

# Book Review

Political Theory

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*La délibération politique*, by Bernard Manin. Edited and introduced by Charles Girard. Paris: Hermann, 2025, 218 pp.

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The publication of four volumes of texts by Bernard Manin was overshadowed by his recent death in November 2024. Manin had established his international reputation with a trailblazing 1985 essay, republished in this journal in 1987, in a translation by Elly Stein and Jane Mansbridge, as “On Deliberation and Democratic Legitimacy.”<sup>1</sup> It became one of the founding texts of deliberative democratic theory, rejecting Rousseau’s homogenizing idea of a pre-deliberative general will and defending a processual understanding of democratic legitimacy. Sandwiched between volumes on *Montesquieu* and on the French Revolution’s turn “from liberalism to terror,” *La délibération politique* collects Manin’s major writings on deliberative politics, from the French original of his 1987 *Political Theory* article to his more institution-focused later works, the most recent one dating from 2021. Together with his magnum opus, *The Principles of Representative Government*, these three volumes, as well as a forthcoming fourth on the fate of liberalism, are a testament to his wide-ranging thought.<sup>2</sup>

*La délibération politique* assembles seven articles, introductions, and interviews written for different purposes and occasions over a span of almost forty years. Following the 1987 essay, the collection includes a chapter on online deliberation, two chapters on the need for “adversarial” debate, two

1. Bernard Manin, “On Deliberation and Democratic Legitimacy,” *Political Theory*, 15, no. 3 (1987.): 338–68.
2. Bernard Manin, *Montesquieu*. With a preface by Melissa Schwartzberg (Paris: Hermann, 2024). Bernard Manin, “*Un voile sur la liberté*”. *La Révolution française du libéralisme à la Terreur*. Prefaced by Biancamaria Fontana (Paris: Hermann, 2025). Bernard Manin, *The Principles of Representative Government*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). Bernard Manin, *La règle et la balance*. (Paris: Hermann, forthcoming).

interviews on the development of the deliberative paradigm, and a final round-up of its contemporary state of the art. Together they present what the volume's editor, Charles Girard, calls a "global theory of political deliberation." Not all of Manin's conceptual, normative, and empirical theses are fully developed here, and some essential historiographical background is added in both *Principles of Representative Government* and "*Un voile sur la liberté*." But given Manin's extreme care in formulations and his reluctance to make sweeping claims, it is fortunate that the two interviews give some less guarded retrospective glosses on his work. Although individual pieces have appeared in English in one form or another, it is the French collection that finally offers a comprehensive view of Manin's work.

Manin anticipated the current "empirical turn" in deliberative theory, addressing the challenges originating from social psychology and media studies, from observations of confirmation bias, group polarization, and information cascades. This explains why his work moved from normative theorizing about deliberative legitimacy to discussing its institutional facilitations and constraints. This is, of course, still a normative enterprise and not "positive political theory," as he describes his *Principles of Representative Government* in retrospect (p. 61).

Manin holds fast to two conceptual conditions for deliberation throughout. One is the claim that deliberation by definition aims at decision-making. This may not sound especially controversial, but the difficulty is that our pre-theoretical understanding of deliberation, just as much as Rousseau's non-deliberative general will, aims at unanimity and universality. How can "the law be the *result of general deliberation*" (p. 38) if unanimity is not to be expected? What does this entail for the relation between deliberation and decision-making?

The second conceptual condition is a spin on the traditional view that deliberation is an argumentative practice in the narrow sense. Manin rejects current attempts to broaden its use to include negotiation, the disclosure of emotion, or other non-argumentative speech acts, and insists on its confrontative, "agonistic" dimension (p. 156). But in contrast to other leading accounts of deliberation, he refuses to invest the process of argumentation with strong epistemic hopes. His conception is incompatible with Habermasian cognitivism, even in a weak, falsificationist reading (pp. 41–42), but also with other current epistemic accounts, such as the "Diversity Trumps Ability" approach and its "oracle assumption," which presupposes that an optimal solution, once put forward, will be evident to all deliberators.

The characteristic feature of Manin's institutional vision is his adversarial view of deliberation. He sharply distinguishes deliberation from both discussion and conversation, which, he claims, neither necessarily involve contradiction and reciprocal critique nor aim at decision-making (p. 160). It does seem correct (although a bit far-fetched) to say that conversational argument

could, in principle, restrict itself to outlining the advantages of opposing proposals and politely refrain from attacking one's interlocutors' views. But the adversarial mechanism further demands, as he argues in chapters 4 and 6, that if oppositional positions did not exist, they would have to be invented for the sake of rational decision-making. The Catholic Church's former institution of a "devil's advocate," as well as the series in which Manin's writings appear, *L'avocat du diable*, illustrate the intellectual need for nonconformist positions. The function of a devil's advocate is to scrutinize the defects in one's preferred position, not to offer a constructive alternative. The device is certainly not equivalent to "hearing the other side," something Manin also recommends, but rather to hearing the other side's attacks on one's own side.

Manin's favored account of deliberation owes much to the "oratorical" practice of public debate in ancient Athens, which assigned separate roles to orators and audiences. But his enthusiasm for an audience's wholesale approval or raucous rejection is surprising for a deliberative theorist (p. 152, 158–59). Public debate between orators, he argues, is not aimed at changing minds but enabling the audience to realize the downsides of ostensibly clear-cut, obvious convictions. He neither claims that orators deliberate amongst each other (p. 164, 206, although he allows that this sometimes occurs in parliamentary debates, p. 80), nor that the audience deliberate collectively or participate at all, much less on equal terms. This distinguishes his approach from deliberative theories that draw on the egalitarian features of New England town meetings, as well as from more recent engagements with his own account (p. 71).<sup>3</sup>

Manin's interpretation of the Greek writers' use of the notion of deliberation has since been philologically corroborated by Daniela Cammack, who stresses that exposure to adversarial views and arguments was to facilitate informed individual, internal deliberation in members of the audience in the run-up to their vote.<sup>4</sup> Adversarial debate can empower the listeners to order their preferences, counteract interest-based reasoning and confirmation biases, and serve to partially discount the perennial presence of social power in deliberation. However, as a conceptual matter, neither inter-oratorical deliberation nor deliberation between orators and the audience, nor public deliberation among the audience, is strictly necessary for collective decision-making to count as deliberative overall. Although Manin prefers multisite deliberations pooling their labor (pp. 208–9), he allows a "deliberative systems" reading of his reconstruction of the oratorical model, where deliberation

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3. For an egalitarian reading, see Charles Girard, *Délibérer entre égaux. Enquête sur l'Idéal démocratique* (Paris: Vrin, 2019).

4. Daniela Cammack, "Deliberation in Ancient Greek Assemblies," *Classical Philology*, 115, no. 3 (2020): 486–522.

can in principle be predicated on a complex institutional practice despite the absence of deliberative interaction in any specific encounter.<sup>5</sup> Speakers bring forward arguments, though not in a deliberative mode, while others reflect on their arguments and draw their conclusions.

Manin's article on internet deliberation, coauthored with Azi Lev-On, likewise adopts an "invisible hand" imagery (p. 85): If things go well, adversarial exchanges will push citizens to balance the pros and cons of a given proposal and vote accordingly. This happens whether they are confronted with oppositional views intentionally or accidentally. Note that the heavy lifting of deliberation is again assigned to individuals, not entrusted to an intersubjective dynamic of public persuasion. Despite Manin's fascination with grassroots democracy, he remains suspicious of accounts of society-wide macro-deliberation, not only because they follow the "conversation" model. He does not engage the idea that creative contributions could result precisely from non-decision-oriented, horizontal exchanges in the public sphere. In a nutshell, Manin's procedural account of legitimacy does not locate the normativity of deliberation in processes of mutual conviction or the persuasive power of the argumentative process, but in its provision of the materials individuals need to convince themselves. Deliberation, Manin had suggested in the 1987 article, produces what voters would have liked to have said and done had they known the countervailing evidence earlier (p. 356). The link between deliberation and decision, and thereby democratic legitimacy, is forged in individual voting behavior. The paradigm shift attempted in the 1987 paper and pursued through the adversarial model was to move on from an *ex ante* to an *ex post* formation of individual wills in order to lend legitimacy to political decisions, rather than to produce an intersubjective or collective will out of divergent volitions. Deliberation does not demand a common or optimal result, but it permits us to move on from abortive searches for a common position to majority voting or other decision procedures after having publicly exposed all candidate proposals to the acid bath of critique.

What does this view of the connection between deliberation and decision-making entail for the adoption of decision rules? In the 1987 essay, it is taken to yield a vindication of majority rule: "The approval of the greater number reflects the greater strength of one set of arguments to others." "Strength" is considered an empirical notion here, not connected to claims to universality or epistemic superiority (pp. 49–50). So how can it confer legitimacy in the absence of qualifications of rightness? Manin reiterates the connection between argumentative strength and the majority's claim to impose its will in

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5. As pointed out by David Owen and Graham Smith, "Deliberation, Democracy, and the Systemic Turn," *The Journal of Political Philosophy*, 23, no. 2 (2015): 213–34.

his *Principles of Representative Government* and sees it foreshadowed in authors like Sieyès: It is the (post-deliberative) “consent of the majority that makes the law.”<sup>6</sup> But in this mid-period work, the link between deliberation and majority rule has changed its status: It is now excavated as a historical principle, uncovered by “positive political theory” in the existing practices of representative government, not a systematic feature of deliberation as such. Manin’s last word on the alleged connection, articulated in the volume under review here, is that the choice of majority rule in ending discussions depends fully on the function “assigned to deliberative processes from the start,” not an internal logic of deliberation (p. 203).

It may have been the futility of trying to provide a full deliberativist account of majority rule that led Manin to concentrate on other virtues of deliberation, beyond its contribution to the legitimacy of collective decisions, in his later work. His anti-foundationalist epistemology and his hesitancy to rank norms or values lead him to stress that under conditions of deep diversity, deliberative processes allow for treating the minority with respect. The majority is forced “to hear the other camp explain its reasons,” and “in the norm of justification through reasons acceptable to others, there lies a consideration of others and therefore a certain respect” (p. 190, 77).<sup>7</sup> But there is also a historical background to the defense of persistent differences that emerges from the companion volume, “*Un voile sur la liberté*,” and its learned chapters on Rousseau, Sieyès, and the French Revolution’s slide “from liberalism into terror.” It is important to see that Manin is not taking another swing at Rousseau when discussing respect for a minority’s stubborn dissent, although Rousseau, under certain conditions, asked the losers in a majority vote to admit their mistake and change their minds. For Manin, somebody would *want* to change their mind if the lack of deliberation had caused them to neglect evidence against their preferred position. Deliberation thus counters a trend Manin identified in the French Revolution and for which Sieyès’s 1789 essay on the *Third Estate* had allegedly “opened Pandora’s box”: a commitment to a “friend-enemy” conception of politics.<sup>8</sup> The Jacobin lustration of aristocrats and priests from assemblies and offices could build on Sieyès’s identification of the Third Estate with the entire Nation, legitimating future processes of exclusion with “mobile frontiers.”<sup>9</sup> Although we owe to the Constituent and National Assemblies an early vision

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6. Manin, *The Principles of Representative Government*, 189.

7. In this, Manin joins forces with Habermasian accounts of deliberation. See Rainer Forst, *The Right to Justification. Elements of a Constructivist Theory of Justice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

8. Manin, “*Un voile sur la liberté*,” 197, 186.

9. Manin, “*Un voile*,” 186.

(and part of the vocabulary) of deliberative politics, Manin takes the connection between the Revolution's slide into terror and its exclusionary conception of a general will to result from the Jacobin coding of dissent as a friend-enemy distinction. This historical motivation for deliberative theory has not been much discussed, and future discussions of "*Un voile*" may clarify the anti-Schmittian motives in Manin's work on deliberative politics. Its concern for minorities demonstrates that his account of deliberation is not exclusively devoted to establishing an individualist ontology of democratic will-formation. The adversarial style of deliberation has a second, equally important function: to facilitate understanding and respect in conditions of irreconcilable dissent.