

**Rupturas da esfera
pública: a ligação
entre os atores, o
ecossistema digital
e a radicalização**

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Revista Compolítica

Ano 2023, v.13, n.2

<https://revista.compolitica.org/>

ISSN: 2236-4781

DOI: 10.21878/compolitica.2023.13.2.655

Interview with Simone Chambers

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Public sphere ruptures: the linkage between the actors, the digital ecosystem, and the radicalization

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Simone Chambers is a Professor and Chair of the Department of Political Science at the University of California, Irvine. She is a specialist in democracy studies, and her concerns are deliberative democracy, public reason, the digital public sphere, rhetoric, and civility. Among her main works, we can cite the article “Bad Civil Society” (with Jeffrey Kopstein. *Political Theory*, 2001); the books *Alternative Conceptions of Civil Society* (with Will Kymlicka. Princeton University Press, 2002); *Deliberative Democratic Theory* (*Annual Review of Political Science*, 2003); *Reasonable Democracy: Jürgen Habermas and the Politics of Discourse* (Cornell University Press, 2018); *Contemporary Political Theory* (Polity 2023); and the chapter “An Ethics of Public Political Deliberation: The Case of Rhetoric (*The Oxford Handbook of Rhetoric and Political Theory*. Oxford University Press, 2022).

In this interview, she talks about the importance of thinking about the public sphere in this democratic crisis context. She also explains how considering disinformation and its asymmetry can help us better understand some public sphere ruptures. Besides that, Professor Chambers makes a distinction between partisanship, polarization, and radicalization.

It is a fact that an active and free public sphere will produce differences of opinion, multiplicities, and conflicting narratives, however, she highlights the need to value pluralism and inclusion from a critical perspective. A further concern is the potential dangers of new digital ecosystems that weaken democracy. For her, we should focus on political actors who have tried to undermine democracy.

In your recent works, you have been interested in the processes of democratic crisis, especially in the challenges conferred to the public sphere. In what way do you believe that your concern - and your various studies - on deliberative democracy can bring a particular approach to thinking about the new mechanisms of public sphere ruptures?

It is true that my democratic theory looks at democracy through the lens of the public sphere. And I think that many of the things that we associate with democratic crisis really can't be properly understood independent of the public sphere. Actually, I do think the public sphere in deliberative democracy theories is even more relevant now in times of democratic crisis and one of the reasons is that so many of the pathologies of democracy are being accentuated through communication.

One example is voter suppression. On one hand, we can talk about democratic backsliding when we have things like gerrymandering, when we have efforts to suppress the votes, or when we make it more difficult for people to vote. All these measures are a form of democratic backsliding and are really a sign of a democratic crisis. But in places like Brazil and the United States, the only way that these proposals can be put forward is when they are floated based on false narratives of voter fraud.

So, the only justifications for these measures are these public sphere arguments, which are constructed on the false narrative of "the elections have been stolen". So, these examples of concrete institutional backsliding are only made possible by the kinds of arguments and pathologies we have in the public sphere. And I think so many of our problems, for instance, polarization, have really been sustained through public narratives. That is why a democratic theory that looks at narratives, that looks at communication, that looks at the public sphere, that looks at discourse, and public debate and arguments in rhetoric, really is, I think, the most important angle to understand the democratic crisis.

Based on the understanding that the function of the public sphere is "to facilitate the pluralist exchange of opinion, arguments, claims, and demands about collective problems or salient concerns that then inform accountability and responsiveness." (Chambers; Kopstein, 2022, p. 3), in what sense do you believe that disinformation is one of the main problems we face in terms of political communication today?

I do think disinformation and misinformation are serious problems, but I don't subscribe to the view that we are in some kind of post-truth situation where citizens, in general, do not care about the truth.

Or that citizens, in general, are being completely consumed by either consumerism or false narratives, or they are all kind of being emotionally manipulated by social media.

I think that the problem of disinformation really has to get down to the details. So, I think one of the most important factors of disinformation is its asymmetry. Some people are more affected by disinformation or believe in more disinformation than other people. And some countries are more hurt by disinformation than other countries. For example, if you compare the recent German election to the last American election there is a difference related to disinformation. I mean, Germany has all sorts of other problems of contemporary economic inequalities and non-responsiveness, and so forth, but disinformation just was not a problem in the election the way it is in the United States. So, in these two types of asymmetries between countries (the United States and Brazil versus Germany and Canada, for instance) and within countries, the groups of people who are being manipulated through disinformation are also different. Thus, you must look at it comparatively, and you must look at it politically. Having said that, I do think disinformation and misinformation are fueling anti-democracy and the rise of autocracy, because they are very dangerous.

In your article “Balancing Epistemic Quality and Equal Participation in a System Approach to Deliberative Democracy” (2017), you mention how worrisome it is for systemic models of legitimacy that some opinion leaders are also opinion shapers and sometimes manipulators. Given this context and the similarities between Donald Trump and Jair Bolsonaro, how do you think the dissemination of disinformation by such political leaders as a weaponization undermines the formation of a considered public opinion?

I think it definitely undermines the formation of considered public opinion. But like I said in my last answer, first, it undermines some groups of people but then it adds to polarization. In the United States, I think this is also true in Brazil, we have serious polarization, and that means that now both sides (Democratic and Republicans) have become so obsessed about their priorities, and about just making sure that the other party or the other leader doesn't come to power.

I like to make a distinction between partisanship, polarization, and radicalization. Partisanship is if you have a cause. And there is nothing really wrong with partisanship, right? Because a cause could speak for justice, and party politics are about partisanship.

Then, the next level is polarization, where it is not a cause, you don't have an ideological content to your kind of contestation. Instead, you just don't want the other guy to come to power. That's the most important thing. The ideological content has left, and you are just fighting sort of with the teams. It is the United States polarization.

But the third level is what is called radicalization. And radicalization is when you are so worried about the other party or leader coming to power or in you losing power that you are willing to violate established norms and rules, in order to ensure that you stay in power, or that the other person doesn't go to power.

So, here, we see the United States Democrats highly polarized, which is not good, but they are not radicalized in the same way that Republicans are polarized and radicalized. And that radicalization involves the willingness to violate norms and rules that most normal people would hold. There are two types of norms and rules that they are willing to violate: the first one is norms about truthfulness, about sharing information that you know is false but that it's going to contribute to your cause. And the second ultimately is more dangerous - it is created by the first one and by the willingness to violate the rules of democracy - is the unwillingness to leave office when you lose the election. So, Trump knew he lost but he was trying everything to stay in power. And the same narrative is happening right now in between elections in Brazil.

In "Truth, Deliberative Democracy, and the Virtues of Accuracy: Is Fake News Destroying the Public Sphere?" (2021), you suggest, as combat against fake news, almost a combination between the Habermasian idea of democracy as truth-tracking and the virtues of accuracy identified by Williams (2002). What do you think about this challenge as we currently live in an epistemic war about what is truth?

In Williams's piece, there's this difference between truthfulness and accuracy. Truthfulness is your willingness not to lie, to tell the truth. Accuracy is your willingness to not just believe in the first thing, to make a minimum effort to correct it, and when you are able to be corrected too.

I think certainly most people when you poll them, say that they care about the truth. I do actually think that most people care about the truth. And which is why, when you look at the United States (I don't know if this is true in Brazil), again this is an asymmetry issue, kind of the mainstream legacy media really does still use evidence-based arguments, it has facts, and they can be checked. One of the things we see is the explosion of fact-checking, and everyone is crazy about that, partly because the general

population likes the idea that facts are being checked. So, my argument there was an attempt to leverage what I think is very common intuition across lots of people that they do want to be accurate, that they are not embracing the post-truth situation.

People say: “That’s your truth, and there are those truths...”. But I think it is clear, for instance, that Trump lost the elections, right? And there are some people who don’t believe it. This is not like “we have one truth or that truth”. That is the truth, and some people don’t believe it. And I think there are still a lot of people who really understand that there are facts out there.

So, I’m not worried about some kind of universal existential crisis of truth, at all. I’m worried about a polarized partisan or polarized radicalization of one group of the population in some contexts, like the United States and Brazil, and some other places that will threaten democracy.

How can a “discursive political culture” (Chambers, 2018) help us reflect on the reproduction of shared understandings in the asymmetrically polarized context to which we are subjected?

This is a complicated question. It is true that discourse and public debate require some kind of shared background understanding, but I don’t see the public debate as creating shared understandings or coming to a consensus. I see public discursive culture as a highly critical contestatory process whereby claims are made by groups or political elites who make proposals, and then they get criticized. And so what’s most important is that the context of public debate, of discursive political culture, be open and pluralistic and contestatory and slightly wild and that everybody can say anything. Now, that does require an underlying culture, that values pluralism and values difference and thinks that this is going to be helpful as opposed to the view that we have to suppress opposition, we have to suppress contestation, we have to suppress criticism and just find some path that the majority could follow. So, the idea of a deliberative discursive political culture is not a notion of a culture where we all share things, but rather a tolerant, pluralist culture where we all value debate.

You know, Habermas refers to the informal public sphere as a kind of wild and anarchic space where anybody can say anything. And so it’s a context of discovery of new claims and new possibilities. That means that we have to value pluralism. And so that’s really what I meant by discursive political culture, not a kind of thick idea that we share some substantive cultural understandings together.

You and Professor Jeffrey Kopstein revisited the 2001 article “Bad Civil Society” and stated, in the most current text (2021), that one of the correct points was that a vibrant and active civil society is not always good for democracy. In what ways do you believe that the engagement of bad actors in the political sphere can misrepresent the idea of democracy itself?

Well, I do believe that a central principle of democracy is inclusion. And some groups that I would consider unhealthy groups in democracy have been excluded. And so, for example, when the Tea Party first came on the public scene in the United States, it really was full of people who had never been involved in politics. There were people who really felt like they never had a say and they never had their voices heard. And so at some level, I think it’s a general principle that all things being equal, every citizen should have an opportunity to be included in the public debate. But then you have the problem that civil society is home to a lot of antidemocratic groups, right? Do you tolerate the intolerant? Do you democratically include the people who want to destroy democracy? And there you must find some balance between the value of inclusion and the problem of including people who actually want to undermine and destroy the principle of the value of inclusion. But what we mostly wanted to show in that is that you can’t just celebrate diversity for its own sake.

You can celebrate inclusion, but you have to think about having some limits. Our original argument was really directed against people who thought that all you need to do is get people to participate in civil society, that the problem with modern societies is that they produced anomic individuals. So, if you get people to get involved in groups and associations, it would foster this kind of civic commitment. And our point was: you can foster some feeling of belonging within the group, but if the group is racist or white supremacist group, you aren’t doing anything good. So, I do advocate against political theories that just say the more people who join groups, the better, because that clearly is not the case.

On the other hand, regarding what you got wrong, you pointed out that you ignored two crucial features for the formation of a bad civil society: status and race. In what sense do you think that today’s antidemocratic groups differ from various antidemocratic groups throughout history, regarding status, race, and even gender?

This has a lot to do with the United States, but not just the United States. Who are the people who support the most problematic authoritarian right-wing movements in the United States and are willing

to storm the Capitol and question the outcomes of the election? Who are they and why have they been pushed in this direction or drawn in this direction? In our original view, we said it is people who aren't getting economic opportunities who are going to join anti-system groups. And that's too simple. In the United States, it's also people who feel that they have lost their status because of the rise of multiculturalism and inclusion. They are white nationalists and you can call them white supremacists. But you know, not really, I don't think that is exactly right. They are people who think that there was this world in which they, as a white group, had benefits and they had status and that they're losing this status and they don't actually blame black people. What they do is blame a system that they think advantages black people.

So, they blame a system that they think is always doing stuff. And you know, when you poll these groups, they have like incredibly false ideas about the opportunity. Oh yes, like black men in America have been rising and they have more opportunities than anybody and they're all getting rich and they're all getting to go to college for free. And of course, this is not true, right? So, they have these false narratives about replacement and the details are completely false. The aspiration to still have the status is completely unjustified. But what is true is that they are living in a different world. Some people have argued that in some sense this pushback is kind of a good sign. It's kind of the last gasp of certain groups of white people because they really see the writing on the wall that we really are trying to move into a multiethnic multicultural democracy. That we really are trying hard to create really equal opportunities which will make the world different for white people. And so it's the success of inclusion that is actually fostering this. The bottom line is that racial resentment is just a huge part of the story of the right-wing threats to democracy in the United States.

How do you evaluate the perspectives that give social media platforms the position of great villains of the current democratic crisis?

So I think, for example, Facebook, everyone loves to hate Facebook and it's a little easy just to make the social media platforms, the villains. And I think that you see in the mainstream legacy press a constant, constant kind of barrage of stories and revelations about how really horrible and evil these platforms are. But I think that they're not great, they're like any capitalist corporation. They want to make money and they will do what they have to do to make money and we need to regulate them.

They want to operate within democracies, and they don't set out to destroy democracies. They just set out to make money. And now it's true that the technology that they are using is outpacing our knowledge of how to control and limit it and particularly the speed with which it functions. But part of my perspective on technological innovation or this digitalization of communication in the public sphere is that we are at the beginning of this revolution, and we have a lot to learn. And I do think that the platform landscape is going to change radically.

In the United States, for example, no young people are on Facebook anymore. Then it's going to be Meta. Okay? People are going to be diving into the metaverse. I mean, who knows? But the landscape is going to change very fast. And so, I don't think we should focus there. I think we should focus on political actors who misuse it, and political actors who have tried to manipulate democracy. Manipulation has been around forever and ever. And maybe these tools of the digital public sphere are new types of tools that make manipulation harder to combat. But it's the bad actors and not the technology that we should be focusing on.

Considering that democratic theorists are increasingly concerned with the digital media ecosystem, in what ways do you think the methodologies used by these studies can deepen the understanding of the complexity of digital interactions?

There is a new generation of democratic theorists. There's still a small group, but they're growing that have become technologically and digitally literate. Right? I believe that we need a new generation of political theorists who really understand technology. But I also believe that we should be looking at the development of engineering degrees, for example. More and more young people are doing computer engineering, right? And we have been concerned with ethics in medical and business schools, for example, for a long time. In engineering, ethics is usually like, making sure you don't build a bridge where it's going to fall on people and die. But I think more and more engineering is digital engineering, right? So computer science and design are central components of political spaces. And so, we should be thinking about educating engineers to be aware of their democratic responsibility in creating the spaces where citizens are going to hang out and spend, like, a huge amount of their time.

Just the way we look at architecture and we look at the space buildings, and we think, can people congregate there? Is this a space? Is this city built for protests or for bringing people together? Or is it a space that pushes them apart? The spaces that we meet and frequent and hang out in the digital world

also have those ramifications. I think educating a new generation of political theorists who are tech savvy, but also introducing these political elements into our technical education for the next generation is really essential.

You are currently working on the book Contemporary Democratic Theory. What do you see as the main gaps to be filled by future research on democratic theory?

The end of the 20th century was a period of democratic growth and democratization. And so in empirical social science, the question really was “let’s measure democracy”. So, we had all these “what is democracy? And let’s measure it” studies. And then in democratic normative theory, it was: “what’s the best form of democracy?”.

The second half of the 20th century was dominated by competition between participatory democracy, direct democracy, deliberative democracy, and agonistic democracy, where all these kinds of models of democracy were battling to be the best form. And now we don’t live in a democratization growth time, it’s a time of erosion and backsliding. The fundamental debate has shifted from “what is the best form of democracy” to “why do you want democracy? What’s so good about democracy?” And the comparisons are not between types of democracy, but they’re between things like democracy and autocracy, meritocracy, epistocracy, technocracy, and the markets. And that’s been driven by all sorts of evidence that the democratic institutions are failing. They are either unable to have good outcomes, for example, they can’t deal with climate change, or they are unresponsive, and citizens feel like no one’s listening to them.

And, in this context, democratic theory is looking at the question “why is democracy worth saving?”. Are democracies actually solving our problems?” Some people believe that an autocracy might solve their problems. But are you going to give up political equality - that’s something that has intrinsic value – for better policy outcomes? It’s like trading in self-respect for a feeling of security. And I think this actually is a good time in democratic theory to really start thinking about what it is about democracy that’s worth fighting for. In that, I think there’s quite a lot of talk about democratic innovation, which is now like a field unto itself. And I think even though there’s so much talk about the death of democracy and democratic erosion, it turns out that grassroots involvement in democratic innovations, citizen assemblies, and mini-publics, has never been higher. There are more of these institutions across the globe, actually, but in all liberal democracies than ever before. All the polls

show that citizens really like it. They're being used more and more for debate questions of climate change, for example.

I guess the biggest challenge and the biggest gap it's something that I haven't been able to really deal with properly in the book. I guess it's called the boundary problem. It's the fact that we live in a world where everybody is moving across borders from climate crisis to political crisis and we do not know how to include them in a democratic system. So we're still stuck with the notion of nation-states that are quite democratic and they're not really confronting immigration problems, for example. They are concerned in every single western country about immigration but they're not really fighting for reasonable future-looking solutions to the problem. So that, I think, is the biggest gap. But I think, for democratic theory, the biggest gap right now is dealing with the migration and movement of people across borders and how democracy can address that.

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Note

This work was supported by the Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior (Capes).

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Submission date: 2023/01/20.
Approval date: 2023/07/10.