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**The expansion of the deliberative agenda, power and populism**

A expansão da agenda deliberative, poder e populismo

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| Interview with Nicole Curato *Entrevista com Nicole Curato* |
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*The expansion of the deliberative agenda, power and populism*

Filipe Mendes MOTTA

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icole Curato is an Associate Professor at the Centre for Deliberative Democracy and Global Governance, at the University of Canberra, Australia. In recent years she has made numerous theoretical and empirical contributions to deliberative research, publishing the books *Power in Deliberative Democracy* (2019, co-authored with Marit Hammond and John Min) and *Democracy in a Time of Misery* (CURATO, 2019), an extensive ethnography on how public life is rebuilt in the aftermath of a deadly typhoon in the Philippines. She has also made important contributions to the discussions on populism and democracy, especially from analyses of the work of Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte (CURATO, 2016, 2017a, 2017b). Curato is the lead editor of the *Journal of Deliberative Democracy* (formerly *Journal of Public Deliberation*) and acts as resident sociologist for CNN Philippines. She is the founder of the Deliberative Democracy Summer School, which seeks to promote intellectual exchange among PhD students and leading scholars of deliberative democracy around the world.

In this conversation, she discusses the latest developments in the study of deliberative democracy including the greater emphasis on diversity in the field, the relationship between power and deliberation, the intensification of experiments with deliberative minipublics and the importance of ethnographic approaches to democratic research, among others.

The interview was held in the first week of June 2020 at the Centre for Deliberative Democracy and Global Governance, where Curato works with other important researchers in this field, such as John Dryzek, founder and director of the research centre, Selen Ercan and Simon Niemeyer.

*What triggered your interest in deliberative theory?*

I first encountered deliberative democracy when I was a PhD student. My research proposal was about Habermas’s distinction between communicative and strategic action. My empirical case, maybe you will find this surprising, was about military coups, which are familiar events in both Southeast Asia and Latin America. I was curious about the ways in which military coups are justified. I look at that phenomenon through the lens of strategic and communicative action, on how the lines between the two are blurred. Military coups obviously have a coercive element, but a big part of them is also a persuasive one. Military officers explain their grievances to the public, their justification for wanting to take over government, and often these justifications use the language of democracy. So, I found that curious. It challenged me to think about the relationship between threats of violence and democracy, coercion and justification, and the allure of the idea that men in uniform can save the nation from corrupt civilian officials.

My master's dissertation was actually about the failed coup of Hugo Chávez in Venezuela, on how that created hope for many excluded people and opened discussions about alternative ways of organising Venezuelan politics and society. That was the inspiration. I had no idea what deliberative democracy was at that time, around 2007. I wasn't formally trained in political theory. All my degrees are in sociology so ‘the canons’ for me are Durkheim, Marx and Weber, not Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau. So, my entry to deliberative democracy was incidental. It was my sociological reading of Habermas, plus the nudging by my supervisor[[1]](#footnote-1) to look at military coups from the lens of deliberative democracy. And I think everything sort of happened since then.

*Then you came to visit the Centre for Deliberative Democracy, during your PhD.*

Yes, I was writing the theoretical parts of the dissertation and I stayed at the Centre. We were still at the ANU [Australian National University] then. I stayed with the Centre for three months, just thinking about how to theorise the role of military intervention in amplifying particular voices while using force to do so. I also tried to locate in the deliberative system. At that time, this is around 2009, the ‘systemic turn’ of deliberative democracy hasn’t happened yet. Jane Mansbridge and John Parkinson’s book (2012) of deliberative systems wasn't even released yet, but there were already some discussions about sequencing deliberation. Bob Goodin (2005) has an article on this. I wrote a similar piece (2012), making an argument that not all demands of deliberation can be achieved at any one time. We have to understand the sequence of argumentation and see which virtues are necessary for each moment. That was my main takeaway from my visit at the Centre, that sharpening of the theoretical aspect of an empirical project.

*My next question is connected to the Systemic debate in the deliberative filed. In the last years researchers such as Warren (2017) and Dryzek (2017) suggested out some accommodation of deliberative research after the “systemic turn". Warren called for an opening to other ways of thinking politics and a problem oriented-approach, Dryzek pointed to the resumption of concepts such as the public sphere or the development of a deliberative polity. Do you agree with the criticism that there was accommodation after the “consolidation” of the systemic approach? And do the new works on deliberation that have come out in the last two years - like yours (with Min and Hammond) about power, Parkinson's and Bächtiger's (2019) about new ways of mapping deliberation... - give answers to these positions, and point new directions to the current?*

I think from my engagement with the theoretical debates you mentioned, takes them as inspirations or provocations, not necessarily as a framework that needs to be defended or promoted. John Dryzek wouldn't want his deliberative systems approach to be considered a framework, he thinks it's an approach, it is a way of looking at things. I like this orientation to theory. Theories, for me, challenge me to analyse empirical developments a certain way, but there is no commitment to just see the world in that way. So, for example—and I think you can relate to this in your own research—we have problems we want to understand, whether these mining disasters in your context [in Minas Gerais, Brazil] or, in my context [Philippines], typhoons or armed conflict. These are complex issues. There's no one way of analysing them, but we need a lens that will help us make sense of these developments. So, I think when you talk about the accommodation in deliberative democracy—“have we opened he theory so much that deliberative democracy has lost its meaning?”—given the work that I do, I am not to fussed by it. Okay, we can debate the boundaries of what counts deliberation, what counts as a deliberative system. Conceptual precision is important. But what for? I think for my work, conceptual precision is important because it gives a vocabulary for us to understand what's going on. For example, in my work on post disaster governance, the language of deliberation becomes useful when I try to understand why the voices of marginalized communities are excluded. And I can identify spaces where deliberation happens through a systemic framework: there is the empowered space, the public space and informal spaces. Tetsuki Tamura (2014) talks about the intimate sphere as well, the sphere of the family and friendship where deliberation takes place. As an ethnographer, extending the deliberative system to the category of the everyday is important, so Tetsuki’s work gives a vocabulary for me to make sense of my observations. That matters. But I also look at social movements. I also look at disruptions to communicative processes. If I go to the field thinking about “oh, but that's not deliberative anymore” or “you’re concept stretching”, it limits my empirical investigation. So, I think, as an empirically-driven social scientist, these debates are important, but they should not constrain creativity in field research.

*In this sense, we have seen a increase in the production and publication of empirical works on deliberative systems that help to understand these questions.*

Yes, I think you're right to point out that there are a lot of studies now that use a systemic approach. There is one book recently released studying the LGBT discourses in the U.S. using a systemic approach (Barvosa, 2018). One of the former visiting PhD students at the Centre, currently our research associate, Lucy Parry analysed the animal rights discourse from a systemic perspective (Parry, 2016). There's a lot of ongoing work there. I think one good advice that I could give is that if you're looking for an approach that will tell you exactly how to study the world, the systemic approach is not that approach. It is strategically vague. And I think the ambiguity in the approach allows scholars to be creative. It doesn't tell you where to look for deliberation. It doesn't tell you where to look for decision-making because it can happen in many different ways. This is what is exciting with the literature, because it allows us to be surprised about where discourses come from, rather than being prescriptive in terms of saying “you have to study the media, you have to study the parliament, you have to study policymaking to understand deliberation”. I don't think the systemic approach requires scholars to do that. It can be applied in many different contexts.

*Beyond the systemic discussion, questions involving the participants' bodies (eg. Asenbaum, 2018), the role of rhetoric (eg. Roberts-Miller, 2017) and the role of emotions (eg. Neblo, 2020; Curato, 2019; Maia and Hauber, 2019) have been raised in recent research in deliberative democracy. Do you believe we will face a new turn after the systemic one? Or are we moving towards a path of several complementary agendas?*

I think that [diversity] is one of the strengths and possibly weaknesses of deliberative theory, which is its openness to engage with different fields of research. For example, you mentioned research on the body in deliberation. That is an exciting way of engaging with the literature on queer studies which talk about the embodied character of politics, on how our bodies can be disruptive. It is important that deliberative democracy engages that research because we all know that communication is also nonverbal communication. It’s just that our methodologies didn't allow us to study nonverbal communications before, because we were focused on the linguistic aspect of communication. That is a strength of the theory: to recognize its blind spots in the past and be more engaging with different fields of research—whether we are talking about queer theory or media studies when we talk about the performativity of deliberation. These are important developments.

The weakness is what we discussed earlier, whether there are even boundaries to studying deliberative democracy. Is there a topic that is not covered by deliberative democracy anymore? But I don't think that's a fair critique. If we think about social movements or protest studies, the boundaries of a protest are also always questioned. The definition of a social movement is always questioned, so I don't think deliberative democracy is unique in that sense. And if you think about these fields, these are the most engaging, exciting and dynamic fields in political studies right now.

*One of your research interests is populism and new authoritarians. Was the growth of deliberative theory, of empirical research into deliberation fruit of a spirit of time, of an apparent stability of liberal States from the 1990s to the 2000s which is threatened? And from your experiences observing the Duterte’s case in the Philippines and other populists contexts, to what extent does deliberation contribute to the understanding of the current context?*

Yes, [it is common to hear] that framing that deliberative democracy flourished because there was stability in liberal democracies but the issue was citizen disengagement. Governance was outsourced to technocrats, and people feel disconnected with experts and politicians. So, deliberative democrats made a case for reinvigorating democracy. And suddenly the rise of populist leaders disrupted the seemingly fragile stability of liberal democracy. The issue for deliberative democrats was no longer deepening democracy but defending democracy from populism.

As someone who studies the global South, I would say that that is not a good way of framing deliberative scholarship. We know from cases of countries like India and China or even the Philippines, that despite these countries’ patchy track record of democratisation, deliberative politics also exists, even if these are not “advanced liberal democracies”. We should push back against the narrative that deliberative democracy as a field of scholarship flourished in Western liberal democracies. We have to celebrate the diversity of deliberative politics taking place in different contexts, which maybe have been happening for a long time, but haven't been using the label deliberative democracy. Our field could benefit from critical historiography.

Reflecting back on your question in terms of deliberative democracy and populism: my thinking about this evolved from 2016, when I was in the Philippines doing fieldwork during the elections, when our president Rodrigo Duterte was elected. And he, of course, is a controversial man, his campaign promise was literally to kill all drug addicts, very illiberal, very misogynistic—I am sure Brazil can relate. And that was also the time when Brexit happened, and Trump was elected. The argument in the sociological circles at that time was “we have to understand the deep stories of populist voters”. That was Arlie Hochschild's (2016) argument when she talked about the Trump voters, linking it back to her study on Tea Party supporters. And I get that. A big part of deliberative politics is about attentive listening, listening to the arguments that are not obvious, but arguments that are more emotional, more visceral. I think there is validity to the argument of populist supporters, even if the arguments they put forward are illiberal, because that is precisely what the election of populist leaders tell us. There are voices that we just did not hear for a long time.

But now it is 2020. I do not think this argument works on its own. It is not enough to say “yeah, we have to understand Trump supporters”, “yeah, we have to understand Duterte supporters”. These guys have been in power for so long now. For Duterte it's his midterm and Trump is subject to re-election. So, we have to move the discussion from “let's understand what they're trying to say” – we now understand what they're trying to say – to “let's hold them accountable to the arguments they put forward”. Now is time to contest these arguments in such a way that there can be a defence of the values that we believe in. This is where we should be when it comes to the deliberative literature or deliberative scholarship: trying to understand the ways in which we can contest political ideas and clarify the preferences. Now that the ideas that I detest have traction and are in the political centre stage, they are no longer marginalized ideas. These ideas now have power. So how do we hold those powerful ideas into account and contest them in ways that may not necessarily be deliberative? I think that's where the debate is. We can think of all sorts of examples: Do you fight iliberalism with strategies that have marks of iliberalism as well? Do we fight troll armies perpetuating hate and fake news by forming our own troll armies perpetuating liberal values? That's an ongoing debate and very much an open question.

*Talking abou power and deliberative democracy, it is still very common for Brazilian deliberacionists to hear criticisms that deliberation is consensual and does not deal with power relations. Going back to the discussions in your book with Min and Hammond, as the very title of your book makes explicit, it proposes an exercise of articulating power and deliberation in a more explicitly way, in dialogue with Rainer Forst's concept of noumenal power. To what extent is there a misunderstanding in the reading of this relationship between power and deliberation by researchers of other fields, and to what extent, is this the fruit of the very formulations made by deliberacionists?*

There is a footnote in my book, maybe it's an acknowledgement, of one of my colleagues from Argentina, Maria Esperanza Casulo, who did her PhD in on deliberative democracy and now is in the populism studies. She told me that she hasn’t been comfortable with deliberative democracy, because she wants to know how to take power. And I thought “yes, that's fair”. Especially if you want to see politics from the perspective of taking power, of reshaping societies by being in a political party in power and can implement reforms. That's fair, I don't deny the importance of realpolitik when it comes to transforming democracies. My understanding of democracy is that it's a way of redistributing power. There will be differences with the way power is exercised in the same way that parliaments have a different power compared to the judiciaries. They're equal, but not the same. So, if we try to use that same logic of democracy as a way of redistributing power, deliberative democracy has a lot to say about that. We are redistributing communicative power. And the reason why there are some oppressive policies out there, and why there are some policies that are against the poor and the vulnerable is because voice or the power of voice is concentrated to the hands of corporate media, concentrated to the hands of a strongman-run-state—that in itself is a problem—and I don't think it's a fluffy problem. I don't think it's a problem of “just communication”, because it's through communication that allows us to develop a worldview that informs the way we shape the world. This is what deliberative democracy can offer. Deliberative democracy has something to offer in terms of “who doesn't have a voice in this situation and how can we redistribute that voice to those people who needs to be a part of these discussions”. I don’t think deliberative democracy has no concept of power or is averse to the concept of power. At the heart of the theory is idea of redistributing the communicative power that resides in democratic actors.

*Your answer is connected to my next question. The view of what was seen as an excessive focus of deliberative democracy on mini-publics and other democratic innovations (eg. Chambers 2009), in some ways, contributed to the strengthening of the discussions on deliberative systems in the last decade. But now, the discussion and practice on democratic innovations are becoming very strong again, such as the cases of the Belgian’s mini-publics experiences and the Irish Citizens' Assemblies. Do the reflections about these innovations changed after those critics? Can these democratic innovations enhance a critical dimension?*

This has also been bothering me a lot because, in Europe, they call it is now the season of minipublics, or the season of citizens assemblies in particular. Graham Smith calls it the “flavour of the month,” or maybe the year. Maybe, when people think of deliberative democracy, they think of minipublics, which obviously is not necessarily the case. But to be fair, I've been spending a lot of time with the practitioner community as well, and I don't think that's a fair critique. Even if there is a lot of promotion or advancement of convening minipublics, the way I observe a lot of practitioners and policymakers who convene these minipublics, they have a clear desire to see this as one of many reforms that democracy should undertake. I don't think it's a case of convening minipublics for the sake of convening them. There is an understanding that minipublics should shape or have an influence with the way society thinks about these issues. The debate about “should mini publics have binding decision making powers?” or “should it be an advisory role” or “should it be an actual proxy for how people think” are not just a debate in academic circles. These are debates among practitioners themselves.

What needs to be better understood better, however, is the relationship of minipublics with the radical politics. This is one insight I got from a workshop that I had about comparative studies on populism which really inspired me. In a panel discussion about Brazilian politics, I asked what happened to participatory budgeting projects under the Bolsonaro regime. Don't these participatory projects have a legacy in the democratizing local governance? The answer of the panellist was “you know what really changed the political power of Brazilians? It's not participatory budgeting. It’s minimum wage” It's people being able to have enough money to decide how they pursue things they value, right? That made me think. Maybe that is what's missing in the discussion right now: redistribution of voice is important, but we should have a stronger, more radical statement about redistribution of material resources as well. They go hand in hand. I feel like the political economy argument of deliberative democracy is a niche among development practitioners. I am talking about people like Vijayendra Rao and Paromita Sanyal (2019), who studied the Graham Sabhas in India, where deliberative forums are used as development tools. There are development tools on a local scale, but how does that improve things greatly on the political scale? This is the question that is still unanswered in the deliberative literature. That is my take on minipublics: it is good in terms of redistributing voice, but it needs a more radical counterpart when it comes to redistribution of resources. How to do that? I don't know. Do we need a new Workers Party? Do we need more radical socialist alternatives? I don't know, but that conversation has to happen.

*Going to your book on catastrophes and democracy, one of its contributions is the discussion about how citizens react to catastrophes and place themselves politically in relation to them - different publics are developed in different contexts. In this scenario of coronavirus, can you see these different patterns been developed around the world?*

That is a good question. The book's main question is: before we have public deliberation, we first have to understand who the public is. It's not a given that when there's an issue, there is a public that reacts. No, creating a public requires democratic labour, it is about imagining the people who suffer with you to create a political claim. What the book is saying is that a contestatory public does not just come out of nowhere: it requires grassroots organizers to recruit people to join a protest movement to contest state policy. Having a collaborative public requires community leaders who are able to convince the poorest communities to take part in deliberation and collaborate with the state. That is not easy! These are agentic, everyday decisions that people make to create a public. The coronavirus context is a bit more difficult, because it changes the landscape of how we relate to each other. Physically. Being together is very much part of democratic practice. That's why I think it's inevitable that protests in the US or elsewhere in the world are happening, even if there's a threat of a virus, because the number of people out there together, the feeling you get from that crowd, is very important -- this emotion to keep these campaigns going.

But I worry, of course, that Coronavirus might have to change the way we conceptualize the public. In the Philippines, for example, when I am observing coronavirus responses, there are just two publics that I see. One is the humanitarian public, which is a kind of public that says “okay, there is very weak state capacity in terms of mass testing, there is weak state capacity and taking care of people's health. So let's just help each other”. And the language there is philanthropy, is mutual aid, just helping each other out. But is also very depoliticized in terms of the narratives -- “we're all in this together”. That's very depoliticized and very soothing -- which is important if you are under stress and under crisis. Soothing narratives are important. But that doesn't answer the question of “how did we get here? Why has the Philippines not flattened the curve after the world's longest and strictest lockdown?” That is a political question. Another public that emerged is one that contested authorities. The kind of public that demands state accountability, that interrogates the president and his ministers -- basically: “why are they so incompetent?” But I think the added challenge there -- and I think the USA and potentially Brazil can also relate to this -- is that this is all happening not just in the context of a pandemic, but in the context of an increasingly illiberal state. Actions are already limited because of social distancing. Action is further limited because if you criticize Duterte on social media, you can actually get arrested. And these are serious threats. The space for politics is very much shrinking in terms of creating that contestatory public in this context. But one lesson that I learned from a historian of Philippine politics is that every time power is concentrated in the centre, resistance grows in the margins. That's what I am waiting for. What kind of resistance will grow in the margins, given the limitation of space of our democratic practice?

*To understand these things you need to pay attention in the context. In you book you emphasize the importance of observe the micropolitics, the everyday interactions. And you only achieve this doing ethnographic work, being close to the people and spend a long time doing field work. Sometimes, the mainstream political science, or the mainstream social science, do not understand how this interpretive approaches can contribute. Do you still observe what it would be a prejudice against this methodological approaches? To what extent does this prejudice threatens the development of democratic research?*

When I make a case for an ethnographic approach to political research, there's no intention to disregard other research traditions. We obviously need big data analysis. Obviously we need political philosophy and formal models of analysis. I understand these are important. But I think what's important about ethnography and contributing to theory is that it challenges us to take a second look at our taken for granted assumptions. For example, and maybe it is obvious to a lot of people, but before going on field, it wasn't obvious to me on how the nuts and bolts of democratic practice takes so much effort on the part of ordinary citizens. For example—and I'm sure you get asked this question a lot as well—“Why are people not yet ousting Duterte?” “Why are people not out in the streets, demanding the resignation of a man who literally called for the genocide of drug addicts?”. But I can ask a similar question from people in the US right? “Why is Trump not yet impeached? Why, why is Boris Johnson still the prime minister of the UK?” And the answer to that question has to do, or it can be answered, by understanding the logics of everyday life. If you ask about the everyday life of ordinary Filipinos or Americans or Brazilians you will realize that, because part of the logic of everyday life is denialism, of looking the other way of just being able to engage in micro politics that can yield to results and make you feel like you are politically effective. Broader political issues of the presidency is a very distant political issue for many people. And this is what we have to realize about political studies. That it doesn't just happen on the level of elected leaders, which are often the subject of our analysis. A lot of the politics happens on the community level, on the level of people's everyday lives, and how they have micro political achievements as well, that are worth celebrating. In the book I give a lot of these examples. About [a person] being able to get a new boat from a local mayor, which for us maybe is so shallow, a petty achievement. But to get that boat, this fisherman literally had to use his social capital, use his political capital, blackmail village leaders to say “if you don't give me the boat, I'll start a rumour about you”. Some would say “that's just the weapons of the weak”. But to me that is political agency. I recognize that this can be critiqued for saying “your bar for politics is so low. Is that good enough?” Well, it wouldn't transform society, but it would help for us to be humble and realize that to achieve what these people achieved, in a context where they literally have no material possessions, it's a big achievement. We have to learn from that. And we have to celebrate that. I learned a lot theoretically about the importance of attentive listening in terms of inclusive policy making, by having a direct experience of what it is to be in a deliberative forum about post-disaster reconstruction without any vulnerable community in that discussion. I know how that feels like. And to be able to experience that will allow us to understand the sense of injustice, the sense of resignation that people have against politics. I think that is important. It is the multisensory experience of ethnography, that allows us to better understand the situations.

*Do you think it's connected to the way people learn social sciences? Is there a lack of training in interpretive approaches in the social science courses? Is something that people do not have enough contact and maybe need to understand better?*

I think so. For example, with the, with the coronavirus restrictions, a lot of the policies on coronavirus are developed within an exclusive circle of technocrats who assume they know what's good for society. Again, reflecting on the Philippine experience, when people are told to stay at home and to wash their hands and to practice social distancing—from a policy perspective, this is how you stop a pandemic. But without an ethnographer in the room, or a community organizer in the room, these policies take a life of their own without being interrogated. And now we see how these policies actually failed when we look at slum communities in India and the Philippines. How can people practice social distancing in slum communities? Living in the slum communities literally means being overcrowded in a house that is the sizable box. How does that policy make sense there? What do you mean wash your hands all the time when there's no running water? This is the problem when policies are created in a way that’s detached to the lived experience of vulnerable communities. And I think that's what ethnography brings to the table—or at least having a clear sense of what it is to live the life of vulnerable communities. It it's a practical way of making policies, especially for a pandemic that you cannot isolate to certain communities for it affects the entire world. So I think that has been one advantages of being able to have grounded ethnographic insights of people's lived experience when it speaks to policymaking. And that has to be central to the way we construct social science knowledge.

*The final question is about how you see the contribution of the Brazilian research to deliberative and participatory democracy. Research on participatory budgeting, especially in Porto Alegre, has long been used as references to the expansion of democratic practice. Is there some specific contribution that you can observe beyond this?*

I am not an expert of Brazilians studies. The way I see the scholarship on not just deliberative democracy, but democracy studies in general, is that scholars are not shying away from making the analysis more complicated. I also know this, for example, that there's a lot of trying to link political economy with deliberative democracy. I think in the Anglosphere it is only Jodi Dean who does that brilliantly on a theoretical level. So I think there's a lot to learn. This extends not just to Brazil, but other centres of knowledge in the Global South and how there's just so much to offer, especially the discussion on deliberation and populism. Latin America has a rich knowledge on populism since the seventies, right? And just to be able to inform what the post populist world looks like. I think Ricardo Mendonça said, “what does the post populist world look like? Does it look like a neoliberal world? Is that any better?” The encouragement from what I know from Brazilian scholarship has always to push the boundaries and make it complicated. And don't shy away from bringing in other disciplines to make sense of a social reality. It is a good inspiration. It is a recognition that neat categories are good to make lucid summations, but they're never enough to make a comprehensive understanding of what's going on in societies.

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Notes

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1. Nicole Curato was awarded a PhD in Political Sociology at the University of Birmingham in 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)