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Barriers to Change

Here in Minneapolis, National Guard helicopters droned overhead for days after George Floyd was murdered. It was an ominous token of the state's capacity for violence, but also a symbol, perhaps, of something genuinely new in the air. After the droning stopped, a majority of the City Council gathered in a neighborhood park and pledged to "dismantle" the Police Department. Only two weeks earlier, the idea would have been dismissed as left-wing blather. Suddenly it was being discussed in high establishment forums like the *New York Times*.¹ Public opinion polls showed a huge spike in White support for the Black Lives Matter movement,² and perhaps for the first time in American history, there were mass-scale, nationwide street protests of racial injustice with a majority White presence.³

Just a few months later these trends had already weakened, and the prospects of significant police reform remain highly uncertain. But the fact that it is being seriously considered reflects a notable shift in American attitudes about racial justice. It also raises some questions about the mechanisms of social progress. George Floyd's murder is only one in a long and well-publicized line of similar incidents, and yet none of them provoked the same kind of mass response. Observing the post-Floyd wave of White support, many African-Americans expressed bemusement: anti-Black police violence was nothing new—so what was different this time? Was this

¹ Searcey 2020.

² Cohn and Quealy 2020.

³ Harmon and Tavernise 2020.

just a tipping point in an inherently chaotic social process? A “straw that broke the camel’s back”? And if this really was some sort of turning point, then why would progress take so long when all of the arguments and evidence for change had been essentially the same for decades (at least)?

On its face, democracy holds out the promise of protest, voice, foment—in short, change. It is designed to be responsive to injustice and yet, in practice, it so often fails in that regard. The long history of racial injustice in the United States illustrates a fundamental reason why this is so: all of the levers that democracy makes available in agitating for change—elections, protest, and deliberation most prominently—tend to be limited by the very structural power dynamics which they might otherwise be used to upend. In other words, if structural racism infects democratic institutions, it’s not surprising that democratic institutions would struggle to upend structural racism. This observation makes the lethargic pace of racial justice in democracies less surprising.

In general, democratic theorists have said very little about “social progress” as such. Still, prevailing models of democracy have a lot to say about why democracy would produce morally desirable decisions, and that provides a basis for thinking about how democracy would also produce social progress. In this chapter I consider two broad paradigms in democratic theory, and assess their prospects as models of social progress. These paradigms do not capture every possible model of progress, but they are broad enough to encompass the major options available in contemporary democratic thought. According to *power-sharing* models, democracy promotes progress by dispersing power among rival groups, thereby encouraging attention to diverse interests in decision-making. According to *deliberative* models, democracy promotes progress through mutual education, as citizens refine their attitudes through reciprocal dialogue. Under the label of “deliberative democracy,” the latter approach has dominated democratic theory for the past few decades.

Because it has been so influential (and also because it has many apparent virtues), it receives the bulk of my attention below.

Considering these models in relation to systemic moral failures (like racial injustice), I argue that the proposed mechanism of social change in each case is undermined by the same structural factors that make change morally necessary in the first place. In that respect, these models fall short as regulative ideals of social progress in the sense defined in Chapter 1. Each captures something important about democracy's capacity to enable progress, but both are incomplete. If we want to properly understand democracy's value as a catalyst for change, we need to look elsewhere. Thus, my work in this chapter is exclusively critical, focusing on the problems with rival views. Seeing where these views fall short will clarify the central challenges that a theory of democratic progress must meet. That sets the stage for presenting my own model and establishing its advantages in subsequent chapters.

2.1. Power-Sharing Models

No definition of democracy is going to be entirely uncontested, but here's a working proposal: (Political) *democracy* is a system of government in which the authority to exercise power lies with all those subject to it ("the people") and should serve "the people" considered as equals. At its institutional core democracy is about the distribution of power, and in particular the power to influence public decision-making. It is differentiated from other ideals of governance by its egalitarianism. Thus, the signal feature of democratic governance is that, among those subject to the power of a governing body, the power to influence its behavior is distributed so as to pass some meaningful threshold of equality. I speak of a "threshold" because no scalable system of decision-making can achieve full equality and, in any case, absolute equality is often

undesirable for various reasons (for example, to protect the due role of expertise on technical matters).

Where exactly that threshold lies is a topic of dispute. But, at a minimum, democratic governments grant certain basic powers of influence—voting rights, rights to stand for office, rights to be heard in official decision-making forums, and rights to contest policy through the legal system—more or less universally within a polity.⁴ There is probably no clean divide between democracy and liberalism, because the rights guaranteed by liberalism—of speech, thought, association, lifestyle, and property—are pre-conditions for real social and political power. Conversely, real influence over decision-making power is instrumental to the protection of liberal rights. But liberalism is an ideal centered on the protection of individual freedom, whereas democracy centers on (sufficiently) egalitarian decision-making power. When I speak of “democracy” in this book I have in mind liberal democracy: an ideal that pairs a democratic distribution of power with the liberal freedoms needed to make it effective.

What makes democracy’s characteristic distribution of power an attractive ideal? Classical arguments target the blind spots and selfish biases of the ruling class. The power of the ballot is an important democratic check on this tendency. But any social group can be biased and self-serving, and therefore elites don’t have a monopoly on tyranny. Democracy presents a potential general solution to this problem: we can structure things so that no faction gathers too much power, enabling competing interests to check one another. J. S. Mill nicely spells out this rationale for democracy in *Considerations on Representative Government*:

The reason why, in any tolerably constituted society, justice and the general interest mostly in the end carry their point, is that

⁴ I say “more or less” because of the numerous exceptions to this idea: minors, non-citizens, convicted criminals (sometimes), etc.

the separate and selfish interests of mankind are almost always divided; some are interested in what is wrong, but some, also, have their private interest on the side of what is right: and those who are governed by higher considerations, though too few and weak to prevail against the whole of the others, usually after sufficient discussion and agitation become strong enough to turn the balance in favour of the body of private interests which is on the same side with them. The representative system ought to be so constituted as to maintain this state of things: it ought not to allow any of the various sectional interests to be so powerful as to be capable of prevailing against truth and justice and the other sectional interests combined. There ought always to be such a balance preserved among personal interests, as may render any one of them dependent for its successes, on carrying with it at least a large proportion of those who act on higher motives, and more comprehensive and distant views.⁵

Mill's insight is that people's capacity to protect their own interests is fundamentally linked to their power. On his view, democracy serves justice, not only by aligning the interests of the ruling class with the ruled, but also by dividing powers widely enough so that diverse factions must cooperate. This idea—which the influential democratic theorist Robert Dahl dubbed *polyarchy*—was central to James Madison's model of American democracy in *The Federalist*.⁶ Polyarchy is not exactly a theory of moral inquiry, since it does not show how people might reliably improve their moral beliefs. Still, it does explain why democracies would outperform other regimes in at least avoiding oppressive decisions, and how it might improve the treatment of minority groups over time, particularly those positioned as critical coalition partners in tipping the balance of power.

⁵ Mill 1998a, 300–301.

⁶ Dahl 1956; Hamilton, Jay, and Madison 1788.

At present the benefits of checks and balances are probably obvious enough. Nonetheless, any casual observer of democracy can see how wealth and other forms of social power enable advantaged groups to wield disproportionate influence. This point is particularly relevant in the case of systemically marginalized minorities. In such cases, the “tyranny of the majority” often plays out in a straightforward numerical form: without adequate numbers, minorities cannot muster sufficient influence when their interests do not align with the majority’s. Sometimes, as noted above, minorities can gain power by positioning themselves as critical coalition partners. But this is hardly a reliable approach, and the agenda of seemingly “pluralistic” coalitions tends to favor the interests of the rich and powerful.⁷ In the worst-case scenarios, democracy can actually accelerate domination and violence by stoking sectarian rivalries.⁸

Majority tyranny also plays out more indirectly, through systemic dynamics that inhibit participation in social, economic, and political life. This point is clear in the history of women’s social and political power, which has remained subordinate well after the extension of equal voting rights. Likewise, in the case of African-Americans, deficits in social, cultural, and economic capital have meant continuing political under-representation. Living in a society in which racism and sexism are pervasive diminishes the power of the ballot and other formal political rights. The essential problem with polyarchy is that, when group-based disadvantage is systemic, the sources of that disadvantage permeate social consciousness across otherwise diverse factions. Under these circumstances, the structural checks and balances favored by Madison are insufficient to counter injustice. Polyarchy also offers little insight into how democracies might foster durable changes in social hierarchies, because the strategic advantages of compromise

⁷ Achen and Bartels 2016, 321–22.

⁸ Snyder 2000.

are fleeting. When it becomes more politically advantageous to exclude a marginalized group from the dominant coalition than to include it, their fortunes change.

Polyarchy exemplifies the power-sharing paradigm. Different groups have partly incompatible goals (“preferences”) that they aim to satisfy through the political system, and, within the rules of the game, they compete with one another to satisfy those goals. The primary driver of political decisions is the relative power of groups, and the key to political success is pulling whatever causal levers (protesting, organizing, shaming, compromising, negotiating, etc.) are available to get more power. Thus, according to polyarchy, progress is primarily about a competition for power, and democracy’s institutional virtue is to keep power differentials in check.

Other power-sharing accounts model democracy’s virtues somewhat differently. One particularly influential approach is “economic democracy,” pioneered by Anthony Downs in the 1950s.⁹ Economic democracy envisions politics as a market in which politicians supply a policy agenda in an effort to compete for votes. Much as Pepsi and Coke must tweak their ingredients to gain market share, politicians must continually adjust their policy formula to increase their voter share. Voters, likewise, vote for politicians whose platforms maximize their “preference satisfaction.” “In effect, [a political party] is an entrepreneur selling policies for votes instead of products for money.”¹⁰ Under the right conditions, this creates incentives toward moderation and compromise, at least on the (not always tenable) assumption that more extreme policies will tend to garner narrower support. According to this logic, market competition thus can promote responsiveness to a broad range of views.

The basic premise of Downs’s approach—voters are rational preference-maximizers akin to economic consumers—shaped

⁹ Downs 1957a.

¹⁰ Downs 1957b, 137.

a whole generation of political modeling. In the unusually depolarized political environment of mid-20th-century America, the idea that rational preference satisfaction would push toward political inclusivity had a certain intuitive appeal.¹¹ But there were several important problems with this picture. One is that, as we shall discuss further below, voters are not all that rational. They tend to have a foggy understanding of policy, and their policy “preferences” are driven to a large degree by partisan group identities rather than a coherent conception of their own interests or values. As the more recent past illustrates, the result is that political platforms which demonize or marginalize disempowered groups often fare quite well. Indeed, in the 1950s, the image of a placid, depolarized political climate was premised to a large degree on a strategic alliance between segregationist Southern Democrats (“Dixiecrats”) and the national Democratic Party. As Ezra Klein puts it, “The Dixiecrats gave the national Democrats the votes they needed to control Congress, and the national Democrats let the Dixiecrats enforce segregation and one-party rule at home.”¹² One key effect of this alliance was to suppress the issue of racial injustice in American politics. In other words, the surface appearance of relative national unity was only made possible by the marginalization of African-American interests in the political system. But from the standpoint of “rational preference-satisfaction,” this made perfect sense. Every constituency in the ruling coalition was getting the thing that political preference-maximizers are supposed to want: power.

Reflecting on the failure of economic and several other models of democratic politics, Christopher Achen and Larry Bartels argue that the dominant explanation of democratic life is not rational choice but the tribal logic of group identity:

¹¹ Achen and Bartels 2016, 25.

¹² Klein 2020, 22–23.

Numerous studies have demonstrated that most residents of democratic countries have little interest in politics and do not follow news of public affairs beyond browsing the headlines. They do not know the details of even salient policy debates, they do not have a firm understanding of what the political parties stand for, and they often vote for parties whose long-standing issue positions are at odds with their own. Mostly, they identify with ethnic, racial, occupational, religious, or other sorts of groups, and often—whether through group ties or hereditary loyalties—with a political party. Even the more attentive citizens mostly adopt the policy positions of the parties as their own: they are mirrors of the parties, not masters. For most citizens most of the time, party and group loyalties are the primary drivers of vote choices.¹³

On the basis of their analysis, Achen and Bartels suggest that we should adopt a “realist” view of democracy. The realist does not expect citizens to be particularly rational, informed, or civic-minded. The realist concedes that democratic decisions do not reflect the “will of the people” or a coherent popular mandate. Once we let go of these illusions, what is left? On Achen and Bartels’s view, democratic elections do retain some important virtues. They provide “widely accepted agreement about who shall rule.” They provide “incentives to tolerate opposition” and to “avoid being caught violating consensual ethical norms.”¹⁴ And, in general, they ensure that no one tends to hold too much power for too long:

[I]n well-functioning democratic systems, parties that win office are inevitably defeated at a subsequent election. They may be defeated more or less randomly, due to droughts, floods, or untimely economic slumps, but they are defeated nonetheless.

¹³ Achen and Bartels 2016, 299.

¹⁴ Achen and Bartels 2016, 316.

Moreover, voters seem increasingly likely to reject the incumbent party the longer it has held office, reinforcing the tendency for governmental power to change hands. This turnover is a key indicator of democratic health and stability. It implies that no one group or coalition can become entrenched in power, unlike in dictatorships or one-party states where power is often exercised persistently by a single privileged segment of society. And because the losers in each election can reasonably expect the wheel of political fortune to turn in the not-too-distant future, they are more likely to accept the outcome than to take to the streets.¹⁵

Here, Achen and Bartels sound a lot like John Stuart Mill earlier: above all, democracy limits sectarian domination by dispersing power. That is clearly an important good, but does it provide a basis for social progress? Certainly, a system that reduces sectarian domination is less likely to succumb to the worst kinds of moral failure. In itself, that is a significant achievement. But reducing abject moral failure is not the same as sustaining an upward moral trajectory. And, for reasons that we've already explored, even when the consolidation of political power is limited, social hierarchies have a persistent tendency to perpetuate themselves through the democratic system. Achen and Bartels are of course quite aware of all this, which is presumably one reason why they do not offer up realist democracy as a theory of social progress.

The fundamental problem with power-sharing models is that, according to their logic, the fate of marginalized groups depends on the ability to acquire more power within a given institutional framework. But having a moral entitlement to more power does not entail the practical ability to acquire more power. This is why, as we have seen, the logic of competitive group coalitions, Downsian policy "markets," and Madisonian checks and balances so frequently favors the wicked. From the standpoint of social progress,

¹⁵ Achen and Bartels 2016, 317.

power-sharing models correctly identify one of democracy's key virtues: for those who would otherwise be marginalized, it establishes a material capacity for influence over the social order. But they are incomplete as regulative ideals because the incremental changes they prescribe—better checks and balances, more efficient policy markets, more fluid group coalitions—do not reliably promote moral improvements. It is of course possible that reducing group domination is the most we can reasonably ask of democracy. Indeed, that is already asking a lot. But I will be arguing that we can and should ask for more.

2.2. Democracy as a Deliberative Forum

“Deliberative democracy” has been the dominant model in democratic theory for the past 25 years or so. The general idea is that democracy requires making decisions through a free, egalitarian, and inclusive process of deliberation. In his influential exposition of the idea, here is how Joshua Cohen puts it:

The notion of a deliberative democracy is rooted in the intuitive ideal of a democratic association in which the justification of the terms and conditions of association proceeds through public argument and reasoning among equal citizens. Citizens in such an order share a commitment to the resolution of problems of collective choice through public reasoning, and regard their basic institutions as legitimate insofar as they establish the framework for free public deliberation.¹⁶

On this model, voting is still indispensable to decision-making. But whereas voting is a process through which we express our political preferences, deliberation is the process through which we

¹⁶ Cohen 1989a, 72.

form, or educate, those preferences in a spirit of moral reciprocity. The idea emerged from Cohen and Jürgen Habermas, both of whom saw rational deliberation as the defining condition of democratic legitimacy.¹⁷ On their view, this is because engaging with citizens' rationality, rather than manipulating or coercing them, is how we show respect for each individual's autonomy. Democratic civic and political institutions should be organized to support the pursuit of a rational consensus among equals, such as the protection of civil liberties or a robust civic society outside of politics.¹⁸ Here is Cohen, again, characterizing the ideal deliberative process:

Deliberation is *reasoned* in that the parties to it are required to state their reasons for advancing proposals, supporting them, or criticizing them. They give reasons with the expectation that those reasons (and not, for example, their power) will settle the fate of their proposal. In ideal deliberation, as Habermas puts it, "no force except that of the better argument is exercised." Reasons are offered with the aim of bringing others to accept the proposal, given their disparate ends and their commitment to settling the conditions of their association through free deliberation among equals.¹⁹

Moreover:

[I]deal deliberation aims to arrive at a rationally motivated *consensus*—to find reasons that are persuasive to all who are committed to acting on the results of a free and reasoned assessment of alternatives by equals.²⁰

¹⁷ Cohen 1989a; Habermas 1996.

¹⁸ Habermas 1996.

¹⁹ Cohen 1989a, 74.

²⁰ Cohen 1989a, 75.

The idea of this approach is not that comprehensive rational consensus is possible in the real world, but only that it should serve as a regulative ideal guiding us toward improvements. Still, many criticized Cohen's and Habermas's foundational work for its hyper-idealized character, which seemed too remote from political reality. Deliberative theorists have since tried to build bridges between the deliberative ideal and a more realistic perspective on politics. Thus, many contemporary deliberative theorists accept that comprehensive consensus may remain elusive even in principle. Instead, we may have to settle for weaker forms of consensus, such as agreement on the nature of a problem, or the values at stake.²¹ And whereas early models of democratic deliberation envisioned political argumentation grounded in moral principle, many deliberative democrats now recognize a legitimate role for bargaining and self-interested behavior.²² Relatedly, deliberative democracy in its present form is much more engaged with a large, and growing, body of empirical work on the conditions, dynamics, and effects of real-world deliberation.²³ Reflecting recently on the transition from Cohen and Habermas to the current, less idealized approach, Jane Mansbridge, John Dryzek, Mark Warren, and André Bächtiger together characterize the general idea of deliberation as follows: "Mutual communication that involves weighing and reflecting on preferences, values, interests, regarding matters of common concern." Deliberative democracy, then, is "any practice of democracy that gives deliberation a central place."²⁴

Clearly, a lot depends on how ideas like "communication," "weighing," and "matters of common concern" are interpreted, and that is a task for particular theories of deliberative democracy. Still, even at this general level, there are clear contrasts with the

²¹ Mansbridge et al. 2010; Niemeyer and Dryzek 2007.

²² Mansbridge et al. 2010.

²³ Bächtiger, Niemeyer, and Neblo 2010; Landemore 2020; Neblo, Esterling, and Lazer 2018.

²⁴ Bächtiger et al. 2018, 2.

power-sharing approach. According to the power-sharing model, voters use the ballot primarily to advance their private or group-based good. While they might form preferences out of concern for others, or abstract principles of social justice, power-sharing models do not prescribe any such motivations. And the basic checks-and-balances architecture of democracy presupposes a political world of rivalrous factions. Relatedly, the notion of “preference satisfaction” tends to encourage an amoral view of voting behavior: going to the ballot box is principally about expressing wants, whatever they might be.

Power-sharing approaches recognize the necessary role that power plays in protecting citizens’ interests. Deliberative approaches introduce a second crucial insight, which is that the decision-making power of marginalized groups depends, not just on formal political levers of political influence, but also on some means of transforming the attitudes that determine how those levers are used. Thus deliberation presents a more robust process for achieving egalitarian voice, and a set of norms that go along with it. Being a good democratic citizen requires a particular kind of participation: informing yourself in light of the best evidence and arguments and weighing others’ concerns in a spirit of civic reciprocity. Though some conflicts may be unresolvable, politics is not presumed to be inherently factional or rivalrous. Citizens should integrate the good of others into their moral outlook, even when doing so is not linked to a strategic advantage. Democracy, on this view, is better understood as a forum guided by mutual respect rather than a market driven by self-interest.²⁵

But the value of deliberation goes beyond moral respect. Earlier, I observed that there is no inherent link between who has power and who is morally correct. For this reason, I argued, power-sharing approaches do not establish a clear link between democracy and social progress. By contrast, under the right circumstances, success

²⁵ Elster 1986.

in an “exchange of reasons” should be linked to moral validity and scientific truth. By nature deliberative rationality—the business of giving, receiving, and properly evaluating reasons—is connected to epistemic norms of coherence, logical inference, and responsiveness to evidence. Likewise the contestation of moral and social ideals through reason-giving implies that some views are more justified than others because they better realize norms of evidence and argument.²⁶ Deliberative democrats often emphasize the fact that rational engagement with others displays egalitarian respect. But there are many different procedures by which we might show due respect for each other as equals. Why not, for example, put all of our judgments about policy into a hat and pull one out at random? There is nothing inherently unfair or disrespectful about this way of doing things. Instead, the problem seems to be that such a method is unlikely to produce outcomes that satisfy norms of evidence and reason.²⁷

Once we see deliberation as an activity that aims, at least in part, at scientific truth and moral validity, then we can begin to evaluate its properties as a potential mechanism of social progress. To what extent can deliberation actually improve moral beliefs and the factual claims that underlie them? And what are the limits of deliberation in these respects? In the context of systemic social change, what processes, besides those captured in deliberation, are needed to drive improvements in citizens’ moral beliefs? There is now a substantial empirical literature on the effects of political deliberation and the psychological foundations of moral judgment. In the next few sections, I survey some of the significant findings. There are two motivations for looking at this research: First, I aim to show that, by neglecting important non-deliberative sources of our moral worldview, deliberative democracy offers an incomplete picture of the moral and political mind. That makes it inadequate

²⁶ Fuerstein 2014.

²⁷ Estlund 2008.

as a regulative ideal. Second, I aim to establish some important foundations for the Deweyan model of moral judgment that I take up in the next chapter. In other words, the key factors that deliberative democracy leaves out are those that the Deweyan model includes, and this gives it important advantages as a regulative ideal of social progress.

2.3. The Promise of Deliberative Mini-Publics

It is not hard to see why deliberation would be beneficial in principle. Citizens have diverse perspectives and information. If they come together and talk about things, then they can learn from each other. Even if they don't reach a consensus, this kind of learning should improve the quality of decisions. But the theoretical benefits of cognitive diversity don't necessarily translate into reality. What do we know about the benefits of deliberation in practice? Whether you find the evidence on this topic promising depends on which studies you look at. In a major review of the research, Dennis Thompson sums things up by noting that "taken together, the results are mixed or inconclusive."²⁸ And the reason for this is that "the success or failure of deliberation depends so much on its context."²⁹ Under the wrong conditions, it can be fruitless or harmful.

The most attractive deliberative outcomes show up in "deliberative mini-publics": highly controlled forums among relatively small, representative groups of citizens.³⁰ There are a number of different active models for deliberative mini-publics, including Citizens' Assemblies, Citizens' Initiative Reviews, Deliberative

²⁸ Thompson 2008, 499.

²⁹ Thompson 2008, 499.

³⁰ Fishkin 2009, 2018; Neblo, Esterling, and Lazer 2018; Steiner 2012; Warren and Gastil 2015.

Polling, and several other variants. The basic approach involves organizing a forum around some important social/political issue or set of issues, with participants selected from the community to achieve a representative cross section. Participants gather information through curated briefing materials and get input from expert panelists. Participants have the opportunity to speak and ask questions, and the process is controlled to promote equal participation. This method has now been implemented in thousands of iterations around the world, and has played an officially sanctioned role in a variety of political contexts. Citizens assemblies played a major role in Irish constitutional reform during the 2010s, for example, and in Mongolia deliberative polling is now a legally required condition of any constitutional amendment.³¹

Deliberative mini-publics do not tell us how deliberation functions in the jungles of mass politics, but they do give us some indication of its potential under relatively optimal real-world conditions. In aggregate, the data suggest that, under these carefully managed circumstances, deliberation can indeed yield significant benefits. Consider the data on deliberative polling, a technique pioneered by political scientist James Fishkin. As of July 2020, over 100 experiments with deliberative polling had been run in 28 countries.³² In a study of nine deliberative polls taken in the U.S., Britain, and Australia, Fishkin found statistically significant—and typically large—net changes on 72% of 58 indices of policy attitudes.³³ On basic measures of awareness of relevant political information, deliberative polls reliably produce substantial gains. Participants consistently show improvement in their awareness of facts such as the costs and consequences of various measures, and shifts in opinion appear to be causally related to these informational gains.

³¹ Fishkin 2018; Suiter and Reidy 2019.

³² Stanford Deliberative Democracy Lab n.d.

³³ Fishkin 2009, 134.

Several studies of deliberative polls have found that demographic factors such as race and gender do not significantly affect the persuasiveness of participants.³⁴ This gives some evidence that, under idealized conditions, deliberators can avoid some of the problematic effects of bias and status.

The evidence also reveals some limitations to the deliberative model. First, deliberative mini-publics tend to be focused on topics such as economic policy, education policy, healthcare policy, environmental policy, and political reforms. While all of these domains have important moral dimensions, the polls mostly have not addressed the fundamental status or rights of social groups, and mostly do not raise direct moral questions about social norms. In cases where mini-publics have addressed these kinds of questions, the results are mixed. A 2001 deliberative poll in Australia on the status of Aboriginal Australians led to very substantial gains in the perception of Aboriginal disadvantage on a number of crucial issues.³⁵ In a 2007 national deliberative poll in Bulgaria on the status of the Roma, those who thought that “Roma should live in separate Roma neighborhoods” went from 43% to 21%. Support for formally integrating the Roma into Bulgarian schools via busing rose from 42% to 66%.³⁶ In both of these cases, we can see a substantial, information-driven improvement in sympathy and responsiveness toward a historically marginalized group. In other cases the results offer less support for the benefits of deliberation. In 2008 a Pennsylvania group ran a deliberative poll on the subject of same-sex marriage. In a follow-up questionnaire, only 2.7% of respondents reported having “significantly” changed their position as a result of the poll.³⁷

A second issue concerns residual dissent even in cases with relatively large changes of opinion. In the case of Aboriginal

³⁴ Fishkin 2018, 142.

³⁵ Fishkin 2009, 161–63.

³⁶ Fishkin 2009, 163–65.

³⁷ Cavalier 2009.

Australians, for example, the percentage of people supporting an official apology to the “stolen generation” went from 46% to 68%. While that is an impressive change for one weekend of deliberation, 32% remained opposed to offering such an apology. Stipulating that rational deliberation has inherent limitations seems reasonable enough. But that doesn’t address the question of what is needed to move the needle further on questions of fundamental moral rights and status. One possibility is that deliberators simply need more time, or more deliberation, to achieve further changes in opinion. There isn’t a lot of evidence about the longer-term effects of deliberation, but in one study in Hungary organizers found that, one year after the deliberative poll, participants had largely reverted to their pre-poll attitudes.³⁸ Intuitively, this is not surprising. What we can be induced to say and believe under idealized seminar-style conditions is likely to seem less compelling once we re-enter the world of social pressures, personal experience, and partisanship. The significance of this point will become clearer below.

In general, there is no doubt that deliberative mini-publics reveal genuine epistemic promise in the deliberative model, at least under highly managed, relatively ideal conditions. There is particularly clear evidence that, under such conditions, deliberation can improve sensitivity to factual information and the internal coherence of citizens’ policy views. The evidence is much less clear about whether it can transform attitudes on the kinds of foundational moral and social issues which are important for this book’s argument. The larger question is how the benefits of tightly controlled, idealized deliberation translate into the much messier, mass-scale conditions of social change. The evidence on this is not particularly encouraging.

³⁸ Lengyel, Goncz, and Vepy-Schlemmer 2015.

2.4. Democratic Deliberation in the “Real World”

There is a huge body of empirical research on voters’ knowledge and beliefs, and the psychological processes which shape them. I won’t try to summarize it here. It will be helpful nonetheless to survey a few of the main findings. Three points are particularly relevant in thinking about the prospects of deliberation.

2.4.1. Democratic Citizens Are Ignorant

The social science on public opinion is more or less unanimous: the average voter knows strikingly little about government and policy. Indeed, there is an entire genre of what we might call “depressing voter studies” devoted to exposing every contour of this particular strain of human ineptitude. Ilya Somin’s *Democracy and Political Ignorance* offers one of the more recent entries. A few examples from his book give you a taste:

- Only 42% of Americans can name the three branches of government.³⁹
- At the height of election campaigns, fewer than half of Americans can name any congressional candidate in their district.⁴⁰
- During the Cold War, only 38% of Americans knew that the Soviet Union was not in NATO.⁴¹
- In October 2010, at the height of the mid-term election race, 67% of Americans did not know that the economy had grown

³⁹ Somin 2016, 19.

⁴⁰ Somin 2016, 19.

⁴¹ Somin 2016, 19.

in the preceding year, even as 52% of Americans named “the economy” as the nation’s most important issue.⁴²

- In 2000, only 44% of Americans knew that Presidential candidate Al Gore was more supportive of environmental regulation than George W. Bush.⁴³

You get the idea. Knowledge of basic facts about the economy, the structure of government, and one’s congressional representatives is not the same as moral knowledge. But our moral attitudes on social issues normally depend on factual beliefs about people and institutions. Egregious factual ignorance therefore has repercussions for moral concerns. If we focus on factual matters with direct implications for justice, racial tolerance, and economic equity, we can see those repercussions clearly. Here are a few examples:

- Sixty percent of Americans believe that the country is spending too much on foreign aid, believing on average that it accounts for 28% of the national budget. In reality, foreign aid hovers around only 1% of the U.S. national budget.⁴⁴
- Fifty percent of Americans believe that immigrants “make the country worse” on the issue of crime, even though incarceration rates for young male immigrants are the lowest of any ethnic group. Trump’s demonization of illegal immigrants on this point was of course a major issue in his candidacy.⁴⁵
- White people who oppose welfare programs tend to believe that they primarily benefit people who are not White. In fact, White people are the largest beneficiary of such programs.⁴⁶

⁴² Somin 2016, 21.

⁴³ Somin 2016, 31.

⁴⁴ Kaiser Family Foundation 2013.

⁴⁵ Pew Research Center 2015.

⁴⁶ Gilens 1999.

How much should these kinds of data points damage our esteem for democracy? The implications of “voter ignorance” are probably less clear than they may at first seem. If your primary choice is between a Democrat and a Republican, being a policy wonk is not always essential to judging reasonably between the options on hand. Relying on a few good heuristics may be enough.⁴⁷ Likewise, the fact that citizens’ knowledge on civic matters tends to be low does not in itself show that deliberation cannot be epistemically beneficial. Indeed, the central promise of democratic deliberation is that citizens can remedy ignorance through engagement with others.

Still, deliberative democracy is a pretty demanding ideal compared to alternatives. As an “exchange of reasons” it requires some capacity to defend political positions with evidence and arguments. Responding to generic partisan cues is not enough. Likewise, engagement only remedies ignorance if there is enough knowledge to go around. Even if the data on voter ignorance are not an instant refutation of democracy, they should make us skeptical of what deliberation can achieve outside of highly controlled environments. To more fully assess deliberation’s epistemic prospects, though, we must take a look at how it fosters rational belief change. Here, again, the evidence is worrying.

2.4.2. Democratic Citizens Are Irrational

In general, our reasoning is “motivated,” meaning that it is driven by desires of one sort or another, many of them beneath the surface of conscious awareness. Some of these motivations are conducive to the truth, such as the desire to be accurate or maintain credibility. But many of these motivations are not, and there is a huge body of research documenting pervasive biases toward beliefs which support our pre-conceptions, which preserve the appearance

⁴⁷ Lupia 2016.

of our own competence, or which flatter the image of our self-identified social groups.⁴⁸ Not surprisingly, evidence confirming what subjects already believe tends to get uncritically embraced, while disconfirming evidence receives skeptical scrutiny. Even on straightforward matters of fact, such as the budget deficit or crime rates, people show strong dispositions toward claims that fit with their ideological worldview. To choose one example, Bartels notes that over 50% of “strong” Democrats thought that inflation had gotten worse during Reagan’s tenure, even though inflation had meaningfully declined during this period. By contrast, only 13% of “strong” Republicans believed that inflation had gotten worse during this period.⁴⁹ The issue here is not just that people tend to make up facts. On scientific issues with a partisan valence, subjects with greater levels of scientific literacy actually polarize more in their opinions than those with less.⁵⁰ In other words, if you are an American conservative, then being more scientifically knowledgeable is correlated with being more likely to doubt the scientific consensus on climate change! A depressingly large share of our political behavior can be explained by the desire to protect our partisan group identity.⁵¹

These observations raise obvious worries about the epistemic benefits of social deliberation. One possibility is that partisan motivated reasoning is an immediate defensive response whose effects dissipate in the longer term. And there is some evidence that deliberation can have delayed effects on subjects’ system of beliefs.⁵² To my knowledge, however, no one has argued that these potential effects can adequately compensate for irrationality at the original moment of argumentation. Motivated reasoning at the individual level may also have benefits at the social level by facilitating

⁴⁸ Mason 2018; Mercier and Sperber 2011.

⁴⁹ Bartels 2002, 134.

⁵⁰ Drummond and Fischhoff 2017.

⁵¹ Achen and Bartels 2016; Mason 2018.

⁵² Mackie 2006.

the defense of diverse ideas.⁵³ As we shall see later on, this possibility is crucial in understanding how social progress works. For the moment, however, the basic facts of political psychology indicate a wide gap between deliberative democracy and the real behavior of citizens.

2.4.3. Democratic Citizens Are Status-Conscious

If deliberative encounters with others enable us to develop a more sympathetic and informed understanding of their concerns, then deliberative inclusion might be an important mechanism for reducing group marginalization. But only if our deliberative reasoning somehow abstracts from social hierarchies and biases. Unfortunately, research shows that our evaluation of others' arguments is strongly influenced by various dimensions of social status: perceived attractiveness, likeability, power, perceived similarity to ourselves, and membership in the social majority or minority.⁵⁴

Among human beings, like our primate ancestors, the spontaneous communication of social hierarchies is pervasive through such cues as posture and directness of gaze. In the context of verbal communication, individuals can communicate their higher status through a range of factors, including speech directness, speed, avoidance of slang, and even rudeness. One of the best predictors of persuasiveness is the ability to convey expertise, and—through the sorts of cues just noted—social status is a strong factor in one's perceived expertise. In addition, members of lower status groups are those most likely to defer on this basis.⁵⁵ These sorts of problems have been confirmed by studies of jury deliberations, in which

⁵³ Mercier and Sperber 2011.

⁵⁴ Petty and Wegener 1998.

⁵⁵ Fiske 2010.

higher status jury members speak more often and are perceived as more accurate in their judgments. Women, non-White people, and members of lower economic strata tend to participate less in deliberations. In the latter case, the effect seems to be mediated in part by lower educational attainment, which is associated with lower deliberative confidence and greater divergence from dominant norms of speech.⁵⁶ In short, deliberation has a strong tendency to reinforce the very social hierarchies which, in principle, it is supposed to remedy through rational engagement.

2.5. Two Neglected Pillars of Deliberative Reflection: Social Emotions and Social Maps

There are two related psychological dimensions of deliberation, in particular, that help explain why social hierarchies tend to assert themselves through deliberation. The first is *social emotions*. These are emotions that mediate our perceptions of other people and their concerns. Standard approaches to deliberative democracy tend to say little at best about the role of emotions in an “exchange of reasons.” The quotations from Cohen above are representative of deliberation’s rationalist leanings: “Deliberation is *reasoned* in that the parties to it are required to state their reasons for advancing proposals, supporting them, or criticizing them.”⁵⁷ In Habermas’s well-known formulation, in ideal deliberation, disputes are settled strictly by the “unforced force of the better argument.”⁵⁸ That said, even strong rationalists tend to concede at least some appropriate role for emotions in moral deliberation. For example, Habermas himself observes that “without empathetic sensitivity by each person to everyone else, no solution deserving universal consent

⁵⁶ See Mendelberg (2002, 165) for an overview of several results on juries.

⁵⁷ Cohen 1989a, 74.

⁵⁸ Habermas 1996, 306.

will result from the deliberation at all.”⁵⁹ In other words, the deliberative process must proceed against a backdrop of some kind of positive affective connections. Even if this dimension of deliberation receives relatively little attention, deliberative theorists generally appear to accept that taking the perspective of others seriously requires some measure of care and respect, and that care and respect depend on emotions like empathy, sympathy, and esteem.⁶⁰

But there is a strong body of research showing not merely that some emotions are a precondition for deliberative engagement, but indeed that our emotional and rational systems are functionally interdependent. To start, many core aspects of practical reasoning—long-term planning, goal formation, social rule following, and decision-making—depend on our emotional capacities. The most famous illustration of this point is the 19th-century railway worker Phineas Gage, who suffered severe damage to his prefrontal cortex—a brain region vital to the processing of emotions—after an explosion propelled a one-meter tamping iron through his cheek and out the back of his head. Remarkably, Gage survived this incident without suffering any major impairment of his functionality in the immediate aftermath(!). Gage’s life nonetheless devolved over time as he proved unable to form and abide by long-term plans, was prone to disregard ordinary social proprieties, and could not consistently fulfill commitments in his work and personal relationships.⁶¹ A variety of contemporary case studies of patients with brain damage to emotional centers display similar kinds of disfunction, and there is growing evidence that emotions are vital in a wide range of basic cognitive processes.⁶² As the psychologists Kelter and Lerner put it, “the study of emotion and reason reveals that almost every cognitive process—attention, evaluative judgments, probability estimates, perceptions of risk,

⁵⁹ Quoted in Krause (2008, 40).

⁶⁰ Neblo 2020.

⁶¹ Damasio 1994.

⁶² Damasio 1994.

outgroup biases, and moral judgment—is shaped by momentary emotions in systematic and profound ways.”⁶³

Just how pervasive is the role of emotion in moral judgment? There is now a growing consensus among psychologists that the mind employs a “dual-process” architecture, with fast, automatic, and sometimes sub-conscious mechanisms operating alongside slower, less spontaneous, and conscious mechanisms.⁶⁴ On the “affective primacy view,” our rational evaluations are typically preceded by emotional reactions that color, constrain, and guide rational thought. Reason then kicks in afterward to provide an *ex post* rational explanation for what has already been decided. As Jonathan Haidt puts it, reason is (very often) merely the “press secretary” for what affect has already decided. On Haidt’s view, rational cognition can under the right conditions steer our moral judgments, but must always play catch-up to our gut reactions.⁶⁵

Haidt defends a particularly strong view of affective primacy. Whether or not he is right, emotions appear to be vital in making rational considerations salient and representing their distinctive significance. Thus, the feeling of anger makes unfairness salient and represents its wrongness. Compassion makes salient the suffering of others and represents it as undeserved. Gratitude makes salient and represents as righteous the kindness of others toward ourselves. Awe makes salient and represents as admirable the morally admirable qualities of others.⁶⁶ In functioning as “amplifiers” of this kind, emotions help moral agents solve a vexing problem for rational cognition: of the infinite number of considerations on which we could focus in a given situation, how should we decide which are important and why?⁶⁷

⁶³ Keltner and Lerner 2010, 335.

⁶⁴ Kahneman 2011.

⁶⁵ Haidt 2012.

⁶⁶ Keltner and Lerner 2010; Nussbaum 2001b.

⁶⁷ Horberg, Oveis, and Keltner 2011.

The integral role of emotion in social contexts is particularly critical for present purposes because emotions mediate group-based attitudes of bias and inclusivity that are salient in the political context. Our emotional reactions vary depending on the extent to which our group identity is primed, and negative reactions to outgroups tend to be associated with specific emotions.⁶⁸ Negative stereotypes of homosexuality, for example, are associated with disgust.⁶⁹ To choose another example, negative attitudes toward Asians are associated with a distinctive combination of envy and fear, but also admiration.⁷⁰ And, as deliberative theorists acknowledge, attitudes of inclusivity and respect are closely associated with sympathy and empathy, both of which enable us to represent the morally significant concerns and experiences of others.⁷¹ These are all prime examples of social emotions.

Thus, emotion guides the interaction between our representation of social identities and our moral judgments. And that interaction is crucial to the strong influence, observed above, that social hierarchies exert on deliberation. The psychological significance of group identity is therefore the second crucial oversight of deliberative theory. In general, human beings display a pervasive tendency to understand their own identity in terms of group membership, and to sort others into “in” and “out” groups, with strong effects on social cognition and emotion. Categorical sorting is rapid, automatic, and frequently unavailable to conscious awareness.⁷² This tendency is most plausibly rooted in our biological history as a species of discrete, relatively small communities competing with other such communities.⁷³ The result is what we might call a *social map*: a representation of how different individuals fit into different groups,

⁶⁸ Yzerbyt and Demoulin 2010.

⁶⁹ Inbar et al. 2009.

⁷⁰ Lin et al. 2005.

⁷¹ Yzerbyt and Demoulin 2010.

⁷² Yzerbyt and Demoulin 2010.

⁷³ Brewer and Caporael 2006.

the key characteristics of those groups, and the relationships among them.

The psychological significance of group identity is generally heightened by perceived group conflict.⁷⁴ For example, perceived threats to cultural norms or economic interests appear to be a major driver of anti-immigrant sentiment.⁷⁵ However, even without conflict, the perception of group difference in itself seems to be enough to generate in-group favoritism. In one of several landmark experiments, the psychologist Henri Tajfel divided a group of boys by showing them images of unsigned paintings by Paul Klee and Wassily Kandinsky and then forming two sub-groups based on which artist they preferred (the division was in fact random, but artist-preference was the stated pretense). In a subsequent task, group members were asked to divide a sum of money between members of their own group and members of the other group. Remarkably, Tajfel found that, even though the “Klee” and “Kandinsky” sub-groups were based on totally insignificant criteria, participants showed a substantial in-group preference in dividing the money. In another experiment he produced a similar effect by dividing groups based on a meaningless dot-counting task.⁷⁶

Group sorting has a range of important effects on how we represent other moral agents and appraise their concerns. Indeed, there is such a huge literature on this topic that it is impossible to provide any kind of summary here. But here is a list of a few representative findings. On a basic cognitive level, people retain more detailed information about their in-group than about out-groups, and selectively remember information in ways that accentuate their differences with out-groups. They are more positive, trustful, cooperative, generous, and concerned with procedural fairness with

⁷⁴ Jackson 2002.

⁷⁵ Zárate et al. 2004.

⁷⁶ Tajfel 1970.

in-group members. People are more likely to see the positive behavior of in-group members as an instance of a general, stable trait which is representative of the in-group, while negative behaviors are more likely to be cast as one-off exceptions.⁷⁷ These tendencies toward in-/out-group categorization also feed back into our self-conception. Thus, the process of group categorization quickly precipitates tendencies to “self-stereotype” so that descriptions of ourselves and of the group to which we belong overlap.⁷⁸ We are inclined, not only to “other” those who we map onto out-groups, but also to see ourselves as fitting with the in-group.

To summarize: Our deliberative capacities are functionally interdependent with our social maps and emotions. These affect our value judgments, our representations of others’ interests, and the moral weight that we give to those interests, particularly when deep social fault lines are in play. And they tend to accentuate pre-existing social divisions and stereotypes. This explains the persistent place of status, group tribalism, and other forms of epistemic dysfunction in deliberation. And so any model of how people can improve their beliefs through deliberation is incomplete without an account of these other kinds of cognitive factors.

What exactly are the implications of this for deliberative democracy as a regulative ideal? In Chapter 1, I defined a *regulative ideal* as a set of optimal conditions that serve as a benchmark for incremental improvements. I suggested that valid regulative ideals (a) prescribe incremental steps which (b) are practically feasible and which (c) effectively promote the values or goods captured in the ideal, (d) relative to a particular social context. They thus provide a set of moral aspirations that catalyze valuable action. Put less abstractly, the question in the case of deliberative democracy is this: Suppose that we earnestly set our sights on performing better in the activities that deliberative democracy

⁷⁷ Dovidio and Gaertner 2010.

⁷⁸ Yzerbyt and Demoulin 2010.

prescribes—to what extent would that sustain moral improvement in the social sphere? To what extent, therefore, does the deliberative ideal capture democracy’s potential in bringing about social progress?

Again, the promising results of deliberative mini-publics suggest, indeed, that real-world emulation of the deliberative ideal can yield significant epistemic benefits on many kinds of policy questions. But we have also seen that deliberation is powerfully shaped by social divisions and hierarchies. If we return to where this chapter began, we can now appreciate why the aspirations set by the deliberative ideal are incomplete in the case of something like structural racism. They are incomplete because the outputs of deliberation are shaped by the very structural injustices that it is being called upon to repair. Thus, at some point, even our best attempts at improving deliberation—reasoning, gathering information, exchanging perspectives, listening to others, consulting with experts, etc.—will fail to adequately advance systemic moral change. We will then need some further intervention by which citizens might transform their social maps and emotions. To be clear, my point is not that deliberative perfection is unattainable. That is true of all significant ideals and, frankly, pretty much any significant normative principle. Instead, my point is that improving our (always imperfect) approximation of the deliberative ideal is a flawed pathway to social progress. As we shall see, deliberation has a crucial role to play in social progress, but it is one factor that works in tandem with others, not the whole show.

2.6. Beyond Rational Deliberation?

Driven by the sorts of issues I just raised, Cheryl Hall, Sharon Krause, and Michael Morrell have all argued that successful moral deliberation depends, not only on our rational faculties, but also

on a healthy set of affective dispositions.⁷⁹ Here is Cheryl Hall envisioning a political deliberation about budgets:

[T]he citizens need to decide how much they value the various services. For what are they willing to pay? What services are they willing to forego? How much are they willing to sacrifice in exchange for what? Once again, the citizens can only do this by paying attention to—and talking about—their passions. There is no shortcut past passion just because in this case multiple people are involved and the values in question concern and affect the whole community. The fact that more people are involved in making and living with this decision means that people will need to be more open to listening to the thoughts and feelings of others, and more open to revising their own thoughts and feelings in response to what they hear. So some of their passions may, and indeed perhaps should, change in the course of encountering those of others. But throughout this process citizens must still observe and reflect on their passions in order to gain insight into what they really care about, so that they can then weigh the advantages and disadvantages of the different budget options in terms of what they really care about. In this way, passion not only motivates citizens to do the hard work of deliberating, it helps them do the work itself.⁸⁰

Hall's approach nicely exemplifies the way that deliberative democracy can integrate emotion. For her, moral priorities concern what people "really care about," and that depends on emotion. Social deliberation thus requires emotional engagement so that we can get a better handle on our own, and others', genuine priorities. And for Sharon Krause, the deliberative ideal is best modeled on a Humean conception of impartiality, in which our evaluations

⁷⁹ Hall 2007; Krause 2008; Morrell 2010.

⁸⁰ Hall 2007, 91–92.

are informed by a “generalized perspective” that “incorporates” without bias the appropriate sentiments of all affected parties. Optimal deliberation involves deploying this affective form of impartiality to guide a reasoned appraisal of evidence. Being a good deliberator therefore requires both rational capacities and a capacity for sympathy across social divides.⁸¹

Krause’s approach—which integrates emotion and reason—is more in line than many others with the empirical realities surveyed in this chapter. It also provides a more plausible account of what is going on in actual instances of social progress where, as Krause emphasizes, emotions such as sympathy, solidarity, and indignation have played a critical role. Still, she does not say a great deal about how the underlying affective and rational capacities can be reliably improved. As a regulative ideal, Humean impartiality confronts the same kind of difficulty as more traditional models of deliberative rationality. If, as I have argued, our affective dispositions reflect prevailing social hierarchies, then these will reassert themselves through failures of Humean impartiality. “Observing and reflecting” on our passions—as Hall puts it—is unlikely to do much good for someone in the grips of, say, toxic masculinity. Bringing diverse voices and experiences together in the public conversation is important for the improvement of sentiments. But that, on its own, is not enough for reliable change. A regulative ideal of social progress needs to represent the larger processes by which both reason and sentiment can be transformed.

“Activist” democrats such as Iris Marion Young and Lynn Sanders have pressed for a more significant departure from the traditional deliberative model. They argue that a conventional model of rational exchange privileges the standpoint of those with the resources and position to excel in this activity. Those with a weaker social position and/or a lack of education will be at a disadvantage. Thus, the deliberative ideal should be at least partially replaced with a variety of non-discursive, contestatory means of pursuing

⁸¹ Krause 2008, 85.

social objectives. “Deliberation before the revolution” cannot be confined to a seminar-style exchange.⁸² Activist democrats recommend protest, theater, storytelling, and testimony as supplements to, if not replacements of, the deliberative model.⁸³

Recall Mansbridge et al.’s definition of deliberation: “Mutual communication that involves weighing and reflecting on preferences, values, interests, regarding matters of common concern.” From this point of view, activist approaches like theater, testimony, and storytelling are plausible instances of deliberation, at least so long as they are suitably reflective. However, activist democrats have offered little evidence that the narrative methods of communication they defend are likely to remedy the problems they identify with the traditional deliberative model. A few social scientists have tried to study this issue empirically, and the results have been either inconclusive or negative.⁸⁴ This is not surprising in light of the various results surveyed above. Consider a method like storytelling. Certainly, the distinctive power of a good, human story is well understood by advertisers, political propagandists, and novelists. But how we receive a story depends on our antecedent beliefs, social identity, and cultural norms. Are people who confront the police “protestors” or “thugs”?

Protest, civil disobedience, and minority political activism more generally present a somewhat different set of issues. Here, the objective is not only to communicate a particular perspective, but also to use social and political mechanisms to intervene for change, even against the wishes of the majority. Some theorists have emphasized the need to act, not only through non-discursive means of persuasion, but also under some circumstances through coercion, civil disobedience, and obstructionist protest.⁸⁵

As will become clear in the next chapter, I have a lot of sympathy with the basic point that these theorists are making: social

⁸² Fung 2005.

⁸³ Sanders 1997; Walzer 1999; Young 2001.

⁸⁴ Fadlallah et al. 2019; Myers 2020.

⁸⁵ Fung 2005.

inquiry depends on action and intervention, often well in advance of majority approval (much less a rational consensus). However, recall that one key advantage of the deliberative approach is that—unlike power-sharing approaches—it promises a reliable bridge between power and moral validity. Activist disruption may at times be a more effective means of change than deliberation. But the success of tactics like civil disobedience, sit-ins, etc. depends on the organizational skills of activists and the unpredictable sparks of moral intuition among observers of such theatrics. Neither of these things is durably linked to truth or justice. Martin Luther King’s Birmingham Campaign exemplified activist disruption, but so did Richard Spencer’s “Unite the Right” rally for White nationalists. The more activism eclipses deliberation, the more politics resembles a power struggle. For those who are systematically oppressed, the implications of this are uncertain at best.

Of course, social history is full of cases (like Birmingham) in which civil disobedience, protest, petitioning, and agitating were instrumental to progress, and we will be discussing a number of them in detail in the chapters to come. At present, however, the problem is not understanding how direct activism could, under the right circumstances, lead to progress. The problem is to understand direct activism as a component of an epistemically reliable process, that is, a means by which progress involves more than lucky shifts of power. In this respect activism, like the alternatives we have been considering, suffers from the same basic problem that plagues deliberation. The success of the methods it prescribes for progress will be inhibited by the very structural conditions in relation to which progress is required.

2.7. Three Tasks Ahead

Why is social progress so difficult to achieve in democracies? I have surveyed a number of potential democratic mechanisms of

progress and have argued that, in each case, the operation of the mechanism is likely to be corrupted by the same factors that the mechanism might otherwise be used to change. The underlying explanation for this is the dependence of our moral outlook on social maps and emotions, both of which profoundly shape our beliefs and rational deliberations. A good model of democratic social progress therefore needs to explain, not just how our social maps and emotions can be changed, but also how this can be done so as to improve our moral responsiveness. And it needs to link this explanation to an account of democracy's characteristic ideal, the aspirations that guide our pathway to improvement. There are three major dimensions of that project: First, we need an adequate understanding of the progress standard itself. So far, I have been relying on intuitive examples of progress without offering a more general account. Second, we need an account of the process by which democratic progress comes about. And third, we need a defense of the reliability of that process. Over the next few chapters, I take up those tasks in order.