested that distinct sets of ideological belief systems can be empirically differentiated, that these belief systems are associated not only with

political orientation but also with lifestyle and personality differences (Jost, Nosek, and Gosling 2008), and, finally, that “people are motivated to engage in ‘system justification’—defined as the tendency to defend, bolster, and rationalize the societal status quo—even when social change would be preferable from the standpoint of self-interest” (Jost 2006, 651).

The last obstacle to the practical success of deliberative democracy that this article will discuss is that of the need for citizens to be informed about their world in order to make decisions about it. Because he is only concerned with establishing the basic principles of justice, in his classical formulation of the ideal deliberative space John Rawls (1999, 119) specifies that all that is required for citizens to reason in public about the good is knowledge about the general features of the political world: that some people are rich and others are poor, some good and others bad, that some external goods are necessary for life and more goods make life better, and so on. However, when it comes to practical questions regarding what to do about a contemporary social problem, good deliberation seems to demand knowledge of the biological, psychological, social, economic, political, and juridical relations relevant to the question at hand. As Robert B. Talisse summarizes this problem of public ignorance, “If [citizens] prove unable to understand the basic political facts from which inferences are to be drawn, they are unfit for deliberative democracy” (2005, 456). In this instance, “unfit” does not necessarily mean that these citizens are unable to deliberate. Rather, because they cannot gain the relevant information to make a rational and informed decision or because they do not care enough to gain it (Posner 2003, 151; Somin 1998), such people are much more likely to arrive at conclusions that are motivated by appeal to emotions or that are due to suasion by elites or to merely fall back on ideological beliefs.

With all these obstacles to the practical implementation of deliberative democracy, the chance of its practical success would seem to be pretty bleak. However, along with noting the obstacles to deliberative democracy, many feasibility theorists have also attempted to formulate a deliberative democracy that recognizes and deals with these impediments. At this point in the debate, plausible solutions have already been given to most of the hurdles just listed. Taking the problem of the necessity of a neutral space for discussion first, John Dryzek’s argument that what is required for deliberation is not necessarily a neutral space but merely a pluralistic space that forbids coercive discourse and which permits and facilitates communication among a variety of discursive strategies while ceding discursive privilege to none seems about right. In the forums that he envisions, rational arguments would have to compete with many other forms of discourse. For instance, reasoned arguments would have to compete against or ally with those telling stories about their experience, with rhetorical pleas, and with those seeking solidarity through greeting and recognition (Dryzek 2000, 68–80). By prohibiting any form of discourse from achieving hegemony and by establishing a space in which different modes of discourse compete on equal

terms to influence others' preferences, the requirement of institutional neutrality for deliberation can be roughly met.

Dealing with the fact that manipulation of opinion has always already taken place prior to deliberation and that, to some extent, it will always be a factor during deliberations is, however, trickier than the problem of the necessity of a neutral space. It is, however, mostly tractable. To second what Cheryl Misak (2000), James Bohman (1998a), and Robert B. Talisse (2004) have argued, the problem that the manipulation of opinion presents to democracy can be dealt with by reframing deliberation as a process of public inquiry. Instead of envisioning the deliberative process as one where subjects make use of their existing knowledge in order to convince others that their idea of the good is the one that should be adopted, deliberation conceived as a process of public inquiry views deliberation as a process by which a plurality of investigators, using a plurality of methods, inquires into many domains of human conduct (Bohman 1998b, 472). Rather than being the *substance* of the deliberation, individual beliefs here become *subject* to investigation. The effects of elite opinion, rhetoric, and media bias can thereby be mitigated. This is the case because, in the process of inquiry and in the discussion of its results, these beliefs can be challenged, confirmed, disconfirmed, and altered by the practical reasoning of others about the world. If they are discovered to be unfounded, too narrow, or uninformed, they can then be rejected or modified.

These practical reasons and this practical reasoning may come not only from those that are affected directly by the problem at hand or by its solution (and thus have some relevant insight) but also by those who, in their capacity as social scientists, have investigated social and economic phenomena relevant to understanding the problem and proposing possible solutions.² To give one example, if citizens of an economically depressed region believe that enticing large corporations to locate or remain in their area will create jobs, stability, and prosperity, then data from economists showing that, in general, such public subsidies have not brought about these results (Buss 1999) may encourage the public to reconsider its views. This is not to say that social scientists will have the last word. To continue with this example, it may be the case that citizens retain local knowledge that suggests that a particular industry will have a better chance for success in this region than in others. In cases where local experience and knowledge conflict with those of the expert, it is conceivable and desirable that, during the course of the public inquiry, this experience comes to inform and possibly correct the understanding of the expert (Bohman 2003, 103). At the end of this process, a collective and informed conclusion about what is to be done can be reached.

In this understanding of deliberation as collective inquiry, the conclusions that any deliberation reaches are understood to be hypothetical. If it is a good solution, then the political course of action decided upon will bring about the result that the deliberators identified as desirable. If these means do not bring about the desired end, then the decision was not good and another inquiry is needed. Treating

deliberation as inquiry thereby solves not only the problem of manipulation but also the epistemological problem mentioned near the beginning of the essay that plagues purely procedural deliberative democracy. With the pragmatic criterion for verification just outlined, there is now an independent standard by which to gauge whether or not reasons are good or bad, namely, whether they allow for the realization of the goal that a specific deliberation decided upon.

Another benefit of deliberative democracy reconceived as a process of public inquiry is that it deals with the problem of public ignorance. In every version of deliberation—including the purely procedural—deliberation is understood to be transformative inasmuch as it results in a “change of preferences on the bases of which people decide how to act” collectively (Przeworski 1998, 140). However, when it is conceived of as a process of collective inquiry, the effect of deliberation is understood to be transformative not only of preferences but also of beliefs about the world and about what the good is. In this process, ignorance is overcome as existing beliefs are submitted to the critical examination that comes about when these beliefs are challenged in a public forum by different beliefs and values and by empirical data. In short, the transformation that deliberation as public inquiry brings about is not only political but also educational.

Despite the promise that deliberation reconceived as pluralistic public inquiry holds to overcome the practical hurdles to successful and fair democratic deliberation, it is hard to see how this process can correct for and overcome those factors that compromise individual autonomy by virtue of their bypassing reason entirely. This is because ideology and emotional appeals are somewhat immune to the effects of corrective reason and contrary evidence. In cases like those where representations of terror or death directly affect the emotions and motivate specific types of reactions, perhaps the best that we can do is to adopt rules like those suggested above about coercion that require us to be suspicious of rhetoric that involves known or suspected triggers.

As for correcting for ideology, a similar proposal might be made. However, as ideology is constructive of basic beliefs and of reason and is more subtle in its effects than propaganda (which mainly appeals to the emotions), any rule or rules could only be proposed after extensive study of the ways in which specific ideologies function to make certain judgments about the world seem reasonable and others not. This accomplished, we might be able to establish rules that correct for, say, the tendency of a certain class to believe that inequality is natural. However, another difficulty soon arises as it is impossible to prove that the diagnosis of an ideology (which then leads to the formulation of such a rule) is not itself the product of ideological thinking. This is because any diagnosis of a particular group’s ideology is always going to be made by a subject (or subjects) who is embedded in a particular ideology. As Cynthia Willett argues in her article in this volume, there is no extra-ideological or universal perspective from which to identify and correct procedurally for ideologies. For instance, in the example given above, only a subject whose perspective has been produced such that he or

she suspects that inequality is not natural would initiate a research project into why another group believes that it is so.

Even with the conclusion that there is a category of obstacles to successful deliberation that are somewhat or even totally ineliminable, there is little doubt that deliberative democracy reconceived as pluralistic public inquiry presents a practicable mode of political association that is superior to our existing elective democracy in terms of procedural fairness, epistemological results, and the formation of a general political will. Though it may never produce outcomes as fair as those hypothesized in theories of pure procedural deliberative democracy, it does present itself as capable of producing better outcomes than our current system. Specifically, it is better in the sense that what results from public inquiry is not merely a decision upon which everyone can agree but also the generation of a “community” in the sense John Dewey uses the word in *The Public and Its Problems* (1927, 208): that is, a body politic who communicates sufficiently about the relations that constitute it such that it is able to realize the goods it identifies as desirable.

This is all good news, of course, but what do we do with that obstacle to deliberative democracy, ideology, that seems so hard to compensate for or eliminate? One of the first things that we might do with ideology is to engage in critique, not of existing ideologies but of the concept of ideology itself. Understood as false consciousness that hides real social and economic relations, ideology obviously compromises any deliberative effort in that the political ends that present themselves to a citizen as public goods may, in fact, only be good for a certain group of people.

However, and as the point made above about the difficulty of finding an extra-ideological position suggests, the definition of ideology as false has proven to be highly problematic.³ If we abandon the idea of ideology as false consciousness, though, and instead understand ideology as a “lived and believed reality” (Rehman 2007, 224), which constitutes subjects as subjects and whose effect is the reproduction of definite socioeconomic relations between particular groups, then ideology might not be the obstacle to effective deliberation that it at first appears. Under this revised definition, ideology always exists and cannot be overcome. However, it exists only in the specific beliefs held by individuals, beliefs produced through each person’s interactions with the world (Althusser 1971, 159).

Even though these beliefs make themselves known only through the actions of individuals, they are for the most part not singular but particular. This is because most human activities are associative or are structured by our associations. Our shared interactions, institutions, and practices tend to produce groups that conceive of the world in similar ways (hence the particularity). These conceptions are all evaluative, and each valuation has its effect on a specific group’s practices. Thus parts of the world are seen as important, valued, useful, or reasonable to a certain group while other parts are left out, devalued, or seen as useless and unreasonable. Often one group’s conceptions of the world (and the practices derivative

of those beliefs) are opposed by other groups who have had different associative experiences and therefore conceive of and work in the world differently.

If we accept this understanding of ideology as those necessary sets of beliefs held by groups of individuals whose effect is to guarantee the reproduction of certain socioeconomic relations, then we might perhaps be moved to see ideology not as an obstacle to deliberative democratic practice but as its necessary precondition. As was noted above, deliberative democracy conceived as public inquiry depends on a plurality of subjects or groups, each with a different perspective on the way in which the world works and about how to realize the good. It needs these perspectives if it is to subject these ideas to scrutiny and to critique in order to arrive at a better understanding of what the real public good is and how to realize it. To give two examples, that certain participants in deliberation about economic policy reflexively balk when they are told that tax cuts for the wealthiest 5 percent of Americans will eventually benefit the quality of life for all Americans is a good thing for effective deliberation. It is also a good thing that another group claims that less regulation for medical device makers and pharmaceutical companies will lead to better public health. As both claims are liable to be contested by groups with opposing ideologies, each provides a point at which collective inquiry can begin. Conflicting ideologies can thus be understood as a prerequisite for deliberation.

That ideology is a prerequisite for deliberative democracy may also be true in another sense. Surveying the literature of deliberative democracy, it is obvious that this project is—even in its most abstract and speculative form—a radically egalitarian one. At base, deliberative democracy is always presented as a more legitimate form of democracy because it corrects for the distortions that structural inequalities, unequal education advantages, entrenched bureaucracy, representative democracy, economic and media interests, and a public distracted from or disinterested in politics introduce into the expression of the democratic will. Those that benefit from these distortions are wont not to notice them or not to believe that they present a problem for democracy. This not noticing the contradiction between their democratic ideal and actual democratic practice is ideology at work. However, there is also another group of people who recognize these failings as pernicious and desire to ameliorate them. This latter ideology is expressed at the practical level by those who attempt to make political institutions fairer and more responsive to the demos and who also try to make the demos more active in political institutions. It is expressed at the theoretical level by those who attempt to convince others that deliberation is desirable, feasible, and necessary, something that has hopefully been accomplished with this article.

Notes

1. In a Quinnipiac University Poll from May 8–12, 2008, that asked the question “Do you think going to war with Iraq was the right thing for the United States to do or the wrong thing?” 62 percent of respondents said that they now think the action was “wrong” (www.pollingreport.com/iraq.htm, accessed June 19, 2008).
2. The introduction of social scientific research into this discussion of the obstacles to deliberative democracy is also an example of this use of expert opinion.
3. So much so that, since Gramsci, most serious Marxian thinkers on the subject have abandoned this conception of ideology. See Rehman 2007, 219–25, as well as Rosen 1996.

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