

Andrew J. Perrin

Comment on Anna Carola Freschi and Vittorio Mete/3. Conjuring Publics

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Conjuring Publics

by Andrew J. Perrin

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Freschi and Mete's comparative study of two institutionalized deliberative experiments in Tuscany begins to address an important set of questions that have been conspicuously missing from the general literature on deliberation. Taking the rather naïve claims of that literature to task, the study asks who ends up participating in deliberative experiments, what they talk about, and how they are allowed to talk about it. The conclusions are bleak: these deliberative experiments, the authors find, attract a rarefied group of participants who deliberate in an overly directed manner and cannot depart from a preset agenda. The real function of these discussions, reason the authors, is therefore to complement institutionalized government and co-opt dissent, not to expand democratic engagement.

Although the empirical cases in the article are quite specific – two deliberative experiments in the Tuscan region of Italy – the theoretical and normative ambitions to which Freschi and Mete aspire are substantial. Extrapolating from the article's critique of its cases, the general argument is that small-scale, managed deliberative experiments like these tend to do more to engender consent among the public than to expand decision-making power. The critique is dramatic: “new deliberative arenas (...) furnish the political class with a source of symbolic legitimation which paradoxically replaces the political (...) thereby producing a form of power which is scarcely accountable.”

For all this thoroughgoing critique, though, the paper never suggests what a “gold standard” might be. What would be a good, democratically expansive, outcome

of a deliberative project? Of course, a critique need not offer an alternative in order to be valid. But there is a bigger, theoretical question at stake here. That question is: what is the ontological status of the object being represented, whether through public opinion polling, deliberative experiments, or formal governmental representation? While the theoretical critique presented by Freschi and Mete is trenchant, the normative critique is lacking precisely because it does not address this ontological issue, although at times it comes close. The result is that we are left with a kind of default ontology of public opinion: one that is essentially *transparent* and *unidirectional* – two features that, when examined, pose both theoretical and normative problems.

Representing a public can take several forms, and in fact there are at least three distinct kinds of representation [Perrin and McFarland 2008]:

1) Political representation, in which a representative speaks *in the interest of* the public being represented [the German *vertreten*; see Spivak 1988];

2) Scientific representation, in which a representative speaks *in the place of* the public being represented [*darstellen* in German; see Spivak 1988]; and

3) Aesthetic representation, in which a representative creatively changes the object being represented in order to evoke its essence or basic meaning.

The literature on representation [e.g., Pitkin 1967; Mansbridge 2003] has tended to distinguish between options 1 and 2, determining how much a representative ought to act on special knowledge or wisdom (option 1) as opposed to transparently passing along (re-presenting) the existing views of those being represented [see also Perrin *et al.* 2006]. In both these cases, though, representation is (at least tacitly) understood to be at odds with distortion – that is, transparency is an unqualified good.

This is an aesthetic choice for mimesis, one Panagia has called a “poetics of substitution” [Panagia 2006, 121]. There is, though, an alternative in option 3: poetic or aesthetic representation, in which the act of representation embraces the necessary reality of distortion in order to distill the cacophony of public voices into a meaningful message. This choice would mirror the development of artistic technique over the course of the Nineteenth and Twentieth centuries, in which transparent fidelity to the object being represented was increasingly discarded in favor of creativity and novelty.

With regard to unidirectionality, these theories of representation tend to understand public beliefs as fixed and exogenous – citizens have interests as a result of their social positions. These interests are present to be tapped or expressed through democratic channels, and a government is responsive – and thus democratic – to the extent that its decisions successfully match those interests held by its citizens. But citizens don’t just pay attention to their private interests; they also pay attention to what their government does [e.g., Arnold 1990] and adjust their preferences for future policy accordingly [Valelly 1993]. More fundamentally, publics – in Freschi and

Mete's terminology, *micropublics* as opposed to *micropopuli* – emerge, daemon-like, as a result of being addressed [see, *inter alia*, Warner 2002; Marres 2005; Latour 2005; Eder 2000]. Thus, while the empirical critique of the deliberative experiments presented by Freschi and Mete is apt, the normative critique misses the mark because it misses an utterly crucial point: publics emerge under particular conditions, and these conditions shape the nature of those publics. To base a critique on the degree of authenticity in a representation – as Freschi and Mete do – is to ignore the dynamic character of that authenticity.

This image of publics evoked by circumstances has a long pedigree. Habermas [2006, 417] offers a related approach, claiming that “votes do not ‘naturally’ grow out of the soil of civil society. Before they pass the formal threshold of campaigns and general elections, they are shaped by the confused din of voices rising from both everyday talk and mediated communication.” This idea reaches back to the all-but-forgotten *Gruppenexperiment* carried out by the Frankfurt School in postwar Germany, which sought to observe the formation of opinion *in statu nascendi* precisely because understanding opinion as fixed, natural, and individual is epistemologically unsound [Pollock 1955; Olick 2007]. In an interesting historical side-note, Habermas was a student assistant on the *Gruppenexperiment* project (as was Ralf Dahrendorf [Dahrendorf 2002]), and his approach to public opinion and deliberation share some key insights with the critique developed there [see also Adorno 2005].

Returning, then, to Freschi and Mete, the study they present offers unique and helpful evidence to evaluate the increasingly fashionable practice of deliberative experiments in public policy making. Their critique raises an important issue for future research to consider: the question of the relationship between deliberation and *contention*. If deliberation is too *deliberate* [see Perrin 2006], too calm, and too oriented toward producing consent for government policies, it may serve to undermine the opportunity for contention, an indispensable form of citizen engagement.

My argument, though, is that this question is better served by recognizing and embracing the necessarily multidirectional and distorted practices of representation. The right question to ask, I submit, is: *what kind of a political subject – and what kind of a public – is evoked by particular practices of deliberation and representation?*

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Conjuring Publics

Abstract: Based on evidence from empirical analysis of an emblematic case within the Italian context, this article proposes an interpretation of the political meanings implied in the institutionalization of deliberative practice. Through the adoption of a mix of quantitative and qualitative techniques, we conducted contextualized analysis of two experiments of public deliberation which have recently been promoted by the Regional Government of Tuscany. The research findings show that the general effect of the two processes was more the domestication of bottom-up participation, rather than the opening of new inclusive and participative spaces. Relevant political functions have emerged with reference to the internal needs of party elites and to the competition/negotiation between consolidated and new political actors.

Thus, we suggest that institutionalization of deliberative democracy can be better understood when put in relation to the current process of functional adaptation undertaken by some institutional political actors. Through ‘outsourcing’ and individualizing participative processes away from the party arena, ruling elite would maintain the control over their own selection and political agenda. In other words, in some contexts the institutionalization of public deliberation operates more like a complementary instrument than a real remedy challenging post-democratic governance.

Keywords: deliberation, democracy, citizenship, public opinion, representation.

Andrew J. Perrin is associate professor of sociology at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, USA. He is author of *Citizen Speak: The Democratic Imagination in American Life* (University of Chicago Press, 2006) and co-translator/co-editor of two upcoming volumes based on the Frankfurt School’s 1955 Group Experiment: *Guilt and Defense: Theodor W. Adorno on the Legacies of National Socialism in Postwar Germany* and *Before the Public Sphere: The Frankfurt School, Public Opinion, and the Group Experiment of 1955*, both on Harvard University Press.