

Deliberation's Darker Side: Six Questions for Iris Marion Young and Jane Mansbridge

BY ARCHON FUNG

Most advocates of public participation and civic engagement view growing interest in the various forms of deliberative democracy with great optimism, but against this tide some critics worry about less-noticed dangers and pathologies of deliberation. Archon Fung, an associate professor at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government, poses several questions about these limitations to Iris Marion Young and Jane Mansbridge. These two scholars have helped to define the field of participatory and deliberative democratic theory. Both have illuminated not only how deliberation can liberate but also its potential to repress.

Archon Fung: Some people argue that participatory and deliberative democracy are unrealistic because most people don't really want to spend their time and energy in political discussions and decision making. How great a problem is this for proponents of deliberative democracy?

Iris Marion Young: This question exposes some of the reasons we should understand participation and deliberative democracy as radical ideas that in full form cannot be implemented without other institutional changes.

In American society, most people devote much of their time to working outside the home and taking care of their families inside it. For working mothers in particular, who do more domestic work than men on average, these activities take up a great deal of their time. It is quite understandable that the overworked American (not to mention the overworked Mexican) might not wish to take her few precious leisure hours to go to meetings. Given the pressure on people's lives, it is quite amazing that there is as much civic and deliberative participation as there is.

This raises two issues for ideals of participatory and deliberative democracy. First, why should deliberative participation necessarily

be a *supplement* to work and family life? Second, to the extent that it needs to be and should be, don't ideals of deliberative democracy require shortening the working day? Let me briefly discuss each.

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As reflected in Carole Pateman's classic text *Participation and Democratic Theory*, a generation ago "participatory democracy" referred less to the design of fora for citizens to discuss public policy issues than to ideas of democracy in the *workplace*.¹ If democratic self-governance is a moral value, then it should be present at places where persons have the greatest stake and where they are vulnerable to domination by others; workplaces are prime among them. It would seem that participatory democracy is most needed in work settings and occupations where workers currently have the least autonomy and are most subject to exploitation: in manufacturing, service, retail, and clerical work. Contemporary theorists of participatory, deliberative democracy hardly mention workplace democracy. (My book *Inclusion and Democracy* is among those that do not.²)

But we should. As Pateman and others have argued, democratic practice in the workplace gives people a direct stake in self-government, and practice in doing it.³ Citizens engaged in deliberation about their work and work relations can see a connection between those issues and wider ones of social policy, and they are liable to want to take democratic interest in those issues. Unions used to provide some of this mediating function for many workers in the United States, and they still do for some, as for a great many more in Europe. So this is the first issue: Why should we have to think of deliberation as something that happens *after* work? Why not as *part of* work, where we might think of such

workplace deliberation as involving both immediate workplace issues and policy issues of the wider society?

Even in a society with more democracy at work, however, it would be a good idea to have distinct policy deliberation processes that are public, that bring citizens together from many locations, backgrounds, occupations, and so on. A society that really wishes to encourage such participation must then cut down on the working day or week. (It should also provide child care for parents attending meetings.) James Fishkin and Bruce Ackerman gesture in this direction when they call for a “deliberation day” as a paid holiday. One day a year, however, does not a social practice make.

Jane Mansbridge: *Ideally, politics should be so exciting that citizens would “fly to the assemblies,” as Rousseau put it. In ancient Athens the assembly decided, among other issues, whether or not to go to war and what penalty to give defeated enemies. For many of the voters—past or future soldiers in the armies that sustained the Athenian empire—the outcomes could be a matter of life and death. Turnout at the Athenian assemblies probably rarely exceeded 15 percent (comparing the seating capacity of the Pnyx to an estimate of the number of eligible citizens).*

When lesser issues are at stake and other forms of entertainment compete for attention, inducing attendance at a deliberative forum—even a binding one—is a major problem. It is not, however, insoluble. The easier you make attendance and the more important the issues, the more likely people in general, and particularly people who are in some way disadvantaged in the deliberative setting, will attend.

*Ease of attendance isn’t a straightforward idea, because a move that eases attendance for some people often makes it harder for others. Holding town meetings in Vermont at night rather than during the day on the traditional second Tuesday in March makes it easier for people who work nine to five to attend, but harder for families with children and senior citizens. The upshot, as Frank Bryan tells us, is that attendance is not predictably higher or lower at night meetings.⁴ Making town meeting day a state holiday would help, but the state has not taken up the idea. In Chicago, however, holding community-policing meetings in hospitable and easily accessible local areas did increase attendance. Ease of attendance is one of the many merits of Ackerman and Fishkin’s proposal, in *Deliberation Day*, that two weeks before the*

election voters would gather in groups of fifteen in various neighborhood meeting places to deliberate on the choices facing the nation.⁵ They plan to spread the event over a two-day national holiday, so that each voter need take only one day off from work within this period and be paid \$150 for his or her trouble.

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Ease of attendance is also a psychological matter. A welcoming environment eases the strain of attendance. In small New England towns, the traditional town meeting dinner at noon—of baked beans, franks, and apple pie, for a relatively small fee and with the food provided by (primarily the women of) various families—makes the meeting more a social and communal event, attracting those otherwise put off by occasional conflicts in the meeting itself.

To get anyone to a meeting who expects to be in a minority or not have the right words to explain himself or herself in a particular setting usually requires special effort, both to get members of those groups to the meeting and to increase the chance of being heard when they do attend. For example, it helps to find a way for disadvantaged members to attend the event together. A forum might recruit members through existing organizations, such as churches, where members of a disadvantaged group already meet voluntarily on a regular basis. The participatory budget processes in Brazilian cities work through local community organizations.

It also helps to change the incentive structure. The ancient Greeks paid their citizens for attendance. As Iris shows, through the Chicago community police “beat meetings” that get better participation in poor than in rich districts, the most important incentive is making sure that when the group does come to a decision it will have as big an effect as possible on the participants’ lives.⁶

The workplace has a large effect on people’s lives, and a truly democratic society would give workers control as well as ownership in their workplace. Yet disparity in participation is likely to persist even here. In my study of a highly democratic workplace in the early

1970s, I still found the same kinds of inequality in participation by class, race, gender, and other predictors that one finds in the larger polity, although the extent of the inequality was much reduced.

I agree with Iris about cutting down the working week. As a first step in that direction, we should at least make election day a legal holiday. It's crazy to have all these "patriotic" holidays and nothing that celebrates, and facilitates, the practice of democracy itself. A major next step would be to build deliberation into that day, with paid incentives as Fishkin and Ackerman suggest. It's a mistake to think that when people don't want to attend a meeting this shows that they are satisfied. Those people have often learned from experience that their views don't in fact have sufficient weight to make giving up time to express them a worthy proposition.

Archon Fung: [How should those who seek to build deliberation respond to arguments that deliberative processes can exclude and silence certain perspectives?](#)

Iris Marion Young: In *Inclusion and Democracy*, I discuss two types of exclusion to which democratic processes taking place under conditions of structural inequality are subject.⁷ What I call "external" exclusion refers to the fact that allegedly participatory processes often exclude members of racial and ethnic minorities, have fewer women than men, fewer working-class people than professionals, are often age-biased, and rarely involve people with disabilities. Deliberative processes that want to make sure various social segments are in the room cannot simply announce themselves open to all and expect the room to represent all segments of the wider community. Because structural inequalities make taking advantage of formal opportunities more difficult or costly for members of some groups than for others, deliberative planners who wish to overcome these biases need to take special measures to include them in the process. This involves organizing and outreach, as well as figuring out what might be obstacles to participation for some people and compensating for them.

I have argued, though, that simply having members of differing groups in the room is not enough to make for inclusive deliberative processes. What I call "internal" exclusion refers to the way that some people's ideas and social perspectives are likely to dominate discussion and decision making even when a forum has diversity in the room. There are a whole set of practical norms about what "proper" speaking involves that are biased against

people with accents, not to mention people who don't speak the dominant language—and biased against people who speak in a high voice or softly, biased against people who express themselves emotionally or haltingly, and so on. These biases tend to correlate with gender, race, and class. The content of deliberations, moreover, more often than not reflects the interests and perspectives of the more socially powerful people in the room, unless explicit measures are taken to counter this tendency. Such counter measures can include agenda-setting bodies that represent diverse constituencies, caucuses, facilitators whose job is to introduce unmentioned topics, and various other self-conscious mechanisms for widening discussion and challenging consensus.

Jane Mansbridge: *Again, I agree with Iris. I will only add a bit on the less-structural, more-immediate ways of countering the pressures that will inevitably exist.*

Starting with the pressure toward consensus, a lot of the psychological literature, summarized by Tali Mendleberg, reveals the tendency of small groups to press for consensus in ways that tend to silence potential dissenters.⁸ So groups that work well by consensus, such as the Society of Friends, usually institutionalize various ways of legitimately expressing dissent while not blocking the consensus (saying, for example, that "I disagree but can live with it"), and strengthening the will—even the obligation—of the dissenters to stand out against the looming consensus. The Society of Friends suggests that if you truly believe that the group is taking the wrong course, and particularly if you feel that course is immoral, you have a duty to God to block the consensus no matter how many are arrayed against you. Your veto allows the group to reexamine its reasoning and allows God's light and the light of reason to enter into everyone's heart—including your own—so that eventually all may reach the right consensus. You must therefore take seriously your duty to stand out against an incipient consensus.

Cass Sunstein has shown that members of groups given a task in critical reasoning before making a decision are less likely to go along with a consensus than groups given a task in cooperation.⁹ So another way of strengthening the will of dissenters to hold out is to praise and provide experience in the task of critical reasoning.

A third way of helping people stand out against pressure toward consensus is to ensure there is sufficient diversity within a group

that potential dissenters find at least one ally on as many issues as possible. An early and famous psychological experiment, the Asch experiment, showed that people were likely even to doubt the evidence of their own senses (their correct perception that one line in a group of several vertical lines was shorter than the rest) when confronted with a unanimous group of other people saying that what they perceived was wrong (saying that the lines were the same height). Most people in these experiments went along with the others and reported incorrectly that the lines were all the same height. But even one other person saying that the lines were of different heights made it almost certain that the potential dissenter would report what he or she actually saw. It made no difference how many others said the lines were the same height; if just one other confirmed the subject's perception, the subject almost always reported the truth as he or she saw it. The point is that even one ally makes a huge difference in holding out against pressures to consensus. Those who design deliberative forums should make a great effort to produce not only diversity in views in the deliberating group but also some redundancy in that diversity, so that a critical mass of at least two can withstand the pressure of the rest.

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Imbalances of power always favor one perspective over another, and cultural patterns always favor one style of communicating over another. In a capitalist market society, for example, approaches that favor the worker in each of us over the consumer in each of us are often not heard, understood, or found convincing. Imbalances of power, as Peter Bachrach pointed out, keep many issues off the table altogether.¹⁰ The cultural patterns of the dominant classes usually become the norm in communicating. Thus assemblies primarily of academic men favor a highly reason-based, competitive style of debate and scorn emotional input, even when an emotional take on an issue yields additional insight. In my study of a Vermont town meeting, many working-class people, especially lower-working-class people, felt that they could easily be made to look the fool if they tried to say anything in town meeting in a town dominated by a somewhat higher social stratum within the working class. Lynn Sanders and Iris have sug-

gested forms of participation, in giving testimony and "greeting," that tend to neutralize the advantages of the dominant classes. These techniques are valuable even when the dominant group is composed of, say, progressives of a particular political stripe.

Studies dating back to the 1960s also show that if group leaders actively facilitate minority opinion, the group is more likely to get an answer right (in problems where there is a right answer). Trained facilitators have developed a number of techniques to facilitate minority opinion, some as simple as saying explicitly, "Has everyone spoken who wishes to speak?" and sometimes explicitly encouraging one or two who have been silent. But you don't need a trained facilitator to do this; a group can often do just as well or better itself when many of its members focus consciously on actively soliciting the opinion of those who might disagree with the majority (or the more powerful, or the more culturally dominant).

Archon Fung: Is there a tradeoff between deliberation and the quality of representation?

Iris Marion Young: If the purpose of deliberation is to make decisions speedily with as little controversy and dissent as possible, then deliberations are best done by a small committee of people, equal in status and power, who have a shared set of interests. Such deliberations happen all the time and have since politics and business began. They are not democratic, however. To be democratic, deliberation *must* be widely inclusive of the major interests, opinions, and social perspectives of differently situated groups. The more social, economic, and political inequality among them, the more cultural differences they have, the wider the variance in value commitments, and the more contentious deliberation is likely to be. There may be reasons to try to mediate conflict by using small or less public bodies for discussion. Differing and disagreeing people don't have to be discussing together all the time; sometimes it is better for diverse, relatively homogeneous groups to organize among themselves and deliberate about what they want, and then send representatives to more heterogeneous bodies. In principle, however, trading off inclusion for efficiency or smooth rationality is antidemocratic.

Jane Mansbridge: *In general, yes. Anyone who doubts this should just read Jack Nagel's Participation.¹¹ The equation is not invariant, however, as evidenced in the Chicago school reform and community police beat meetings, and Frank Bryan's Vermont*

town meetings. Those who design deliberative forums must take this strong general tendency into consideration and actively work to counter it.

Archon Fung: Is deliberation more conservative compared to other modes of political action, such as community organizing and social movements?

Iris Marion Young: Surely deliberation ought to take place in processes of community organizing and within social movements. It often does.

Here's how I would rephrase this question: Is organization of consultative processes by government officials, which brings citizens together to deliberate among policy alternatives, more conservative than community organizing, which concerns issues government officials are not paying attention to, challenges those officials, or challenges the current terms of a policy debate? If that is the question, then the answer is usually yes. When local government officials create an inclusive deliberative process where participants decide how to implement workfare programs, the framework of workfare programs is assumed and cannot be challenged. When planning officials try to get members of several communities together to deliberate about the best way to site a facility that will treat hazardous wastes, a whole set of questions about industrial processes and environmental priorities are assumed and not part of the agenda for discussion.

In the United States today, many public administrators and scholars of public administration have embraced deliberative democracy and wish to make policy formation and implementation more deliberatively democratic, and that in itself is a good thing. Most often, attempts at creating deliberative fora take place at the local level of city or town. On the whole, however, the policy framework within which deliberation is to take place, and the alternatives available for discussion, are already set long before any deliberative planning begins; the federal or state programs are mandated, the budget allocations are set, or the economic context of investment and commerce is under the undemocratic control of private corporations who set the terms of their relationship with the locale.

Radical social movements are about changing the institutional terms within which deliberation takes place and about challeng-

ing the assumptions usually brought to policy discourse about priorities and purposes of collective action. It is a mistake, I believe, to reduce participatory, deliberative democracy to citizen involvement in deliberative processes that government officials set up and promote, to work through policy agendas driven by the current configuration of social power and economic interests. That's what I was referring to before about not recognizing the radical implications of deliberative democracy. If inclusive deliberative fora are used primarily by local governments to induce acceptance of the structural status quo, then they are a conservative tool, even when the government officials are liberal and well intentioned. Fortunately, nongovernmental organizations frequently stage short- and long-term deliberative processes, some of which have contributed to social change, and their potential to do so remains. Usually they combine deliberative meetings with less deliberative actions of public protest, and this is usually instrumental in their success. In my opinion, deliberation should not be considered an alternative to street demonstration, guerilla theater, sit-ins, nonviolent actions of civil disobedience, and boycotts, but as part of or complementary to them. We often make speeches at protest rallies, and these speeches intend to foster public debate and deliberation. Government officials and agencies sometimes ally with protest movements and movements for policy and social change, and when they do they can make a powerful contribution to realizing the objectives of those movements.

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Jane Mansbridge: Lynn Sanders argues that deliberation is more conservative than these other forms, and she may be right.¹² This result would tend to follow from the likely dominance of higher-status groups in deliberative settings (a pattern established not only in my own town meeting and alternative workplace studies but also in studies of juries and other deliberative groups) unless steps are taken to rectify this tendency. Chris Karpowitz has shown recently that in the town of Princeton, New Jersey, a carefully designed (but not carefully enough) delibera-

tive process suppressed dissent far more effectively than a traditional public hearing.¹³

Whether the “consensual” outcome, favored by the university and other high-status players, was more “conservative” than the alternative depends on your definition of conservative. The university-favored outcome would have spent more taxpayer money, invested in public spaces, and brought about change. But Sanders would still find meat for her argument in the dynamics of this deliberation.

Engagement even in these mainstream, nonradical deliberative forums may help overcome the defeatist apathy that is a major enemy of social change.

The forms of citizen deliberation that the Kettering Foundation has been working on for years and that are now springing up around the country through organizations such as AmericaSpeaks are, I believe, generally more conservative than most social movements and most of the community organizing that I know. These deliberative forums do not set out, generally, to rock the boat. But this is not a zero-sum game. The people organizing these deliberative forums would probably not be out working in radical social movements and engaging in radical community organizing. It is also likely that participation in one forum encourages participation in another, as Carole Pateman argued in 1970.¹⁴ At this stage in social science it has been hard to demonstrate this effect persuasively, but I believe nevertheless that it is true. If it is true, engagement even in these mainstream, nonradical deliberative forums may help overcome the defeatist apathy that is a major enemy of social change.

Finally, deliberation occurs in many venues, including social movements and community organizing. I argue in “Using Power/Fighting Power” and in my forthcoming *Everyday Feminism* that to escape, even partially, the hegemony of the dominant classes and of the status quo, we often need enclaves of like-minded individuals who egg one another on to new heights of imagination (and new heights of absurdity), try to live a new kind of life, and resist the pressure to think like everyone else.¹⁵ Most of the important ideas of social movements (such as black power) arose from deliberation within such enclaves. These enclaves do

have the drawback of encouraging the members to talk primarily with one another. This was my main point in *Why We Lost the ERA*.¹⁶ But the cost is the flip side of the gain. Deliberation in enclaves is critical for initiating social movements. In addition, deliberation—of the slow sort that I call “everyday talk”—is critical for sustaining social movements and making them grow. So, like Iris, I would not, in general, contrast deliberation with social movements or community organizing.

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Archon Fung: What kinds of issues are best addressed primarily through the deliberation of elected officials rather than by ordinary citizens in popular deliberation?

Iris Marion Young: I have not thought of this question in this way. Here’s a stab at an answer. Doesn’t it make sense to think of the elected official as a kind of expert? They are experts in fashioning legislation and implementing it. A lot of what is involved in fashioning legislation and implementing it is technical: the law has to be written in a certain way, there are details about how it has to relate to other laws that involve knowing a lot about other laws, and to enforce and implement laws one has to know a good deal about bureaucratic missions and how agencies operate. Ordinary citizens don’t know all these technical details, most don’t want to, and they have other jobs to do. So this is what government officials ought to deliberate about.

What citizens should deliberate about are social priorities. Is the state of the domestic health care system more important to us than nation building abroad? If we are so concerned about the state of the educational system, then why don’t we pay teachers more? And so on. In the United States today, in my observation, there are only small and poorly working mechanisms through which citizens can seriously and genuinely deliberate about what is important to them, send reasoned messages to government officials about what those priorities are, and hold government accountable. The elites set our priorities.

Jane Mansbridge: *The more important the issue, the more critical it is that the citizenry, in interaction with their elected repre-*

representatives, deliberate on it. Representatives, who dedicate their whole lives to the process, are better versed on some issues. They are also more willing than the average citizen to face and deal with conflict. Because they must know their districts to get elected, they are often more versed in the competing interests in the district as well as in the nation, and more skilled in coming up with workable compromises.

In some cases technical decisions, or decisions of great complexity, may be best delegated to elected representatives, but only if the citizenry has been able to give, reflectively, some guidance to those decisions. Even those who have spent their lives, say, mastering the complexities of missile launching systems do not have opinions on these matters that are isolated from the rest of their political and ideological beliefs. Their expert opinion ought not to be dispositive. On the other hand, great ignorance does not usually produce good deliberation, and most of the population in most polities around the globe live in great ignorance of those features of the economy, society, and polity that should inform a good decision. For important issues that most of us would concede have technical qualities requiring some study, Robert Dahl suggested many years ago that we convene assemblies of representative groups of citizens, drawn by lot (or the modern equivalent, by an approximation to random sample), to deliberate and advise the elected representatives, perhaps with some institutional bite to that advice.¹⁷ The members of such assemblies would themselves be representatives of the rest of the citizenry, just not elected representatives. Representation by lot fails to capture the good features of elected representation—authorizing the representatives and threatening them with potential sanctions for unrepresentative behavior. But it also avoids the bad features of running for elected office and reelection—sound-bite politics, short time horizons, and dependence on money.

I can imagine a polity in which every citizen is called at least once in his or her life to serve on such a citizen assembly, drawn by lot, just as one is called for jury duty today. Although we have little evidence on this point and little chance of getting any, I believe that such an experience would draw citizens into a fuller sense of responsibility for the whole, lead them to scrutinize more carefully other facts and insights that come their way in their subsequent lives as citizens, make them better watchdogs over their elected representatives, and give them a more subtle understanding of the kinds of decisions elected representatives

have to make. On the basis of my study of town meetings, I believe that such assemblies by lot would be qualified to make most, if not all, of the decisions that representatives now make.¹⁸ (A little experimentation would give us a better idea if this is true.) Authorization might come from a citizen-initiated mandate to call such an assembly. Community reputation might be sanction enough to keep the participants honest. But potential problems in authorization and in nonresponsiveness to sanctions ought to make us wary for a while of anything other than an advisory role for deliberative assemblies drawn by lot.

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Archon Fung: Are there political issues for which deliberation is a counterproductive way to make decisions, or for which it is simply a waste of time?

Iris Marion Young: There are countless decisions involving public institutions that should be made by very small groups, usually by deliberating, or by single individuals—we hope they deliberate too (remember Aristotle: deliberation refers to the process of considering alternatives and reasoning to the best). So the question really is, Are there political issues for which wide public discussion is unnecessary or positively undesirable? The answer is yes. Most of the activities of government fall in this category. I don't want to be involved in deciding the organizational structure of the city planning department. I don't want to know the calculative means by which the Social Security department superannuates my pension. Let them do it. In general, in my opinion, the fewer the issues citizens deliberate about, the better the quality of the deliberations that they do have. We want public *servants*! But that's the point. Their decisions, and the means of arriving at them, should be *on public record* so that citizens—in principle, any citizen—can review the decisions if they choose and begin general citizen public deliberation about them if they think there is a reason to.

Jane Mansbridge: *I can imagine many issues so trivial that one would not think it worth the time either of the citizenry or its*

elected representatives to deliberate. The elected representatives should simply delegate these decisions to the appropriate bureaucracies. I also think we should not make a fetish of deliberation, just as we should not make a fetish of the constructive clash of ideas. Matthew Arnold writes of a businessman who had just funded a “dissenting” church in a small town in England and was boasting of the “zeal and activity” that the ensuing controversy encouraged. Arnold replied, “Ah, but, my dear friend, only think of all the nonsense which you now hold quite firmly, which you never would have held if you had not been contradicting your adversary in it all these years!”¹⁹ At this stage in human development, we have little idea which conditions of deliberation are most conducive to critical thinking, good outcomes (where such can be discerned), and inclusion of many perspectives. But we are poised to learn to do this a lot better in the next couple of decades—if we can keep from blowing the earth to bits.

In my opinion, the fewer the issues citizens deliberate about, the better the quality of the deliberations that they do have. We want public servants!

ENDNOTES

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