

# CAN DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY BE DECOLONIZED? A DEBATE

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## Decolonizing deliberative democracy: Four possible approaches

Bonny Ibhawoh

A discussion on decolonizing deliberative democracy must begin with a foundational question: Why is it necessary to decolonize *dominant paradigms* of deliberative democracy? The reference to the ‘dominant paradigm’ here is instructive. It draws attention to the premise of my intervention in the debate. What needs decolonizing is not deliberative democracy as a normative decision-making principle. The notion of consensus decision-making and the principle that deliberation should be central to decision-making are evident to varying degrees across many societies and cultures (OECD, 2020). Consensus-based decision-making—the roots of deliberative democracy—dates to pre-historical times. What requires decolonizing is the dominant West-centric paradigms and hegemonic pedagogical frameworks of deliberative democracy that lay claim to universality and immutability.

Western political theorists who first articulated the notion of deliberative democracy—from Joseph Bessette (1994) to John Rawls (1999)—framed deliberative democracy as an association whose affairs are governed by the public deliberation of its members. The value of such an association is that it ‘treats democracy itself as a fundamental political ideal and not simply as a derivative ideal that can be explained in terms of the values of fairness or equality of respect’ (Cohen, 2002, p. 19). Deliberation aims at finding rationally motivated consensus in decision-making. Among the critical elements are respect for a pluralism of values, recognition of the deliberative procedure as the source of legitimacy, and acknowledgement of the deliberative capacity of each group member.

Ironically, the scholarship on deliberative democracy does not quite reflect these principles of *pluralism*, *legitimacy*, and *inclusive respect for deliberative capacity* that are foundational to theories of deliberative democracy. If anything, the scholarship on deliberative democracy remains dominated by West-centric frameworks, paradigms, and cases. This trend is evident from a simple journal database search of the countries and regions referenced in articles on deliberative democracy. It is also apparent on crowdsourced data platforms such as Participedia, where over 60 percent of the case studies tagged ‘deliberative democracy’ as having focused on Western countries or models developed in the West. As project director of Participedia, I have sought to address this lopsidedness by focusing more on documenting deliberative processes in the Global South.

However, debates about deliberative democracy are also happening elsewhere, in different contexts. For example, as a platform for documenting democratic innovation, Participedia strives to bring in broad participatory approaches to the study of deliberative democracy that account for silences of colonial pedagogies, democratic exclusions, and the hegemonies of intellectual and praxis discourse (Participedia, 2023). Participedia researchers recognise that for many communities, the goals of empowerment, inclusion, self-development, and self-determination can only be realised within a decolonized framework of democratic innovation. This aspiration is reflected in Participedia’s Mission Statement, which states that although committed to democratic ideals, Participedia does not advance any ideological or programmatic agenda: ‘We believe there are many ways to advance democracy and that they will differ by place, history, culture, and context-based challenges. We recognize existing inequalities in the collection, theorization, and mobilization of knowledge about non-Western forms of democratic innovations. Participedia is committed to working to address this imbalance’ (Participedia, 2023).

What does a decolonized notion of deliberative democracy look like? I offer four approaches for decolonizing deliberative democracy.

The first approach questions the implicit and explicit assumptions about the universality and normative objectivity of Western liberal democratic theories, models, and practices. This requires paying more attention to democratic exclusions and the epistemic blind spots of liberal democracy. It also requires paying attention to the silences, omissions, and erasures of liberal democratic discourses. In some ways, this is what deliberative democracy is already doing by presenting an inclusive alternative to liberal democracy. However, decolonization demands a fundamental rethinking of what constitutes deliberation and the varied forms it can take.

The second approach rethinks notions such as democratic innovation and democratic deliberation, recognising that what constitutes innovation is relative and that deliberation can take diverse forms.

The third approach affirms decolonization as a substantive project—not simply a buzzword or a metaphor (Turk & Wayne, 2012). Decolonization is a tangible agenda that includes (but is not limited to) resistance to colonial hegemonies, restitution for indigenous epistemic repression and material dispossessions, and the affirmation of indigenous life.

Finally, decolonization means recognising and legitimising non-Western epistemologies on communitarian deliberative decision-making and representative governance. We have concrete examples of how this can be done. In Bolivia, longstanding practices of communitarian democracy based on Indigenous customs and traditions have been accorded constitutional recognition and even guide state policies. The inclusion of direct, participatory, and communitarian elements into the democratic system has improved representation for Indigenous peoples. Some indigenous communities have established new governance structures to assert self-determination through negotiations in a complex political field.

Decolonizing dominant West-centric paradigms of deliberative democracy begins with recognising Indigenous and other non-Western-inspired forms of discursive civic inclusion and deliberative participation in decision-making. Discursive decolonization requires fundamentally rethinking democratic concepts and reimagining what democracy can look like in various political, social, and cultural contexts. It requires expanding and, sometimes, deconstructing paradigmatic liberal democratic frameworks and ancillary concepts, such as democratic innovation and deliberative democracy.

A decolonized approach is essential to addressing current challenges with electoral democracy, which is increasingly strained in both the Global North and South. In developed countries, disaffected citizens are too easily mobilised by authoritarian populists and nationalists, and electoral majorities leave exclusions, inequalities, and injustices unaddressed. In developing countries, although significant strides towards responsive and accountable government are being made, human rights are often poorly institutionalised, corruption is endemic, and basic capacities for the collective provision of welfare and security are absent or constrained.

Current global crises complicate the assault on democracy—from climate change to refugee crisis, from armed conflicts to toxic forms of digital communication. These pose threats to people and political systems that are not matched by the scope, powers, and legitimacy of conventional liberal democratic norms and institutions. These political ruptures and socioeconomic disruptions reflect governance deficits that threaten democracy where it exists, stall progress where democracy is weak, and undermine collective capacities where issues exceed the capabilities of existing jurisdictions.

How do we respond to these varied threats to democracy? How do we address new challenges to democracy when old Enlightenment precepts and liberal democratic theories no longer suffice? We seek fresh ideas and rediscover long-overlooked indigenous methods. To meet the needs of increasingly cosmopolitan societies where the historically marginalised actively demand inclusion, we need to re-imagine governance systems. The United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has noted that as societies become ever more multi-ethnic, multi-religious, and multi-cultural, we need greater investments in inclusivity and cohesion to harness the benefits of diversity for all humanity, rather than perceiving it as a threat. Part of this investment includes re-imagining what democracy can look like within and beyond the state.

Decolonization places new demands on liberal democracy by addressing its representational blind spots with its reliance on elections and political parties as primary communication channels between representatives and citizens (Rice, 2016, p. 225). Conceptual and discursive decolonization can strengthen democracy in an era when democratic principles are under assault. Conceptual decolonization can help us better understand Indigenous deliberative practices and draw on them to enhance civic inclusion and participatory democracy. At the very least, a decolonized approach to liberal, electoral democracy will allow more space for indigeneity, representation, and self-determination.

The Report of Canada's National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls that outlines a notion of decolonization scholars of democracy will find helpful. The Report states: 'A decolonizing approach aims to *resist* and *undo* the forces of colonialism and to re-establish Indigenous Nationhood. It is rooted in Indigenous values, philosophies, and knowledge systems. It is a way of doing things differently that challenges the colonial influence we live under by making space for marginalized Indigenous perspectives' (MMIWG, 2019). Decolonizing approaches involve recognising inherent rights through the principle that Indigenous peoples have the inalienable right to govern themselves in relation to matters that are internal to their communities; integral to their unique cultures, identities, traditions, languages, and institutions; and with respect to their special relationship to their resources (MMIWG, 2019, p. 57).

In Nunavut, the Inuit—in seeking to incorporate their values, beliefs, and worldviews into a Canadian system of government—have opted to pursue self-determination through a public government system rather than through an Inuit-specific self-government arrangement. The guiding principle of the Government of Nunavut is *Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit* (or 'that which is long known by the Inuit'). 'IQ,' as it is commonly described, has become the key mechanism for incorporating Inuit cultural values into a Canadian system of government. Studies have shown that the emergence of these new mechanisms for Indigenous and popular participation has the potential to strengthen democracy by enhancing or stretching liberal democratic conceptions and expectations (Rice, 2016, p. 220).

Decolonizing deliberative democracy foregrounds the recognition and reaffirmation of Indigenous cultures and values within the rules and institutions that govern society. It entails re-imagining the nation-state, infusing the state with Indigenous principles, and creating new forms of citizenship. Decolonizing dominant West-centric democratic concepts through new participatory and communitarian elements can improve the representation of Indigenous communities and other marginalised groups in democratic processes. More broadly, decolonization can help address the limitations of democratic theory and the contemporary crisis of democracy.

## Situating a decolonial ethos at the core of deliberative democracy

Ricardo F. Mendonça and Hans Asenbaum

Colonialism is at the very heart of modernity. This is the main argument developed by decolonial theories, which have emphasised how the Western democratic ideals of rationality, publicity, and inclusion not only neglect but depend on colonial exploitation (De Aragão Ballestrin, 2013; Banerjee, 2021; Mignolo, 2009; Quijano, 2007). Modern Western democracies thrive and blossom in contexts marked by colonial violence that allow the extraction and accumulation of resources necessary to sustain these same democracies. Resources of several kinds and forms of knowledge extracted from Latin America, Africa, and Asia are at the very heart of the economic development of modern, liberal, and democratic Europe.

Theories of deliberative democracy are grounded in this modern logic and, hence, struggle to challenge deep colonial inequalities. The project of deliberative democracy is not an active agent of colonialism. It has, however, benefitted from colonial systems and has engaged in negligence and ignorance. Deliberative democracy is, thus, guilty of un-reflected complicity. The research field of deliberative democracy has never managed to properly face how modern forms of rationality have been used to promote and justify exclusion, exploitation, and violence. To be clear, we are not arguing that rationality is intrinsically violent. Nor are we saying that rationality is a Western creation (Ani, 2014). Framing pre-modern and non-Western societies as irrational is a product of modernity. Many deliberative democrats, however, build on modern thinking without questioning it, and this has implications for the practice of deliberative democracy. The commodification and de-contextualisation of deliberative innovations is one dimension of this issue (Johnson, 2015; Hammond, 2021; Lee, 2014). Another dimension of the problem emerges in the internal relations within the academic field, as Westernised academics can only interpret related concepts through Western lenses and fail to recognise the originality and plurality of non-Western contributions.

So, can deliberative democracy be decolonized? If decolonization is understood as an end state or fixed condition to be reached, then the answer is no. However, the answer can change to ‘maybe’ if we think of decolonizing as an ongoing process. Decolonization requires permanent critique, questioning, and rethinking. We suggest understanding decolonization as an ethos, rather than a checkbox. Instead of a temporary acknowledgement of decolonial theories, a decolonizing ethos needs to be situated as the core of deliberative democracy and continuously drive the deliberative project. In this way, decolonization constitutes an ongoing process of fundamental reformulation of deliberative democratic theory and the re-invention of deliberative democratic practice.

If we imagine decolonization in processual terms, the a priori negation of the possibility of decolonizing deliberative democracy makes no sense (Banerjee, 2021). Decolonial theory is not supposed to simply deconstruct existing theories but can play a positive role if thought of as a critical approach capable of making other theories—such as deliberative democracy—aware of their limits, problems, and complicities. In this way, we are convinced that it is worth trying to decolonize deliberative democracy. An ethos of decolonization contributes to the emancipatory drive of original critical theories of deliberative democracy (Hammond, 2019). After all, critical theories of deliberative democracy ‘are most confidently directed against particular repressive or exploitative social relations based on class, gender, race, spatial location, dominant kinds of rationality, and so forth’ (Dryzek, 1990, p. 30). Deliberative democracy’s concern with mutual respect, empathy, and diversity favours the displacing dialogues necessary for a decolonizing project.

Upon an extensive critique and deconstruction of deliberative democracy, we propose three concrete moves to continuously rebuild a self-aware deliberative approach with a decolonizing ethos at its centre.

First, we suggest starting from the bottom-up by engendering a more inclusive process of theory building which includes indigenous communities and social movements. Engaging with an ecology of knowledges can push deliberative democracy in new and more inclusive directions. Ailton Krenak (2019, p. 12), for instance, claims that an ecology of knowledges integrates the ordinary collective experiences and practices of Indigenous communities to challenge the idea of a homogeneous humanity. Indigenous and decolonial methods, with their openness to nonhuman participants, introduce a flat, non-discriminatory ontology (Rosiek, Snyder, & Pratt, 2020). This flat ontology emphasising the equality of participants, the participatory approach to theorising which enhances the agency of participants, and the dialogical quality of this type of inquiry deeply resonates with deliberative democratic values (Johnson, 2022).

Second, we propose a more open and democratic engagement with the Global South or Majority World scholarship. The Global South, and its diaspora in the North, should not be seen as a source of cases investigated with anthropological curiosity. It must not be framed as an inventory of exotic illustrations. Global South scholarship should be met through open dialogue and democratic listening. We claim that proper dialogue could reshape the relationships within the field of deliberative democracy, allowing not only broader scrutiny around concepts and research findings, but also a pluralisation of the theoretical instruments employed. Such broader exchange can lead to a more nuanced approach to democracy, which is capable of grasping context-sensitive issues and avoiding attempts to universalise and reify democracy.

Third, deliberative democracy needs to re-focus on emancipation. Deliberative democracy must emphasise its critical roots to face existing injustices and forms of exploitation (Hammond, 2019). It is not enough to design ideal forums for dialogue and neglect the grave power asymmetries in the broader polity. Inequalities related to gender, race, sexuality, and class must be brought to the centre of debates and understood as a starting point for deliberative theorising.

By starting with inductive theorising, including Majority World conceptions of deliberative democracy, and finally connecting these insights and perspectives to the critical roots of deliberative democracy, we can situate a decolonial ethos at the core of the deliberative democratic project. In providing these concrete moves, we aim at going beyond metaphoric thinking. The decolonizing effort is a practical and concrete project that requires challenging extant forms of oppression and asymmetries (Yang & Wayne, 2012). Theory shapes how we see the world, and the current theories of deliberative democracy are still linked to colonial ways of thinking. Therefore, to decolonize deliberative practice, we need to rethink theories of deliberative democracy.