
Review

Sharing Democracy

Michaele L. Ferguson

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In recent years, parts of political philosophy have undergone what might be called a practical or political turn. Rather than search for grounds of justice or legitimacy or other normative notions in metaphysics, human psychology, the nature of language or other deliverances of theoretical reason, political philosophers making this turn advocate regarding both democratic politics and democratic political theory as activities that make claims, invite response and have value in themselves – in other words, the products of practical reason. Making this shift leaves both democratic theory and democratic action more open-ended, less certain. In the words of Tully (2009), it marks a shift in orientation from conditions of agreement to practices of civic freedom.

In *Sharing Democracy*, Michaele L. Ferguson adds another voice to this growing chorus. She argues that too many political philosophers and theorists, even when concerned to accommodate diversity, wind up advocating democratic theories that nevertheless support attitudes hostile to diversity. She traces this failure to an assumption that democracy requires what she calls ‘commonality’.

Resting democratic legitimacy on commonality leads to an attempt to establish possible unifying grounds for democratic society or action in incontrovertible facts. The result, however, is both to leave out those who reject these facts, either altogether, or as the proper grounds for democratic connection, and to circumscribe the very political activity of working out the terms on which we might live together. As an alternative, Ferguson argues that we should regard claims to commonality ‘as political claims rather than neutral observations about the world ... Such claims seek the agreement of others, seek to persuade others, and seek to shape the way others see the world that we share intersubjectively’ (p. 51). Offering such interpretations and being responsive to the alternatives that others offer would amount to sharing democracy. Throughout the book, she insists that only such an acceptance of the unpredictability and open-ended nature of political activity can be truly consistent with democratic freedom and full inclusion.

Ferguson details the workings of the assumption about commonality and her practical alternative with detailed discussions of three more particular claims about



democracy. She argues that theorists have routinely held that without some form of already established commonality, citizens (1) cannot share an identity as fellow citizens, (2) will not trust one another to the degree necessary to make compromises or accept the legitimacy of decisions they disagree with and (3) will be unable to act collectively. The three central chapters of the book take each of these claims in turn, and draw contrasts between the theoretically grounded claims familiar in the literature and her practical alternative.

The vision of democracy as the ongoing intersubjective making of claims and issuing of invitations without any guarantee of how or whether they will be taken up by our fellow citizens or others is an attractive one in many ways. It offers an approach to democracy and democratic action that is less state- and government-centered, less confined to particular national borders and more deeply inclusive. It also helps to sidestep various theoretical debates in political philosophy that can become sterile, such as those concerning the delimitation of the demos or the possible sources of national solidarity. At the same time, it refreshes those debates by conceiving of them not as fruitless disagreements among academic elites searching for the one true theory of democracy or justice, but as part and parcel of the ongoing democratic activity of working out how to live together. Moreover, from the perspective Ferguson offers us, we can see the diversity of democratic societies less as a problem to be solved or overcome, but as the appropriate outgrowth of what Arendt called human plurality under conditions of freedom.

The book's final chapter argues that on this intersubjective view of democracy, protest marches are a kind of paradigmatic democratic activity, perhaps more so than formal, institutionalized means of determining popular will such as elections. It thus provides a novel conceptual position from which to engage in current debates about the legitimacy of various peaceful 'revolutions' brought on by such demonstrations in the absence of (or even in the face of) elections. For those reasons among others, the book is a welcome addition to the conversation.

That said, it leaves, as it must, more work to be done and conversations to be had. Ferguson's concern here is entirely with questions of difference and diversity. Her orienting contrast, between commonality and freedom, is posed around responses to various forms of difference, whether ethnic, religious, cultural, racial, gendered or ideological. However, as this list suggests, not all differences are structurally similar. Some differences are best seen as the outcome of systems of structural inequality and oppression, and looking at them as just one more set of differences will obscure important and democratically important features. Nevertheless, Ferguson never takes up questions of inequality and oppression, or of power. This is a striking lacuna, given her serious engagement with feminism and issues of race.

Most significantly, it prevents her from coming to grips with the effect of inequalities of power in shaping the way our words and ideas are heard and what can count as an acceptable response. The result is that as the argument of the book develops, Ferguson does not develop sufficient critical resources to distinguish

between what might be called democracy-enhancing political action and democracy-eroding political action. Toward the end of the book, she briefly takes up this question. She explains that only responses to political action that leave open further discussion rather than closing it off will enhance democracy (p. 133). That, I think, is exactly the right way to begin to spell out the necessary criteria, and it shows, *inter alia*, a deeper problem with the theoretical approaches to democracy that tend to aim, at least implicitly, at closing off at least philosophical debates about democracy by setting out correct theories. However, in the face of inequalities in power, it is insufficient. Under conditions of structural inequality, exchanges that serve to reinforce inequalities can proceed in just the open-ended manner that Ferguson requires. One of the insidious features of such inequality is that it shapes our very concepts and the norms we use to shape our conversations. Moreover, the most apparently open and ongoing conversations can be the very ones that re-affirm and reinforce rather than trouble or challenge inequality.

My point here is not that this lack of attention to questions of power and inequality leaves the view on offer vulnerable to devastating criticism, but rather that it shows there is more work to be done. I see no reason why the view Ferguson develops here cannot be built out to accommodate more fully these kinds of concerns, and I assume, given her other interests and commitments, that such work will be forthcoming. I look forward to seeing how it develops, in all its unpredictable, open-ended, democratic splendor.

Reference

Tully, J. (2009) A new field of democracy and civic freedom. In *Public Philosophy in a New Key, Vol 1: Democracy and Civic Freedom*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, pp. 291–317.

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