

Stuck. Or Why Democracy Can Be All Joy and No Fun

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Abstract

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Pieter Pekelharing

In *Democracy without shortcuts* the word ‘stuck’ occurs at least seven times, often in passages that are crucial for understanding the gist of the book. *Democracy without shortcuts*, Lafont explains, is “a book written by a citizen to other citizens” (Lafont 2020, 5). Not many works on democracy are written from that perspective. Most are conceived from the third-person perspective of an observer. If they address citizens at all “it is mainly to talk *about* citizens not *to* them.” (Lafont 2020, 5).

The ideal Lafont defends is the democratic ideal of self-government. Democracy, according to Lafont, rests on the fundamental commitment to ensure that all members of the *demos* “can equally own and identify with the institutions, laws, and policies to which they are subject.” (Lafont 2020, 3).

In pluralist societies, however, which are rife with disagreement, the mutual commitment to ensure that citizens can own, and identify with, the institutions to which they are subject, can be a fragile and quite burdensome undertaking. Hence “there is a strong temptation to simply ‘skip it’, to take shortcuts that remove political decisions from debates in the public sphere in order to avoid problems such as overcoming disagreements, citizens’ political ignorance, or poor quality deliberation within the public sphere.” (Lafont 2020, 3).

It is in contexts like these that the word ‘stuck’ comes into its own. The ideal of self-government provides joy but it often isn’t fun. We citizens did not choose one another and we frequently disagree. The experience of having our beliefs made hostage to opinions we intensely disagree with is not a particularly comforting experience. It is what makes populists transform the notion of ‘the people’ into an exclusive category: democracy represents ‘us’, the good people, not ‘them’, not migrants, or the cosmopolitan elite.

Trying to save ‘true’ democracy by avoiding ‘fruitless’ debate and bypassing those who don’t belong to the good people, or by skipping talk and leaving it to the experts, or by resignedly conforming to the majority, are all tendencies which tend to erode the ability of citizens to talk to each other, and provide those in power with an excuse for only talking about themselves. Blindly deferring to majorities undermines democracy.

Commitment to democracy, says Lafont, is simply the realization that there are no shortcuts: “However arduous, fragile, and risky the process of mutual justification of political decisions through public deliberation may be, simply skipping it cannot get us any closer to the democratic ideal. In fact, it will move us further away.” (Lafont 2020, 4).

Organizing a democratic society means devising institutions and structuring public opinion and debate in such a way that citizens are given enough time and space to be swayed by the better argument. Not on special occasions but on an everyday basis - in families, the workplace, the school, as well as in politics. Democracy means schooling citizens in the ability to listen, to recognize, to deliberate, to represent, to vote, to join or exit unions, social movements or political parties. Though none of these practices are inherently democratic, taken together they determine the quality of political will-formation and collective decision-making in society. Habituating citizens to these practices, making sure they are respected and enhanced, helps certify that, in principle, no citizens are excluded from political will-formation and decision-making. Taking the participatory route stops citizens from having to *blindly* defer to political decisions.

Near the end of her book Lafont comes up with the example of talking to her son. Because the passage captures and summarizes so much of the argument in her book it is worthwhile to quote it in full:

Imagine I am discussing with my teenage son why the policy of “no texting while driving” is reasonable. During the conversation, it may transpire (rather quickly) that my son, in fact, does not have any new reasons or information to offer that would justify a revision of my considered judgment about the appropriateness of this family policy. In fact, the conversation may be such that, after a while, I get the impression that all I am doing is keep providing evidence and information against his mistaken beliefs [] In my view, [his desire to stick to his favored policy of texting while driving] is generating all kinds of bizarre arguments and examples and is blinding him against accepting the obvious. [...] I would never choose my son, of all people, to seriously discuss and evaluate the reasonableness of a more permissive texting policy [...]. Why am I having this type of conversation with him? [...] [T]he answer is obvious. I am stuck with my son [...]. I may wish he was older, wiser, and more prudent so that he would realize

the tremendous significance of getting this particular policy right, so that he would not put his life at risk and have a better chance of surviving into adulthood. But I can't change that. He is the son I've got, the one who must comply with the policy of no texting while driving [...]. I can only convince him of something if I offer him exactly the type of information, evidence, arguments, examples, counterexamples, etc. that his present cognitive stance requires, so that I may be able to change his mind on the merits of the policy. I have to figure out the specific arguments that may move him from his current cognitive state (i.e. what he happens to believe, assert, value, etc.) to endorsing the opposite conclusion. I am hoping that this transformation will occur once the "unforced force of the better argument" works his way through his epistemically creative resistance and he is finally convinced that the no texting policy is most reasonable. [...] [Why am I spending so much effort on this?] Well, every parent knows the answer: because I am trying to avoid the alternatives (at least for as long as it is feasible, given what is at stake). I am trying to convince him instead of simply coercing him into blind compliance (e.g. by taking his phone away or threatening with bad consequences). I am trying to avoid exercising unilateral power over him by simply forcing him to blindly obey the policy I favor. I want him to endorse the policy as reasonable upon reflection so that he can identify it as his own and comply with it on its own accord. Needless to say, my son is trying to do the same but just defending the opposite policy. (Lafont 2020, 165-167)

In this quote many of the concerns, uncertainties and worries that motivated Lafont to write the book come together. It highlights what it takes for citizens, who are stuck with one another, to become and to be members of a self-governing community.

It may seem strange to illustrate the process of political will and agenda formation by a familial conversation between a mother and her son. Its point, she says, "is simply to highlight the distinctive normative significance of deliberation about coercive policies among those who must be subject to them in the presence of deep reasonable disagreements." (167). It is what happens when those, having to live under one roof, find out they are stuck with each other and strenuously commit themselves to finding rules all can comply with.

Politically speaking the example has its limitations. Being a conversation between two people,

it does not do justice to the importance of voting and majoritarian decision-making. Having majority rule maximizes the number of individuals in a community who exercise self-determination. Voting and majoritarian decision-making enable citizens to transform themselves into a collective agent and get things done, despite their disagreement. When votes are counted, people know who won and who lost. Dissenters gain an indication of their strength, which may then become the basis for their next political campaign even as they accept the legitimacy of the decision.

What the example of Lafont talking to her son does make clear, however, is why voting and majoritarian decision-making can only take us so far. The whole point of the example, and of Lafont's book more generally, is to illustrate that even when we respect one another's equality and freedom through the vote, it may still be the case that significant numbers of the demos are either asked, assumed, or forced, to blindly defer to the decisions made. If the community claims to be ruled democratically, that's an affront to democracy.

Majority rule helps to ensure the values of freedom and equality, but to get from there to the value of rule 'by the people, of the people and for the people', majority rule does not take us far enough. What counts is the means by which a majority comes to be a majority: the quality of antecedent debates, the willingness to modify views to meet the opinions of minorities, the relative satisfaction given the latter by the fact that they had a chance and that next time they may be successful in becoming a majority. In democracy majority rule depends on the quality of public opinion and political will-formation, and also on the ability, as a collective, to get things done.

It is for these reasons that the classical distinction between 'aggregative' and 'deliberative' democracy is better conceived of as a gradual difference than as a hard dichotomy. Any aggregation of votes must take place under some set of normative conditions in order to qualify as an election. Similarly, not just any process by which participants argue or debate by advancing and entertaining utterances constitutes democratic deliberation.

What Lafont's book adds to the debate on democracy is her emphasis on the participatory perspective. There are no shortcuts. It is only by taking the long participatory route of "citizens attempting to change one another's hearts and minds" that 'voting' and 'arguing' respectively resemble 'elections' and 'deliberation'. In her view democracy stands or falls by the constant

attempt of citizens to engage in and create the right kind of institutional setting for taking the participatory route. There is no substitute for it. The more we tend to skip it, either by leaving decision-making to the experts or by simply asking those who disagree to ‘play by the rules’ and passively conform to legitimate majorities, the darker the prospects for the ideal of self-government.

In singling out the special ‘circumstances of politics’ she has made one thing memorably clear: the realization that we are stuck with one another. In forming our beliefs we are unavoidably guided by the true, the good, and the beautiful. But in politics, as in the family, we do not get to choose our deliberative partners. Under these circumstances it is only through the institutionalized practices of listening, recognizing, representing, etc., that we have a chance of settling on decisions that can be justified to those who must comply by them. The more we skip talking to those we intensely disagree with, the less our grip on democracy and the weaker our ability to distinguish compromises from sell-outs that merely put a nice face on blind obedience. For Lafont, it is only “to the extent that citizens can mutually justify the political coercion they exercise over one another, [that] they can see themselves as co-legislators in precisely the way the democratic ideal of self-government requires. It is because political decisions must be reasonably acceptable, not to the rulers but to the people who are subject to them, that in a democracy the people rule.” (Lafont 2020, 102).

Freedom and equality are necessary but not sufficient for self-government. Performing that last act can be a grueling process. It’s why realizing these ideals often provides joy but no fun.

Let me conclude by imagining a conversation, this time not between her and her son but between her and me. We are having a discussion about what it means to take the participatory route. I tell her how impressed I was by the book. She has provided one argument after another for the unavoidability of taking the participatory route. Her opponents’ proposals to ‘skip it’ have been skillfully driven into the ground. She has refuted the argument of over-demandingness and eloquently defended the democratic role of constitutional courts. She has demonstrated that even though political deliberation is a genuine epistemic practice, its aim is not so much the search for truth – although it is that too - but to specifically address those we are stuck with -an aspect of justification her opponents have missed and populists deliberately try to avoid (something they have achieved electoral success with). But I can’t stop feeling uneasy.

As with Wittgenstein's contention, her elucidations seem to leave everything as it is. The constitutional courts she defends are there, the practices of representing, voting, protesting, etc., are there too. There is no lack of citizens' efforts to widen the participatory route. And haven't democrats always attempted to distinguish deference from blind deference? That concern was more or less born with democracy. She began her introduction by lamenting the sorry state of contemporary democracy. But how does the book help in changing this? Is it purely our understanding that she wants to change? I tell her she wrote an inspiring book. But the moment I go out into the world I get stuck. Not with her but with the world and how the book relates to it.

Biography

Pieter Pekelharing used to teach philosophy at the University of Amsterdam. He is now retired and writes articles and reviews for various journals. He has followed the advice of Jaron Lanier and has deleted most of his social media accounts. He can be reached by email: p.pekelharing@uva.nl