

# **Deliberative Democracy as Critical Theory**

## **Abstract**

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Many theorists of deliberative democracy are turning to the concept of system to develop the theory in new ways. This paper assesses the critical potential of this move in deliberative democracy theory. In the past 10 years more and more democratic theorists interested in deliberation have moved away from studying and designing individual deliberative institutions and have instead focussed on macro level connections between institutions. The most significant consequence of this move is that any individual institution (or individual person for that matter) need not embody or even approximate all the characteristics of good or high quality deliberation. This approach allows deliberative theory to, among other things, account for and discuss the way that protest, contestation and even quite uncivil behaviour may contribute to a deliberative system even though the political action seen in isolation looks deeply un-deliberative. Another apparent advantage to this approach is that it allows deliberative democracy theory to include informal every day talk into the analysis even though such talk is not directly tied to a decision-making. (Arguable both these advantages can be found in Habermas's two track model of democracy but the deliberative systems approach departs from Habermas in some significant ways) But there are also draw backs to a deliberative system approach the most obvious being that it appears to weakened normative expectations on individual political actors. A second potential problem is that in seeking ways to accommodate some forms of power into the system, a system approach may have undermined is ability to criticize power. This paper reviews the potential draw backs of a system approach to deliberative democracy and defends such an approach from the accusation that it cannot be critical. The paper also offers a general account of what it means for a democratic theory to also be a critical theory.