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Book Review

Deliberative Mini-Publics:

Innovating Citizens in the Democratic Process

Curato, N. (2016) Book Review: Deliberative Mini-Publics: Innovating Citizens in the Democratic Process. Edited by by K. Grönlund, A. Bächtiger and M. Setälä (Colchester: ECPR Press) in Perspectives on Politics.

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There was a time when mini-publics were considered the exemplar of deliberative practice. A forum composed of a diverse set of randomly selected individuals exchanging reasons to determine the best course of action is regarded as a corrective to democratic deficits in “traditional” forms of political participation. A lot has been written about the virtues of these forums—from Archon Fung’s landmark piece in 2003 which first registered the term “mini-publics” in the vocabulary of deliberative studies (Archon Fung, “Recipes for Public Spheres: Eight Institutional Design Choices and Their Consequences,” *Journal of Political Philosophy* 11[September 2003]: 338–367) to a series of monographs showcasing the nuts and bolts of designing, implementing and evaluating deliberative forums.

The growing interest in deliberative systems, however, places the study of mini-publics at a crossroads. Today, debates about the function of mini-publics in relation to formal institutions and the broader public sphere have started to take root, particularly in the context of sharp critiques against the legitimacy and impact of mini-publics as discrete sites of deliberation.

And so it is timely that it after a decade of what John Dryzek (*Foundations and Frontiers of Deliberative Governance*, 2012) calls the “institutional turn” in deliberative studies that a comprehensive edited collection on mini-publics comes to fruition. The sheer volume of publications on the subject demands a clear and systematic inventory of the conceptual, methodological and empirical developments in the literature, as well as the trajectory of mini-publics research after the “systemic turn.” On this task, the book has been successful. Each of the chapters focuses on basic yet provocative themes, starting with Ryan and Smith’s critical review of various definitions of mini-publics (pp. 9–26). The subsequent sections are devoted to the design and outcomes of these forums while the final chapters imagine the functions of mini-publics in the wider deliberative system.

The book speaks to a wide range of audience. It is accessible to those who are after a concise introduction to lessons learned after years of studying mini-publics. That design matters is one of these lessons. Claudia Landwehr’s (pp. 77–92) discussion on the role of “impartial intermediaries” or facilitators in deliberative forums brings up a number of recurrent but not insurmountable issues in mini-publics. The challenge of domination persists even in inclusive deliberative forums, where more eloquent participants can take control of the conversation. Landwehr provides practical insight on interventions facilitators can make to surface other participants’ voices and, in turn, enrich the range of discourses considered in the course of deliberations. Didier Caluwaerts and Dimokritos Kavadias’s (p. 135–156) study

on deliberation in deeply divided societies also offers a way out of possible tensions when people who have strongly held views deliberate. The chapter enumerates several design decisions made in a deliberative experiment in Belgium, from selecting a venue that is not considered “hostile territory” to asking participants to follow stringent decision-making rules. This experiment reveals that that citizens whose views vastly differ on contentious issues in Belgium can engage in high quality deliberation, disproving the impression that deeply divided societies can only be stable if citizens remain passive subjects (p. 151). Marlene Gerber and Andre Bächtiger’s study of Europolis, on the other hand, presents a different story where diverse views ended up generating “gentlemanly conversation” instead of “vigorous contestation” which poses its own set of issues (p. 115–134). Indeed, no two mini-publics are alike and different lessons for democratic practice emerge in each case.

Beyond these practical lessons, however, the book offers insight into ongoing theoretical debates about the functions of mini-publics in the broader deliberative system. The discussion of these debates, however, is not overt and instead, takes shape in the reflective rather than proselytizing tone evident in each chapter. Deliberative democrats have been critiqued for placing too much emphasis on the role of mini-publics, such that it limits the “ecumenical attitude towards different approaches to deliberative democracy” (e.g. Cristina Lafont, “Deliberation, Participation, and Democratic Legitimacy: Should Deliberative Mini-publics Shape Public Policy?” in *Journal of Political Philosophy* 23 [March 2015]: 40–63). The contributions in this volume demonstrate, albeit indirectly, that such criticism is debating a strawman. The literature that takes a positive view of mini-publics is far from being evangelical and instead, they are driven by a constant negotiation of the appropriate relationship between mini-publics and other institutions and practice of democracy. James Fishkin reflects on this question, asking about the “points of connection” between Deliberative Polls and mechanisms for electoral competition (p. 33). Niemeyer (p. 177-202) and Calvert and Warren (p. 203–224) posit various possibilities for mini-publics to act not as decision-makers but as knowledge shapers, myth busters and challengers of anti-deliberative frames in the public sphere. Bächtiger, Setälä and Grönlund’s concluding chapter present a clear response to these criticisms, suggesting that mini-publics are best understood not as replacement to existing institutions of representative democracy but to complement them in counteracting the vices of partisan politics (p. 240). In other words, while the book is about mini-publics, it does not canonize these forums as the best and only

articulation of deliberative practice. Mini-publics are one of many mechanisms to deepen democracy. This is a timely intervention given the range of literature that seems to equate mini-publics to deliberative democracy.

While the book provides a fair snapshot of the state of the field, it could, however, have taken a bolder route by asking bigger questions. One of these big questions relates to an assessment, or, at least a beginning of a discussion, of what, on balance, have mini-publics done to enhance the quality of actually existing democracies. What are the biggest achievements of mini-publics in promoting deliberative politics? Are citizens left with what Strandberg and Grönlund refers to as “side effects” of deliberation (e.g. enhancement of interpersonal trust, political efficacy and other-regarding attitudes) (p. 107) or can mini-publics claim bigger victories? Moreover, the book could have been more ambitious in showcasing the global reach of deliberative mini-publics. Although China and Porto Alegre were briefly referenced throughout the book, this compendium could have taken intellectual leadership in foregrounding the diverse applications of mini-publics beyond the northern hemisphere. One of the biggest and most nationally successful forays in deliberative forums, for example, is happening in Brazil’s National Public Policy Conferences, where large scale mini-publics make an impact on public policy on the national level (see Thamy Pogrebinski and David Samuels, “The Impact of Participatory Democracy: Evidence from Brazil’s National Public Policy Conferences,” *Comparative Politics* 46 [April 2014]: 313–332). A brief glance at Participedia also establishes the breadth of democratic innovations taking root in Africa, Asia and Latin America which deserves attention in a compendium that hopes to “offer a panoply of insights into deliberative mini-publics” (p. 3). That said, this book is useful for anyone who wishes to have an sense of what mini-publics can do, what they cannot do, and what is usually left out when discussing the subject.