

Massimo Caon

Deciding experience

Democratic normativism to the test of deliberative democracy

Abstract

This essay aims at pointing out how recent developments inside deliberative theory are relevant to the debate between normative and realist approaches to democratic theory. More specifically, I argue that a substantive understanding of the epistemic functions of a deliberative system offers a decisive argument against current tendencies that confine normative approaches to democratic theory into the realm of utopianism.

Keywords

Deliberative Systems; Reconstructive Normativity; Realism.

Received: 07/04/2025

Approved: 06/06/2025

Editing by: Massimo Caon

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1. Introduction

More than fifty years have passed since philosophical normativism's¹ "resurrection" inside international political theory (Rawls 2017, Ferrara 2021, Maffettone 2010); after decades of arguably undisputed consolidation of its status, at the beginning of 21st century's second quarter PN seems once again to be seriously challenged by realist approaches to political studies. Several historical events during the last two decades have been strengthening this impression: more precisely, phenomena as the 2008 financial Crisis, the first tangible effects of climate change on human societies, the challenges to *pax americana's* hegemony around the globe (Dodds 2023) and the impact of information technologies (ITs) on democratic public spheres (Habermas 2023, Hassan 2020, Floridi 2014) have all raised concern about the possible shattering of democratic horizon's representation as the "end of history" (Fukuyama 1992). In such a scenario, it is difficult not to recall Leo Strauss' well-known diagnosis about political philosophy back in the mid-20th century (Strauss 1957):

The pitiable rump for which honest social scientists do not care is left as prey to philosophers of history and to people who amuse themselves more than others with professions of faith. We hardly exaggerate when we say that today political philosophy does not exist anymore, except as matter for burial, i.e., for historical research, or else as a theme of weak and unconvincing protestations. (p. 346)

Recalling the words of Strauss while looking at the current international order might then foster the question whether 21st century's democratic normativism still has enough grasp on its own object, i.e. contemporary democracies. In other words: can normative approaches to political issues still provide understanding of the world and human affairs? Of course, such an issue might seem easy to discard at first sight: hasn't political-sociological normativism kept showing remarkable fertility as in the cases of, say, Critical Theory's fourth generation and Republicanism's latest contributions- to mention only few examples (Forst 2021, Jaeggi 2021, Bellamy 2019, Pettit 2012)? And more importantly: since – arguably – normativism addresses goals and realism offers explanations, why should we consider normativism and realism as they disagreed? However, these

¹ In order to facilitate reading, I will sometimes address philosophical normativism as PN. Furthermore, this contribution will employ the terms "normativism", "PN" and "normativity" as synonyms.

objections (especially the latter) would make sense only if we understood normativism as a “prescriptive” notion. Quite differently, this contribution will adopt a *reconstructive* reading of PN; as hopefully will become clearer in the following pages, a reconstructive understanding of normativity enables us both to better defend normative democratic theory from charges of utopianism and to get a richer comparative grasp on realism and normativity. More specifically, throughout the article, my reconstructive understanding of normativity will be largely based on Jürgen Habermas’ theory of communicative action and deliberative democracy (Habermas 2022: 427 tab.16, Petrucciani 2000: 102, Floridaia 2017: 329-30; Corchia 2009); the reasons for this heuristic strategy do not simply lie in the global recognition that Habermas’ work has gained in research fields related to this article, but also in the seminal effect his approach to normativity has had on contemporary deliberative theory (see paragraph 2). Given all these premises, we might thus synthesize our leading question: “can normative approaches to political theory still perform a reconstructive analysis of human affairs in a way that it can at the same time understand and transform society? Or – on the contrary – is it arguable that the above-mentioned epochal changes (geopolitical, technological exc.) show how the current phase of modernity is way better explained by realist approaches?”.

Hence, the guiding/underlying concern throughout this paper will be the possibility that the “distance” between normative democratic theory and actual democracy has grown too long, i.e. that normative democratic theory is losing grip on “reality” and moving towards *utopian realms*. This issue holds perhaps more urgency now than a few decades ago, not only in light of the historical changes mentioned above, but also because realist political theory too has not ceased to develop since Arrow’s landmark contributions to the field (Arrow 2012, Austen-Smith & Banks 2000, Achen & Bartels 2016, Dodds 2023, Friedman 2011).

In order to sketch out a possible answer to this issue, my analysis will proceed this way:

1. I will introduce the notion of “deliberative system” as a key development inside contemporary deliberative theory (Floridaia 2017b: 325). More specifically, I will argue that the deliberative-systemic approach risks being inconsistent unless it rejects a *fully procedural* understanding of political justification.

2. David Estlund's epistemic proceduralism will be assessed as being a more consistent candidate than pure proceduralism (see paragraphs 2 and 3) to study the epistemic functions of deliberative systems.
3. Given the essentially *prescriptive* nature of epistemic proceduralism, I will try to show how it can be integrated in normatively *re-constructive* terms (i.e., as abovementioned, in a way that *at the same time describes and transforms* society).
4. Given points 1-3, I will argue that reconstructive normativity seems to be better suited than prescriptive normativity to answer the realist challenge inside contemporary democratic theory – at least with respect to some of its domains.

2. *Deliberative theory and the systemic turn*

The notion of “deliberative system”² has been developed for two decades inside deliberative theory, in competition but not necessarily in opposition to the empirical approach³ (Mansbridge *et al.* 2012: 25); in the first place, this concept relates to the idea that “we should attend to the deliberative qualities of the system as a whole as well as to its particular components” (Bächtiger *et al.* 2018: 14). By reprising the macro-sociological perspective that Habermas built while contributing to the foundation of deliberative theory⁴, a systemic reading of democratic deliberation understands contemporary democracies as social wholes that perform specific functions in multiple parts at their inside; according to this reading,

² In order to make reading easier, I will sometimes call “deliberative system” “DS”.

³ The empirical approach to deliberative democracy has been studied through many historical-genealogical framings (Florida 2017, 2018, Mansbridge *et al.* 2012: 24-6). Developed since the end of the 90s (Bohman 1998) (after a theoretical consolidation of deliberative theory not only thanks to Jürgen Habermas (2013) and John Rawls (2012), but also to several authors in the 80s (e.g. Elster 2016)), the empirical turn inside deliberative theory has been developed via (1) the experimental design of *loci deliberativi* under ideal epistemic conditions and (2) the study of actual institutional segments inside contemporary democracies (Mansbridge *et al.* 2012: 1) However, scholars as Antonio Florida have underlined how it is not possible to find a rigid diachronic distinction between a theoretical and an empirical phase in the history of deliberative theory (Florida 2017b: 315-6).

⁴ This aspect has been stressed by related literature (Barvosa 2018: 13-4, Mansbridge *et al.* 2012: 2 footnote 1, Florida 2017b: 325; see also Maia 2012 and Maia *et al.* 2023).

there is no function that is strictly performed by a single part of a deliberative system⁵ (Mansbridge *et al.* 2012):

A system here means a set of distinguishable, differentiated, but to some degree interdependent parts, often with distributed functions and a division of labour, connected in such a way as to form a complex whole. It requires both differentiation and integration among the parts. It requires some functional division of labour, so that some parts do work that others cannot do as well. And it requires some relational interdependence, so that a change in one component will bring about changes in some others. (p. 4)

“Deliberative system” constitutes a relevant concept not only because it makes room for a critique of functionalism’s imperatives for social reproduction inside deliberative theory; more crucially, it includes a descriptive approach to empirical data and processes which is close to several epistemologies in the *realist tradition* (Bächtiger *et al.* 2018, Dryzek & Stevenson 2014, Mansbridge *et al.* 2012: 13). In this sense, forms of communication such as strategic or agonistic interaction (not to be mistaken for agonistic theories of democracy (Fiorespino 2022: 173-243)) are not simply excluded from deliberative standards, but constitute a phenomenon that *under certain conditions* can bring forth truth claims (Mansbridge *et al.* 2012):

[...] a systemic approach allows us to analyse the division of labour among parts of a system, each with its different deliberative strengths and weaknesses, and to conclude that a single part, which in itself may have low or even negative deliberative quality with respect to one of several deliberative ideals, may nevertheless make an important contribution to an overall deliberative system. [...] In another example, serious discussions on European Union (EU)-wide matters take place mostly among elites, while the national media and, to a lesser degree, national politicians, organize the public debate on EU issues. Although the overall system is far from ideal epistemically, the elite discourse provides expertise, reasoned and informed mutual accommodation, and mutual respect, while the nationally instigated deliberation provides perspectives that might otherwise not be heard. By enhancing inclusion, the national media also increase the EU’s normative democratic legitimacy. (p. 2-3)

⁵ The notion of “deliberative system” holds a specific sociological meaning which is different from functionalism (Parsons 1991) insofar as it addresses epistemic-normative functions inside a given social whole (Mansbridge *et al.* 2012: 19).

Thus, *differentiation* and *integration* are the two guiding lines through which a deliberative system can be understood; the *normativity* of a social-deliberative system can be assessed in a macro-sociological way, analyzed in multiple intersubjective contexts that, if taken alone, might be illegitimate with respect to certain deliberative standards (Bächtiger *et al.* 2018: 15). In spite of the abovementioned relation between Habermas' theory of democracy and the systemic turn of deliberative theory, the systemic approach has not been founded on national borders; for instance, Mansbridge *et al.* (2012) claim a deliberative system can be conceived not only in a vertical-institutional sense, from institutions to "informal friendship networks", but also in an issue-related way (*Ibidem*: 6-8). However, they argue, even more important is the notion of "social decisions": a deliberative system is also made of informal discussions that are not formally regulated, i.e. all those discursive contexts outside of the public-institutional or business-nongovernmental domain. Thus, contemporary literature on the systemic turn clearly rejects the legal dimension of decisional processes as a privileged research object, focusing instead on the relevance of social processes of collective learning; it can be argued this approach has the remarkable advantage of further opening the deliberative paradigm to the study of digital infospheres and how they affect Habermas' well-known two-track scheme (Floridi 2014, Schönberger & Cukier 2013, Habermas 2013).

To sum up and detail what we have seen so far, two major points concerning deliberative theory's systemic turn should be underlined: (1) the systemic approach is remarkably sensitive to processes as democracies' trans-nationalization and digitalization; (2) it *renovates* and *innovates* Habermas' contribution to deliberative theory. While Habermas builds his theory of democracy and law through the well-known "center-periphery" metaphor, scholars working in the systemic turn understand a deliberative system by including "both informal decisions by accretion and binding decisions that take place outside the state. It goes beyond the boundaries of the nation state to include international, transnational, and supranational institutions, and extends as well to societal and institutional (e.g. corporate) decisions that do not involve the state" (Mansbridge *et al.* 2012: 9). Moreover, the systemic approach frames DSs as holding functions that are able to perform a critique of social systems (Parsons 1991, Habermas 2022), thus crucially going beyond Habermas' "lifeworld-system" dyad and welcoming theoretical contributions from Frankfurt School's latest generation (Forst 2021, Jaeggi 2021). As quoted above, an example of this

theoretical-critical innovation can be found in the interaction scheme between EU experts and citizenry.

Mansbridge *et al.* (2012) discuss three functions which can be detected in any DS; these are epistemic, ethical and democratic functions. A deliberative system performs an epistemic function when decisions are informed by all relevant reasons for their implementation and deliberation includes every possible part of the system (Mansbridge *et al.* 2012: 11). At the same time, an ethical function is detectable in a DS when mutual respect is promoted at its inside among citizens, since “to deliberate with another is to understand the other as a self-authoring source of reasons and claims” (*ibid.*). While introducing the democratic function of a deliberative system it is fundamental to note that *in any DS there can be tension among functions*; this is especially evident if we compare *epistemic* and *democratic* functions: to perform a democratic function means to make room for full inclusion of every citizen inside a deliberative system. Of course, Mansbridge *et al.* underline how the notion of “democratic function” in this context presupposes a *very demanding normative standard*, since “well-functioning democratic deliberative system must not systematically exclude any citizens from the process without strong justification that could be reasonably accepted by all citizens, including the excluded” (2012: 12).

However, this paper claims, it is not the democratic function of deliberative systems the most crucial issue stemming from related literature: *way more problematic is to conceive an epistemic function of a DS while the philosophical approaches at the basis of deliberative theory itself significantly differ from each other*. To see why this is the case, it suffices to list epistemic proceduralism, post-metaphysical Kantianism⁶ and pragmatism (Florida 2017b: 308-12). Indeed, the notion of “epistemic function” inside a DS radically changes whether we consider theorists as Rawls, Habermas, Estlund and Bohman, i.e. *depending on the normative perspective through which we understand a deliberative system*. More specifically, how are we supposed to make use of a deliberative-systemic framework that does not explicitly define its own relation to epistemic proceduralism (Estlund 2008) and, say, procedural fairness (Habermas 2013)? Arguably, contrary to the latter, the former grounds democratic legitimacy through

⁶ As it is well-known, this label cannot account for the deep differences detectable among authors in this tradition; of course, the most famous case is that of Jürgen Habermas and John Rawls (Finlayson 2019).

an epistemic standard which is *outside* democratic deliberation; quite similarly, the Rawlsian burdens of judgement (Rawls 2012) frame the relation between epistemic judgement and political judgment in a way which is quite different from Bohman's own perspective, centered on the notion of "interest" (Bohman 2014; 2004; see also Pappas 2008); furthermore, this lack of philosophical definition risks ignoring how prescriptive and reconstructive normative approaches differ inside deliberative theory. Perhaps even more importantly: how can the systemic approach claim to innovate Habermas' theory of democracy if both the epistemic and the democratic functions of a DS are still understood through the notion of procedural fairness (Mansbridge *et al.* 2012: 12)? Trying to overcome this *impasse* is not only a crucial task to better ground the coherence of the systemic-deliberative approach, but also an opportunity to value both its proneness to reconstructive normativity and its sensitivity to the changes now affecting democracy worldwide.

3. *Normativism versus utopophobia: inside the systemic turn*

As claimed in paragraph 2, one of the most crucial research issues in the deliberative-systemic approach concerns the tension between Habermas' legacy and normative-epistemic innovations clearly emerging from related literature. I believe a promising research avenue in this direction can be found in David Estlund's epistemic proceduralism and the issues it raises (Estlund 2008). Arguably one of the most original contributions to contemporary deliberative theory, Estlund's approach stands halfway between epistocracy and fair democratic proceduralism⁷: *epistemic proceduralism stresses the fundamental role played by the epistemic quality of democratic procedures in any attempt to justify democracy*. Fully detailing Estlund's argument here would be both impossible and beyond the scope of the present article. More simply, let us recall, our aim here is to highlight how rising issues in contemporary deliberative theory promise to relevantly contribute to the broader debate between (reconstructive) normativism and realism inside democratic theory. Therefore, having already sketched out the emerging notion of "deliberative system" and the

⁷ Estlund subsumes views like that of Jeremy Waldron (2000) – according to which what fairness requires of democratic procedures is independent of any epistemic standard – under the broad family of fair proceduralism (Estlund 2008: 94)

questions it opens, I will now dedicate to two specific tasks, i.e. drawing a general scheme of Estlund's argument and highlighting how at least some of the difficulties Estlund's approach faces might be better dealt with in terms of *reconstructive* normativity.

Concerning the first task, Estlund's core claim is that democracy "will be the best epistemic strategy from among those that are defensible in terms that are generally acceptable" (Estlund 2008: 42): however better some epistemic methods might be, they are too controversial among *qualified points of view*. This last point here needs some further explanation. Quite arguably, Estlund's philosophical position is based on a specific reading of Rawlsian political liberalism (Estlund 2008):

Rawls's liberal criterion of legitimacy attempts to put political justification beyond the reach of certain controversies [...]. It does, however, take a controversial stand in distinguishing between reasonable and unreasonable points of view. Rather than engage the debates about where to draw that line, let us look more generally at this kind of approach – [...] at the approach that says legitimacy requires justification in terms that are acceptable, even as it does not require that it is acceptable to every point of view. (p. 44)

Thus, in order to develop his epistemic proceduralist approach, Estlund recasts "reasonable" as "qualified" (we will further discuss this point in the following pages). Given all these premises, Estlund conceives his account of the legitimate exercise of political power as *one* necessary condition for it (I will shortly go back to this last aspect), i.e. that it "be justifiable in terms acceptable to all qualified points of view"⁸ (Estlund 2008: 41). As abovementioned with respect to its acceptability requirement, epistemic proceduralism stands halfway between epistocracy and pure procedural approaches; if the latter – according to Estlund – cannot actually avoid bringing in some sort of epistemic dimension insofar as they claim democratic procedures are not fair in the same sense as coin-flipping (see Estlund 2008: 89), the former can be defeated somehow on its own ground (Estlund 2008):

But lovers of the truth want to know what the truth is about justification itself as well, and that requires that we determine whether only true points of view or also some others are qualified to defeat proposed justifications. If the truth is that

⁸ Estlund distinguishes between authority and legitimacy (Estlund 2008: 41). For the purposes of this paper, I will address legitimacy without delving into authority.

justifications must be acceptable to all qualified points of view, including many that are not true, then lovers of the truth should accept this view of justification. (p. 4-5)

However, as the Author explicitly acknowledges, his design of epistemic proceduralism gives an account neither of the content nor of a general criterion concerning reasonableness or qualification: in the overall argument, at least in some minimal sense qualified points of view are assumed to be plausible according to contexts (Estlund 2008: 63). At the same time, though, truth claims do play a major role in Estlund's picture insofar as his reading of Rawlsian political liberalism goes well beyond the shift from "reasonable" to "qualified": in a nutshell, an acceptability requirement cannot work without appealing to the truth. What this means is that the acceptance criterion works as "a statement of authorization" and that it "asserts that doctrines that are acceptable to all qualified people are appropriate in political justification in the sense that normative conclusions from those doctrines are no less legitimate for the falsity of any of the doctrines" (Estlund 2008: 60). But, Estlund concludes, authorizing statements cannot be held to be authorized without also being true.

Having sketched out a general scheme of Estlund's approach, we can now go back to the query that opened this paragraph: the emerging systemic-deliberative approach seems to be in need of a sharper philosophical definition on pain of being incoherent. If, as we have been pointing out, it is accepted that a DS approach cannot really be innovative with respect to Habermas' theoretical legacy without rejecting fair proceduralism, then Estlund's own development of deliberative theory can hardly be ignored among the best candidates to perform such a task. However, even if we agreed to recast our understanding of the epistemic function of deliberative systems in terms of epistemic proceduralism, at least one major difficulty would immediately arise: at the end of paragraph 2 I have claimed that the notion of "deliberative system" is prone to *reconstructive normativity*. Arguably, this is quite directly demonstrated by the seminal role played by Habermas' philosophical and sociological work in the foundation of the systemic-deliberative paradigm, as explicitly acknowledged by related literature (Floridia 2017b: 325); at the very same time, though, Estlund's normative perspective seems way more *prescriptive* than *reconstructive* (Estlund 2008):

[...] what the critics of supposedly "unrealistic" normative theories need to show is not that "you and I both know it will never happen". That's no objection to a

moral theory of politics. They would need to show that not only will it never happen, it is not something people could do (or, at least, not without more effort or sacrifice than it's appropriate to require). Maybe epistemic proceduralism asks more of voters than they will ever deliver, maybe not. Either way, this is no deficiency in the theory whatsoever. (p. 14)

I believe epistemic proceduralism might better deal with at least some of its difficulties if understood in *reconstructive* normative terms; of course, if this was the case, we would also solve our trouble here, i.e. *epistemic proceduralism and the deliberative-systemic approach would both work with reconstructive normativity*. To offer an argument for my claim, let us now consider how Estlund answers what he calls the “overexclusion objection” (to his qualified acceptability requirement: see *supra*; Estlund 2008: 45). According to his interpretation of it, this objection implies that “justifications must be acceptable to all those over whom the power in question is supposedly permissible” (Estlund 2008: 46); however, since objections are very likely to be raised on lots of political issues, the overexclusion objection would conclude that “almost no law is ever legitimate” (*ibid.*). This might seem to be a kind of decisive counter-objection to the overexclusion one, but more difficulties arise as soon as we consider (1) that – as just quoted above – probability has nothing to do with normativity unless it tells us the normative standards we are promoting “are not something people could do” (Estlund 2008: 14); however radical the overexclusion objection might be, it is not actually impossible. (2) There are moral contexts in which any actual objection succeeds in prohibiting action, as in the case of sexual contact (Estlund 2008: 46). Hence, Estlund’s conclusion is, the overexclusion objection and the qualified acceptability requirement are compatible on the condition that they are held to be only necessary and not sufficient conditions for legitimacy.

However brilliant this solution is – this paper does intend to suggest it –, it still leaves us at least with one decisive problem if we were to apply epistemic proceduralism to the deliberative-systemic framework: we would be exactly in the same kind of predicament we have seen with the relation between Mansbridge *et al.*’s approach and Habermas’ legacy (see *supra*). How could an epistemic function work if *actual objections* and *qualified possible objections* were both held as justification defeaters in the exercises of political power? As hinted in paragraph 1, this would seem to relegate any normative effort to ground epistemic accounts of political legitimacy to the realms of utopianism. I believe it is here that a

normative reconstructive understanding of the qualified acceptability requirement might help: if actual objections which could count as disqualified *do exist* – statistically speaking – *in democratic politics*, then the fact of their actual existence might give them less normative weight than qualified possible objections. In other words, if we conceive normative standards reconstructively (see *supra*, paragraph 1), then it seems quite plausible to say that possible qualified objections count more than actual disqualified ones. Surely, this still would not directly address the sexual contact counterexample to Estlund's approach: if the mere existence of constant objections is so normatively detrimental to the justification of political power, how can we justify that actual objections to sexual contact normatively count more than qualified points of view? Even if someone refused sexual contact on Nazi ideology grounds, the counterpart would not be justified in keeping on trying sexual contact.

To sum up, if we read Estlund's analysis of the overexclusion objection in terms of reconstructive normativity, there seem to be two parallel conclusions:

- (a) The empirically detectable constant existence of actual disqualified objections in democratic politics gives them less normative weight than possible qualified objections to the legitimate exercise of political power.
- (b) Whether or not actual objections to sexual contact are qualified, nothing can be held to normatively defeat them.

At first sight, both (a) and (b) seem perfectly compatible with a reconstructive reading of the qualified acceptability requirement: just as, say, Nazi ideology-based objections cannot weigh more than qualified objections in political justification, so actual disqualified objections in cases of sexual contact normatively count more than any qualified acceptability criterion. In both cases, reconstructive normativity is affected by the specificity of the context. Of course, detailing this discussion would go well beyond the scope of this article. What our analysis has been all about here is simply showing how current literature into normative democratic (deliberative) theory shows the potential to fully answer the realist challenge and object to charges of utopianism; more specifically, I have tried to show how *reconstructive* normative approaches promise to help dealing with several normative-epistemic issues at the heart of actual democracies worldwide.

4. Conclusions

This article began with a question concerning realist and normative approaches in current democratic theory, given the epochal changes democracy is undergoing worldwide. More specifically, I have asked if normative democratic theory is losing grip on how actual democracy works. In order to investigate this research question, this article has distinguished between prescriptive and reconstructive normativity; hence, we dug into current deliberative theory to test whether reconstructive normative approaches promise to answer realist charges of utopianism better than prescriptive ones. After investigating ongoing normative-epistemic issues both in the deliberative-systemic paradigm and in a key deliberative approach as David Estlund's epistemic proceduralism, this paper concluded that normative democratic theory – at least with respect to some of its research domains and issues – currently seems to work better if understood reconstructively, also given its own “competition” against realist theories of democracy.

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