Deliberation and Global Governance: Liberal, Cosmopolitan, and Critical Perspectives

William Smith and James Brassett

Recent decades have seen a proliferation of proposals within political theory and international relations to reform global governance institutions along democratic lines. It is, though, increasingly possible to discern another related but distinct trend: proposals to reform these institutions by making them more deliberative. In many cases these two aspirations—to enhance the democratic and deliberative character of global governance—go hand in glove, particularly when democracy itself is understood in deliberative terms. However, the sheer number of approaches that seek to open up governance to deliberative reason, contestation, or some other mode of public communication, coupled with the fact that not all of these approaches are characterized by their advocates as “democratic,” suggests that it may be fruitful to focus specifically on the theme of deliberation. To that end, we address the emerging nexus between deliberation and global governance.

Three distinct approaches to deliberative global politics can be identified, which we label liberal, cosmopolitan, and critical. Although there is substantial diversity and disagreement within each paradigm, these labels mark out recognizable, albeit porous, boundaries in the intellectual terrain. Liberals aim to establish a shared basis for ongoing public reasoning among international actors, usually in the form of a minimum range of human rights, but do not equate this deliberative praxis with any broad-based democratization of global governance. Cosmopolitans, by contrast, are more optimistic about using deliberation as a basis for achieving democracy at global—or at least transnational—levels. And while critical approaches share this optimism, they focus more specifically on the democratic potential of deliberation within global civil society and its public spheres.

In what follows, we provide a critical discussion of each approach. Our aim is to map an emerging literature that is rich and promising, as well as complex and
diverse. We highlight the strengths and weaknesses in liberal, cosmopolitan, and critical approaches with a view to encouraging their ongoing development. Our suggestion is that, despite their differences, all three approaches unite in identifying deliberation as a vital tool of critical reflection in the global realm. The principal interest that these deliberative approaches should hold for academic study and political practice is, therefore, that they foreground the currently underdetermined state of knowledge about legitimacy and power in global governance, while developing a theoretically rich and operationally relevant approach to dealing with that indeterminacy. In this way, we hope to provide a fulcrum for theorists of deliberative democracy, on the one hand, and scholars and practitioners of global governance, on the other, to openly contest both the communicative values and the political makeup of contemporary global governance.3

Such a venture is no doubt limited by its openness. Without a fixed idea of the “correct” standard(s) of deliberation, the scholar of the politics of global governance could well question the practical use of such reflective ventures. Equally, without a fixed idea of the case at hand—of either the deliberative principles or a neat definition of global governance—the philosopher could well wonder where their much prized “elegant argument” will come from. But, on our reading, the emerging nexus between deliberation and global governance demands that such disciplinary blinkers are removed (for the moment at least) in the hope of developing a politically relevant and philosophically reflective conversation. And the requirement for such a conversation can be seen in the complexity and nature of global governance itself.

Global governance “speak” has proliferated in recent years. In policy-making circles, governance emerged as both a technical managerial discourse of international organizations and, in the goal of “good governance,” as a normative ideal for developing states to aspire to. For some the term “global governance” is an analytical compromise that seeks to take account of the obvious and spatially extensive powers of international organizations, while seeking to cut off the critical charge of global government. For others, global governance takes a sociological form, which seeks to reflect the growth of nonstate, commercial, and cultural networks that have emerged to administer and (on occasion) apportion values in the context of globalization. A further discussion, to which this article intends to contribute, focuses on the normative dimensions of global governance.4

Critiques of global governance range from the straight defense of sovereign powers, through neoliberal assertions that governments have too much say in
the world economy, and on to a variety of reformist ideas that seek to extend, incrementally, the range of social and ethical responsibilities that the institutions of global governance should endeavor to address. Moreover, the origin of these various critiques is also part of the politics of global governance. In particular, many calls for reform of such institutions as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Trade Organization (WTO) have emerged from the array of voices contained within “global civil society.” For this reason, perhaps more than any other, deliberation is an idea that traverses both the political practice and the normative debates surrounding global governance.

Any attempt to fix the status of global governance as simply international organizations, or the administration of the world economy and/or its key networks, runs up against the burgeoning and, on occasion, vociferous agency of global civil society. Policy responses, including both direct exclusions (as in the case of G8 meetings) and participatory engagement (as with the proliferation of outreach programs by such organizations as the WTO and World Bank) underline the importance of deliberative practices in global governance. Many of the more ambitious reformist approaches to global governance therefore emplace global civil society as the ethical agent apparent. Indeed, several of the approaches to deliberative global governance discussed below aim to harness the critical and pedagogical potential of this agent.

We therefore argue that deliberation can contribute to the politics of global governance as both a standard of legitimacy and as a way of recognizing (or not) the ethical value of including a range of actors and social issues per se. We suggest that, on this view, the issue at hand is not so much “deliberation and global governance” but “deliberation as global governance.” The subject is a moving feast that requires a degree of openness to the importance of ideas and insights from different disciplines, as well as the capacity to go back and forth between scholarly reflection and the contested and political practices of global governance themselves. Thus, the final section outlines some cursory research questions that our approach may lead to.

**The Idea of Deliberation**

What is “deliberation”? How might we characterize approaches to or practices of global governance as “deliberative”? And why has deliberation become such a prominent feature of proposals to reform global governance?
The nature and value of deliberation has, in recent times, been most systematically investigated by political theorists. In particular, competing models of “deliberative democracy” are now a prominent feature of today’s theoretical landscape.\(^5\) While there is no settled definition, deliberative democracy is often understood as a system of government in which free and equal citizens engage in a collective process of political debate. What differentiates deliberative theories from alternative interpretations of democracy is the idea of “public reason.”\(^6\) Public reason refers to an ideal of political justification that specifies the norms that are to regulate democratic institutions and their argumentative practices. It requires that democratic institutions and political decisions be defended on the basis of reasons that all participants can accept. Legitimate political decisions should not be made exclusively on the basis of an aggregation of preferences, or strategic compromises between competing interests, but on the basis of public reasons.

Some accounts incorporate substantial restrictions on what can count as a genuinely public reason in deliberative democracy; for instance, they may require citizens to abstain from invoking their “comprehensive moral or religious views” and deliberate on the basis of a “family of political conceptions of justice,” at least in relation to certain issues.\(^7\) Other accounts appear to adopt a broader interpretation of what can count as a public reason, while retaining the idea that law and policy should, ideally, be made on the basis of reasons acceptable to all in conditions of pluralism.\(^8\) Still others apparently eschew any kind of content restriction on public reasoning, sanctioning a wide range of opinions and defending “endogenous” characteristics of deliberation that will, hopefully, lead to reasonable outcomes.\(^9\) The common idea is that public deliberation—public reasoning about issues of shared concern—should be one of the principal ingredients of political life.

These theories of deliberative democracy are a major source of inspiration for deliberative approaches to global governance. At the same time, as shall become apparent, deliberative models of global governance at the international level are sometimes elaborated in such a way that they end up differing markedly from their “parent” state-based conceptions of deliberative democracy. In order to orient the following discussion, we understand deliberation in a minimal fashion as a process of public reasoning geared toward generating political decisions or public opinion about how to resolve shared problems. This minimal definition can be augmented by noting that, as in deliberative democracy, political decisions should be
made on the basis of public reasons, not merely an aggregation of preferences or a strategic compromise of interests. In addition, the process of debate that accompanies decision-making should, as far as possible and desirable, be conducted openly and in public.\textsuperscript{10}

We shall categorize an approach to global governance as deliberative, then, if it aims to embed processes of public reasoning at the heart of global decision-making, or if it at least aims to make global decision-making more responsive to public reasoning. The norm of deliberation could apply to institutions that are commonly identified as the principal global governance bodies, such as the United Nations, the WTO, the World Bank, the IMF, and the World Health Organization. Alternatively, it could apply to less formal sites of communication, such as civil society associations, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), or transnational public spheres. The defining characteristic of a deliberative approach to global governance is its commitment to public reasoning in transnational and/or global realms.

We should stress at the outset that this thumbnail sketch does not presuppose that a deliberative approach to global governance must be democratic. This may seem strange, given our claim that deliberative accounts of democracy are a major influence on deliberative approaches to global governance. We deny that a deliberative approach to global governance must be democratic because many theorists agree on the need to promote public reasoning at transnational and/or global levels but disagree about whether this public reasoning should be characterized as democratic. This issue is at the heart of the disagreement between liberals, on the one hand, and cosmopolitans and critical theorists, on the other. To take account of this disagreement we propose, initially at least, disassociating the concept of deliberation from democracy.

Clearly, our minimal understanding of deliberation as public reasoning does not have much content. The theorists we discuss below substantiate the ideal of deliberative global governance by describing in more detail its fundamental features. But even with this minimal idea of deliberation, we can begin to understand the current vogue for deliberative approaches in political theory and international relations. Public deliberation may improve the legitimacy of global governance, by requiring that decisions be made on the basis of public reasons that affected parties can accept. Public deliberation may be an effective tool for promoting transparency, enabling those affected by decisions to see why and how they were made. It may also contribute to greater accountability,
placing affected parties in a better position to understand and criticize the actions of global governance bodies. And it may promote greater efficiency, by increasing the input and circulation of relevant information and opinions in decision-making processes.

Of course, all these claims for deliberation require greater elaboration and defense. And it should also be remembered that theorists of deliberation often develop much more ambitious and transformative projects, some of which aim to fundamentally challenge current distributions of power and resources at the global level. The idea of deliberation can be applied to global governance in many different ways, with diverse political implications. It is to these more concrete applications that we now turn.

**Deliberative Approaches to Global Governance**

In this section, we introduce three paradigms within the emerging literature on deliberative global governance. Our aim is to suggest categories that are sufficiently determinate to differentiate positions in the literature, while being flexible enough to allow for differences within and similarities between each camp. In using the labels liberal, cosmopolitan, and critical, we hope to capture something about the intellectual and political orientation of each approach. In relation to each position, we address three important questions: Who deliberates, what do they deliberate about, and why is deliberation important?

*Liberal Approaches*

Liberal approaches identify public deliberation as an important component of global governance. They conceptualize deliberation as taking place primarily among representatives of bounded political societies within regional, international, and global institutions. The content of deliberation is given by a liberal theory of international order, comprising principles to guide the foreign policy of peoples, guidance for the collective formulation of institutions or cooperative associations, and a statement of fundamental moral principles that can be shared by all members of the international “society” of peoples. Deliberation is important because it provides a common medium for debating and interpreting the principles that unite the society of peoples and an ongoing practice that might, if carried out in the right way, contribute to the deepening of ties between peoples.
This sketch is heavily influenced by John Rawls’s account of liberal internationalism in *The Law of Peoples*. It may seem strange to include this account in our discussion: after all, Rawls does not specifically discuss the issue of global governance and does not explicitly develop a deliberative approach toward it. Nonetheless, Rawls’s account qualifies for inclusion because it defends a conception of public reason tailored to the international realm. Rawls defines this conception as “the public reason of free and equal liberal peoples debating their mutual relations as peoples.”

Joshua Cohen elaborates on this liberal idea by describing “global public reason” as:

a broadly shared set of values and norms for assessing political societies both separately and in their relations: a public reason that is global in reach, inasmuch as it applies to all political societies, and global in its agent, inasmuch as it is presented as the common reason of all peoples, who share responsibility for interpreting its principles, and monitoring and enforcing them.

He embellishes this characterization by going on to describe global public reason as “a broadly shared terrain of deliberation.” This metaphor captures an important function of global public reason: its values and norms provide a shared vocabulary for peoples to debate issues of common concern and to determine the principles and arrangements that should underpin their cooperative activities.

In the Rawlsian account, the content of global public reason is given by “familiar and largely traditional principles . . . from the history and usages of international law and practice.” These “familiar” ideas include, among others, the equality of peoples, principles to limit the pursuit of state interests and the waging of war, and respect for human rights. This content supplies a store of global public reasons, which should be the basis for peoples justifying their foreign policies to one another and engaging in shared deliberation.

A distinguishing characteristic of global public reason is that the “terrain of deliberation” that it maps does not include ideas and principles that are unlikely to gain widespread adherence in conditions of substantial philosophical, ethical, and religious disagreement. Indeed, it is a defining feature of the approach to deliberative global governance developed by Rawls and Cohen that they avoid drawing on such views; for instance, both authors are careful not to invoke controversial ethical, moral, or religious values, even some that are core components of a liberal conception of justice for a constitutional democracy, when working out the rationale and range of human rights that should inform liberal foreign
policy and global political institutions. This caution derives from their commitment to liberal toleration; and such toleration should warn liberals against a wholesale projection of their own vision of justice onto the global realm. As Cohen puts it:

Of course there are limits on toleration: and an aim of the conception of human rights is to set out those limits. But the observation here is simply that, once we take into consideration the value of toleration, we will be more inclined to accept differences between what we take to be the correct standard of justice—and the rights ingredient in those standards—and the human rights standards to which all political societies are to be held accountable.14

Toleration requires that liberal peoples—and, indeed, liberal political philosophers—should accept a less comprehensive package of human rights globally than they would domestically. According to Rawls and Cohen, for example, an international doctrine of human rights—acceptance of which is a condition of equal standing in a society of peoples—should not incorporate a right to democratic government, though it does incorporate some sort of right of consultation or interest representation. This would mean that, in a society of peoples deliberating its underlying values according to global public reason, liberal peoples should not impose sanctions against regimes that are not democratic, at least insofar as the latter satisfy a minimum threshold of “decency.”15

The fact of global disagreement and the requirements of toleration combine to generate a theory of global public reason that differs in content from the public reason of a democratic society. This underscores the fact that the liberal approach under review here does not conceptualize the global arena as a potentially democratic space. The liberal approach to global public reason does not incorporate many of the core ideas associated with democracy, including equal political rights; nor does it conceptualize individual citizens as the primary agents within global deliberation. In particular, the approach does not require the participation of individuals within global deliberative practices, nor does it require holders of political power—peoples pursuing foreign policies or institutions of global governance—to justify their decisions directly to individuals. Rather, it offers a different standard of legitimacy for global decision-making. It suggests that, in order to be legitimate, institutions and decisions at regional, international, and global levels must be defended on the basis of arguments that can be reasonably accepted from the perspective of liberal and decent peoples:
The ideal of the public reason of free and equal peoples is realized, or satisfied, whenever chief executives and legislators, and other government officials, as well as candidates for public office, act from and follow the principles of the Law of Peoples and explain to other peoples their reasons for pursuing or revising a people’s foreign policy and affairs of state that involve other societies.16

This characterization of the ideal of public reason indicates that a key aim of the liberal approach is to establish conditions of mutual respect among peoples. This respect is manifested through a shared process of reason-giving in which representatives of peoples advance arguments that they believe, in good faith, could be accepted as reasonable by other peoples, with their different ideas about culture, values, and political justice. In addition, the deliberative practices of a society of peoples, and the various cooperative practices and institutions they facilitate, will hopefully deepen ties of affinity among peoples over time. This pacification of the global order, however, does not amount to its democratization.

The liberal account of global deliberation contains much of interest and originality. In particular, it advances a powerful argument from toleration to explain why the aspiration to export liberal democratic values will often be inappropriate. As an account of global deliberation, however, the liberal account is somewhat unclear and incomplete.

First, it lacks a full and clear account of the scope of global public reason, that is, the agents and issues to which it applies. In particular, it is not always clear whether the norms of global public reason apply to all agents who might exercise political power within the international arena. This lack of clarity emerges when Rawls addresses whether it is reasonable to offer nonliberal peoples financial incentives to become more liberal. While this would be an unreasonable foreign policy for liberal peoples to pursue, it would apparently not be an unreasonable policy for financial institutions, such as the IMF.17 This suggests that global public reason applies strictly to peoples but not so strictly to the global governance institutions they may set up. In addition, it is not always clear whether the norms of global public reason apply to all issues that might collectively concern the society of peoples. Global public reason appears to apply primarily to discussions about the underlying values of a society of peoples, such as the interpretation and enforcement of human rights, though it is unclear whether and how it could be extended to apply to shared deliberation over a broader global policy agenda.

Second, the liberal approach lacks a full and clear account of the requirements of global public reason, that is, what public reason permits and prohibits in
deliberation between peoples. In relation to foreign policy, it is clear that public reason prohibits justifications for coercive acts against other peoples that presuppose a comprehensive doctrine. It is less clear, however, what public reason requires in relation to noncoercive—or diplomatic—relations between peoples. Indeed, Rawls treads a somewhat thin line by expressly allowing that liberal peoples have an entitlement to raise “critical objections” against decent peoples while at the same time requiring that relations of “mutual respect” obtain between them.  

Third, this approach lacks an account of what one might describe as the evolution of global public reason, that is, whether and how its content—its ideas of international order and its account of human rights—might change over time. There is some suggestion that evolution might be a consequence of internal reforms within well-ordered societies, particularly if nonliberal societies undergo a process of noncoerced democratization. There is little indication, though, of how global public reason itself might be a means of reinterpreting or recreating the terms of cooperation among peoples. This is in stark contrast to the ideal of public reason as it is worked out by Rawls for liberal societies. The public reason of a liberal society is made up of a “family of political conceptions of justice,” meaning that “the forms of permissible public reason are always several.” The content of public reason is thus not “fixed,” but can potentially change over time. If this were not the case, “the claims of groups or interests arising from social change might be repressed and fail to gain their appropriate political voice.”

It may be that global public reason, suitably elaborated, has a similar dynamic potential, though that potential appears, to us anyway, less evident. There are some indications, though, that alternative liberal approaches are being developed that do explore the potential for global deliberation to alter the values and ideals that lend content to global public reason. In a recent article in this journal, Allen Buchanan and Robert Keohane defend, from a broadly liberal perspective, an account of legitimacy in global governance that combines respect for pluralism with an apparently more dynamic conception of global deliberation. They propose a standard of “minimal moral acceptability” for global governance institutions, which, in a Rawlsian spirit, only incorporates the “least controversial human rights.” At the same time, they defend an “epistemic-deliberative” process that involves dialogue among those institutions and various critical constituencies, geared toward expanding the range of global human rights and improving the means of their realization.
In making explicit the potential of global deliberation as a tool of critical reflection, and in making clear the role that nongovernmental agents might play in deliberative practices, Buchanan and Keohane arguably provide a link between the liberal approach under discussion here and the more cosmopolitan accounts analyzed below. To be sure, Buchanan and Keohane do not describe their proposal as a democratization of global governance. But they do move toward the cosmopolitan idea that global political power should be justifiable from the standpoint of individuals and not merely the peoples they belong to.

Cosmopolitan Approaches
Cosmopolitans identify deliberation as a crucial component of global governance. Like liberals, they see deliberation as a means of guiding foreign policy, forging transnational ties and institutions, and articulating shared global values. Unlike liberals, however, they have a broad account of the agents of deliberation: deliberators can include state representatives, NGOs (including corporations and civil society groups), and individual citizens. And cosmopolitans differ from liberals in characterizing deliberation as a means of democratizing global governance.

The cosmopolitan paradigm is arguably the hardest of our three models to describe, as a number of contrasting cosmopolitan approaches to deliberative global governance can be identified. David Held’s proposal for “cosmopolitan democracy” calls for a complex scheme of “multi-layered” democratic governance and an enforceable system of global public law.²³ This new institutional framework would provide a home for deliberative politics within and among national, regional, and global levels; as Held puts it, “the resolution of value conflicts becomes a matter of participating in public deliberation and negotiation, subject, of course, to provisions protecting the shape and form of these processes themselves.”²⁴ These “provisions” include a range of fundamental cosmopolitan principles, including the “equal moral status of persons” and the idea of “active agency.”²⁵ The impetus behind Held’s project is to allow political communities to reclaim the capacity to exercise meaningful democratic self-determination. According to Held, new regional and global institutions are necessary precisely because globalization undermines the possibility of achieving self-determination within the nation-state.

James Bohman develops an alternative cosmopolitan approach.²⁶ His “cosmopolitan republicanism” is also committed to forging new global and regional
democratic institutions, but his approach departs from Held’s by rejecting the ideal of self-determination as a normative basis for democracy. According to Bohman, the increasingly interdependent nature of social interaction means that it is no longer possible to demarcate “self-legislating” political communities.\textsuperscript{27} Cosmopolitan democracy should not, therefore, be based on the chimera of self-determination, but on the republican value of freedom as “non-domination.”\textsuperscript{28} The ideal of nondomination requires that all persons enjoy meaningful opportunities to contest arbitrary exercises of power over them. Given that the current regime of economic and political globalization allows for this kind of domination, a transnational democratic politics, giving citizens opportunities to contest the exercise of global political power and to initiate deliberation about the nature and terms of that power, must be forged.

Another influential cosmopolitan perspective can be found in the recent work of Jürgen Habermas.\textsuperscript{29} He agrees with Held and Bohman that globalization—along with the historical failure of the nation-state to adequately safeguard human rights—means that democracy must transcend the horizons of the state. At the same time, he is less optimistic than these authors about the prospects for a global democratic praxis, arguing that the “ethical-political self-understanding of citizens of a particular democratic life is missing in the inclusive community of world citizens.”\textsuperscript{30} Habermas therefore endorses a hybrid institutional arrangement, in which democratic components are limited to only certain types of international institutions. Transnational institutions, operating at regional levels, must democratically regulate economic and social affairs, while supranational institutions, operating at the global level, should administer international peace and uphold human rights. Transnational polities, such as the European Union, can build upon shared cultural and historical resources to sustain robust democratic deliberation. Supranational institutions, by contrast, can only rely on “the spontaneous activity of a weak public sphere that . . . at least makes possible a form of legitimation via a loose linkage of discussion and decision.” This “weak public sphere” is comprised of media organizations and social movements that exert pressure on supranational institutions. Given the restricted political functions of supranational institutions, Habermas contends that a global public can generate enough influence and integration to render these institutions sufficiently legitimate.\textsuperscript{31}

Despite disagreements over the normative foundation and institutional design of global deliberative politics, Held, Bohman, and Habermas take views that
distinguish them from their liberal counterparts. In particular, unlike Rawls, who focuses on the fundamental interests of liberal and decent peoples in constructing his account of global public reason, cosmopolitans foreground the fundamental interests of individuals. This has two immediate consequences.

First, cosmopolitans do not restrict the content of global public reason to the limited range of human rights preferred by liberals. In particular, the three authors discussed here insist that, at least in principle, all citizens of the world should be entitled to equal rights of political participation, both within their own national communities and within reformed transnational or global deliberative institutions.32

Second, cosmopolitans require that global political power be justifiable not from the perspective of representatives of states or peoples but from the perspective of their citizens. Cosmopolitans insist that global and transnational governance institutions must defend their underlying values and political decisions to the citizens whose lives are affected by them. An important aim of Bohman’s cosmopolitan republicanism is to enhance the “reason responsiveness” of global governance institutions, by which he means their accountability to the opinions and concerns of their constituents. As he puts it: “institutions tend towards domination simply due to the absence of any obligation to provide a justification to citizens that they could accept.”33 Held also alludes to this notion of public justification when he characterizes his project of cosmopolitan democracy as one that “builds on principles that all could reasonably assent to in defending basic ideas.”34 And Habermas stresses that international human rights must be justifiable to all citizens “in their capacity as human beings.”35

This emphasis on public justification explains another unifying theme of cosmopolitan approaches: the idea that the democratic character of deliberation can be enhanced through the “civilizing” influence of “global civil society.” Talk of global civil society can sometimes descend into uncritical sloganeering, so it is important to appreciate its full significance within a cosmopolitan framework. On standard accounts, international NGOs act as important means of enhancing accountability and representation. On the cosmopolitan account, however, they have a further, deeper significance. Through public criticism and activism, and the articulation of neglected interests and viewpoints, NGOs may pressure powerful political bodies, including institutions of global governance, into offering public justifications for their actions. In so doing, global civil society transforms
the deliberative process itself simply by virtue of compelling the powerful to engage with the powerless.\textsuperscript{36}

The reformist agenda of cosmopolitan approaches lends them a radical aura that is arguably absent from the liberal account surveyed in the previous section. Cosmopolitans also probe deeper into the implications of globalization for the theory and practice of democracy. At the same time, their radicalism arguably comes at a price.

First, any theory that endorses democratic deliberation at transnational and global levels will immediately be subjected to a range of well-worn objections. Critics have pointed not merely to difficulties of scale, but also to challenges caused by the lack of a shared culture, language, or demos.\textsuperscript{37} Held arguably owes us some account of whether and how a common identity can emerge that might support collective processes of self-determination at global and transnational levels. Bohman, while embracing a conception of democracy that appears to have less need for cultural or linguistic commonalities, still makes the demanding requirement that sufficient levels of political equality, in the form of equal “capacities” for influence and organization, be achieved to secure the legitimacy of deliberative global institutions.\textsuperscript{38} Even Habermas, who distances himself from the aim of a global democracy, may be vulnerable to objections that he overstates the democratic potential of global civil society and understates the difficulty of generating an international consensus over human rights.\textsuperscript{39}

Second, cosmopolitans confront a familiar dilemma in their efforts to promote transnational and/or global deliberation. Cosmopolitans aim to empower citizens through democratizing global and transnational deliberation, giving them effective opportunities to shape the design and decisions of global governance. At the same time, as we have seen, all three of our theorists identify principles, such as active agency, nondomination, or human rights, which must be realized in order for global deliberation to get off the ground. Indeed, Held, Bohman, and Habermas all support the creation of global or transnational constitutional arrangements that would instantiate these principles.\textsuperscript{40} There may be a danger that cosmopolitans prematurely constrain democratic deliberation in establishing these principles as constitutionally off-limits or nonnegotiable. This is not a difficulty that necessarily confronts liberals; their aim is to establish a brand of global public reason that can secure cooperation and respect among peoples, not to enhance opportunities for citizens to exercise democratic control over their own affairs. Cosmopolitans, by contrast, are committed to giving
global citizens greater control over their destinies and may, therefore, be uneasy about constraining the agenda of global deliberation.

Cosmopolitans are perhaps unlikely to recognize this as a genuine dilemma, given that they characterize the principles in question as preconditions of democratic deliberation. A third objection may raise harder questions. In elaborating and justifying their proposals, cosmopolitans draw on ideas and values that some liberals may regard as comprehensive and, therefore, potentially intolerant in circumstances of global plurality. Consider, for example, Held’s cosmopolitan principles of the equal moral status of persons and the idea of active agency, understood as “the capacity of human beings to reason self-consciously, to be self-reflective, and to be self-determining.” As Held concedes, these ideas are “intertwined with liberalism and the Enlightenment,” and “clearly tied to particular traditions and places.”

The difficulty with these types of arguments is that they appear to entail judgments about ethics and politics over which one can expect substantial disagreement within global contexts. Therefore, Held’s assertion that his theory “builds on principles that all could assent to” arguably requires more defense than it is given.

Cosmopolitans do, however, have a powerful strategy for combating charges of intolerance. Cosmopolitans allow comprehensive liberal ideals into global public reasoning (and by extension exclude or marginalize nonliberal ideas) on the condition that the interpretation of these ideals is determined in public deliberation; as Held puts it, “the elucidation of their meaning cannot be pursued independently of an ongoing dialogue in public life.” Bohman develops this idea by claiming that “republican freedom” entails “the capacity of citizens to amend the basic normative framework, the power to change the ways in which rights and duties are assigned.” In this respect, global governance institutions may be able to publicly justify their actions by invoking more comprehensive ideals than would be permitted in Rawlsian public reason provided that the interpretation of these ideals is open to further revision and reinterpretation. As in Buchanan and Keohane’s account, deliberation can assume the important function of transforming the underlying values of global governance. Cosmopolitan public reason, then, is at once more comprehensive and more dynamic than Rawls’s account.

There is, though, one more observation, which, in a way, applies to both liberal and cosmopolitan approaches. Liberals presuppose radically different conceptions of deliberation in domestic and international contexts: the former is the public reason of a democratic community of citizens, comprising a wide range
of civil, political, and social rights, whereas the latter is the public reason of a society of equal peoples, comprising a minimal range of human rights. Cosmopolitans apparently see little difference in the nature and content of deliberation in domestic and international contexts: both can be conceptualized as a democratic process of public reasoning between free and equal citizens and both appear to be realizable within broadly similar institutional frameworks. In fact, the best approach probably resides somewhere between the cosmopolitan and liberal positions. In other words—contra cosmopolitanism—we might expect to see differences between democratic deliberation in domestic and transnational contexts, but—contra liberalism—that difference need not be so radical that it precludes the very possibility of democratic deliberation beyond the nation. In order to transcend the current impasse between liberals and their cosmopolitan critics, it is helpful to explore alternative, more critical, accounts that appear to stake out such a path.

**Critical Approaches**

Critical approaches, like their cosmopolitan cousins, value deliberation as a means of democratizing the global arena. In their emphasis on the “software” of deliberative democracy (discourses and communication) rather than its “hardware” (formal institutional structures), critical theorists offer a vision of transnational democracy that contrasts with the cosmopolitan approaches discussed above. The critical approach identifies “discourses” as the object of deliberation, and civil society activists as the principal agents of deliberation; deliberation is important because it constitutes a means of reflexively challenging—and hence democratizing—the discourses that order and structure complex processes of global governance.

This sketch is highly influenced by the model of transnational democracy advanced recently by John Dryzek.45 Interestingly, given the note on which we concluded our discussion of cosmopolitan approaches, Dryzek explicitly states that “democratic governance in the international system must . . . look very different from democratic government within states.”46 This claim is partially supported through Dryzek’s acceptance of the idea that the international realm is best understood as embodying “governance without government.” This means that it lacks the stable hierarchical structures or “sovereign centres of power” that can be found in domestic democratic regimes. The international order relies less on government and more on governance, understood as “the creation and
maintenance of order and the resolution of joint problems in the absence of . . . binding decision structures.”

Dryzek criticizes what he sees as the cosmopolitan aspiration to recreate institutions of the nation-state at transnational and global levels, suggesting that such a move would merely replicate the vicissitudes of those institutions, such as “constitutional excess” and “excessive administration,” on a much larger scale. At the same time, he emphatically rejects the liberal claim that democracy in the international realm is impossible. Instead, he draws on a novel interpretation of deliberative—or, as he sometimes calls it, “discursive”—democracy as a basis for his radical reformist agenda.

Dryzek’s deliberative approach is built on a quasi-sociological theory of the key role that discourses play in shaping governance in the international system. He defines a discourse as:

a shared set of concepts, categories, and ideas that provides its adherents with a framework for making sense of situations, embodying judgements, assumptions, capabilities, dispositions, and intentions. It provides basic terms for analysis, debates, agreements, and disagreements. Its language enables individuals who subscribe to it to compile the bits of information they receive into coherent accounts organized around storylines that can be shared in intersubjectively meaningful ways.

His examples of discourses include market liberalism, globalization, realism, sustainable development, and human rights. Discourses such as these play a key role in orienting or “co-ordinating” the various regimes, behavioral norms, and cooperative arrangements that comprise practices of global governance. Global policy agendas and decisions are often determined according to the outcome of contests between competing discourses. According to Dryzek, projects for democratizing global governance should focus, then, on the democratization of discourses.

The idea of democratizing a discourse or a conflict of discourses is, to put it mildly, rather opaque. Dryzek goes to great lengths, therefore, in explaining how it might be achieved. He begins by contrasting his approach with those that emphasize “high level” deliberation within formal processes of negotiation, such as deliberation between state representatives or within institutions like the United Nations. This kind of deliberation—which is rather like that envisaged by the liberal account explored earlier—is criticized as insufficiently democratic, because it does not provide “opportunities for participation by all those affected by a decision.” Against this approach, Dryzek turns to another strand in deliberative
democratic theory, “which looks to the potential for diffuse communication in the public sphere that generates public opinion that can in turn exercise political influence.”\(^{50}\) His hope is that civil society activists and NGOs can act as bearers of democratic values within transnational public spheres. They can perform this function insofar as they are able to criticize, contest, and change the terms of dominant discourses or the balance of power between and among competing discourses.

This “transnational democracy” is realized “in communicatively competent decentralized control over the content and relative weight of globally consequential discourses.”\(^{51}\) The civil society actors who contest the terms of global governance should not actively seek entry to sites of collective decision-making, because within such sites deliberative practices are often overwhelmed by a competition to win control; genuine deliberation is more likely to take place over longer periods of time in informal sites, where the costs of moderation and changing positions are less high.\(^{52}\) In addition, civil society actors should contest discourses in such a way that they increase the scope for “reflexive action.” This means, among other things, that they educate publics about the nature and terms of dominant discourses, reveal their contingent and changeable nature, and encourage a process of critical reflection on their adequacy and acceptability. Dryzek embellishes the requirements of this kind of communication by claiming that it must be “first, capable of inducing reflection, second, non-coercive, and, third, capable of linking the particular experience of an individual or group with some more general point or principle.”\(^{53}\)

Dryzek’s distinctive approach makes a valuable contribution to the emerging debate on deliberative global politics. His account of the nature and role of discourses is particularly useful, lending his theory a sociological complexion that underscores its plausibility. At the same time, his vision of a deliberative global politics is open to a number of criticisms.

First, it is not clear to us that the critical approach succeeds on its own terms in democratizing discourses. In particular, given that Dryzek criticizes liberal approaches for failing to secure “opportunities for participation by all those affected by a decision” in transnational deliberation, it is surprising that his own theory lacks an account of widening access or increasing participation. Perhaps he assumes that a vanguard of transnational civil society activists will be able to effectively represent the interests of affected parties in deliberative contestation, though little is said to substantiate this claim. Indeed, Bohman articulates the
powerful objection that Dryzek’s discursive approach may be “insufficiently democratic” because “it cannot compensate for differing capacities for organization among [civil society] groups.” In fact, cosmopolitan approaches may claim superiority in this respect: given that they remain committed to developing institutional “hardware” to go alongside the “software” of transnational public spheres, they can suggest various means—elections, referenda, sampling—of incorporating citizens directly within these institutions.

Second, Dryzek may prematurely drive a wedge between the deliberative and decision-making aspects of transnational democracy. He appears to want to “save” civil society from being sullied by the grubby realities of politics; in so doing, he effectively abandons the aim of democratizing decision-making processes in order to preserve a space for “authentic” deliberation in transnational public spheres. While this aim is laudable, it may be guilty of overlooking the possibility—perhaps even the necessity—of opening up existing transnational decision-making bodies to greater democratic accountability. It also denies what may be a legitimate desire on the part of activists or NGOs to directly influence, or engage in, these decision-making processes.

Our third and final concern returns to a recurring theme in this discussion by probing the connection between “reflexive” deliberation and public reason. In order to be authentically reflexive, deliberative processes may need to conform to an account of the general or public interest that Dryzek does not fully elaborate. This observation is provoked by his statement that reflexive deliberation must be “capable of linking the particular experience of an individual or group with some more general point or principle.” The precise nature of a “more general point or principle” is left unspecified, though apparent affirmations of “tolerance and enlightenment” and “universalistic discourses such as human rights and liberalism” may provide some clue as to what it entails.

The lack of a fuller account is a serious omission: a key challenge for any theory of democratic deliberation is to indicate how the particular and the general can be brought together. To use less philosophically loaded vocabulary, such a theory must give some indication of how deliberation that incorporates a plurality of opinions can generate an outcome that, somehow, can be seen as legitimate or acceptable from the perspective of all involved. And this leads us back to the idea of public reason that occupies liberal and cosmopolitan theorists. Dryzek requires the notion of a “general point or principle” to gauge the reflexivity—and, therefore, the democratic pedigree—of deliberation, even
when it takes place within civil society rather than decision-making bodies. Without such a generalizing perspective, it would be very difficult to criticize deliberative processes that are hijacked by sectional interests or to demarcate a line between “civil” and “uncivil” society.

If we are to accept Dryzek’s claim that deliberation must involve an “implicit appeal” to “universal standards”—and infer from this that it is these standards that lend content to the idea of a “general point or principle”—then we are entitled to ask of him that he say more to elaborate and defend this claim. In particular, how can his critical approach deal with the problem of global disagreement over such standards?

**Critical Reflection in Deliberative Global Governance**

We conclude with a brief discussion of a core theme that manifests itself, in different ways, in all three perspectives: the importance of *critical reflection* to deliberative global governance.

Deliberation is presented by liberals, cosmopolitans, and critical theorists alike as a uniquely suitable tool of critical reflection at the global level. “Deliberative reflection,” we might say, is a means for international and global political actors—whether state representatives, NGOs, or individual “citizens of the world”—to determine, reinterpret, and in some cases transform the principles and values that regulate their cooperative activities.

The importance of reflection is made explicit in cosmopolitan and critical accounts, though it is also present, albeit to a less prominent degree, in liberal approaches. It is clear that “global public reason”—or the “public reason of a society of peoples”—can be a basis for interpreting common values, such as human rights or the laws of war (even if it is less clear whether and how these values can be radically reinterpreted, or even changed, in and through global public reasoning). In fact, it may be possible to position our three paradigms on an informal spectrum, according to the extent of deliberative reflection they require: at one end of the spectrum would be the liberal approach of Rawls, in which the terms of discussion (the Law of Peoples) are established but up for interpretation; at the other end of the spectrum would be the critical approach of Dryzek, in which the terms of discussion themselves appear to depend on the outcome of a discursive praxis; in the middle would be the various cosmopolitan approaches, with Held closer to the liberal position and Bohman closer to the critical
position. This is a somewhat stylized exercise, involving what may be undue simplification, but it does give some indication of the different priorities of each perspective when it comes to embedding reflective practices in the global arena.

The attractiveness of deliberative reflection is highlighted when we bear in mind the present uncertainty and disagreement about global governance, both in theory and in practice. This current ambiguity means that attempts to “fix” the normative basis of global governance may appear premature. And herein lies the rub. As Dryzek and Bohman suggest, it is the contested—and contestable—status of many areas of global governance (including its definition) that marks this discussion as one of both reflection and performance. That is to say, at the same time that we delineate the terms, spaces, and participants of deliberative global governance, we provide innovative theoretical vocabularies that gradually influence emergent political realities.

Robert Keohane alludes to this process in a recent discussion of evolving conceptions of legitimacy in global governance. He argues that “the view that agreement by states, according to institutionalized rules, guarantees legitimacy relies on a deeply statist normative theory.” Keohane goes on to explore the contingency and, therefore, the malleability of such norms. He suggests:

As democracy has become more widely accepted as the best form of government domestically, its international analogues have also made inroads. Demands for multilateral organizations to become more accountable to “civil society” rather than simply to states have proliferated. Insofar as these views become widespread, the sociological legitimacy of statism will decline and multilateral organizations will need to find new bases for their claims of legitimacy in the 21st century.58

On this view the spread of deliberative ideas may itself be a constitutive element of the growth of deliberative global governance. What may also be required, then, is not simply the articulation and defense of deliberative principles, but also an ongoing sociological exploration into the migration of deliberative ideas and ideals through global institutions and the actors of global civil society.

Such a sociological investigation might explore a number of pertinent research questions:

• Deliberative Reforms of Institutions. What have been the most promising attempts to reform the institutions of global governance along deliberative lines? Here we might look at attempts to foster more participatory policy-making practices on the part of the IMF and the WTO. We might
also explore efforts to open up and engage with concentrations of global economic power, such as recent attempts to deliberate with multinational corporations over the design of market regulation policies in the European Union and the United Nations.

- **Global Civil Society.** How well does global civil society contribute to deliberative practices? What deliberative ideals do the actors within global civil society foster? There is already an exhaustive literature on the impact of global civil society on decision-making in global governance. But such debates arguably frame global civil society as an (unquestionably) ethical agent. More work can be done to identify and contest the areas where global civil society can itself act as an obstacle to free and fair deliberation.\(^{59}\)

- **Results.** What have been the effects of deliberative practices in global governance? How have policy stakeholders and policy-makers benefited from inclusion? More problematically, has greater deliberation curtailed the efficiency and performance of the policy-making institution? Overall, has the evolution and spread of such norms and values transformed the space(s) of public reason in a significant way?

All these questions take as their focus the move from the elaboration of deliberative theories to the emergence of deliberative practices. They therefore call for research that combines normative and empirical analysis.

In lieu of such research, this article has been concerned with the politics and pluralism of emerging deliberative approaches to global governance. What is evident from our investigation is that deliberation is increasingly viewed not merely as an exotic “add-on” to decision-making institutions, but as a means of continually assessing the nature, basis, and design of these institutions. This, we submit, is the distinctive feature of deliberative approaches to global governance. None of the deliberative paradigms discussed above are perfect; problems were identified with each that need to be addressed if they are to be developed into compelling guides for reforming global governance. In short, the project to define and develop more deliberative practices of global governance is, as it were, at the end of a worthy and original beginning. The task for future research is to transcend the (comforting) separations that exist both among the various disciplines and between the academy and the institutions of global governance, in order that the intellectual energy put into print is translated into meaningful dialogue with the political practices it critiques.
NOTES


3. This article is part of an international and interdisciplinary project, entitled “Deliberation and Global Governance: Theory, Practice, Critique,” that draws together theorists of deliberation and scholars of global governance with a view to mapping the emerging terrain and exploring potential synergies. Participants involved with this project include James Bohman, Garrett Brown, Molly Cochran, Nancy Fraser, Randall Germain, Patrick Hayden, Richard Higgott, Kim Hutchings, Tony McGrew, Peter Newell, Philip Pettit, and Jan Art Scholte. Comments on this paper and questions about the larger project are welcome at jamesbrassett@yahoo.com.


10. We leave open the possibility that, as suggested recently in an interesting article by Simone Chambers, public reasons may, on occasion, argue against openness and transparency (Simone Chambers, “Behind Closed Doors: Publicity, Secrecy, and the Quality of Deliberation,” Journal of Political Philosophy 12, no. 4 (2004), pp. 389–410).


16. Ibid., p. 56.

17. Ibid., pp. 84–85.

18. Ibid., p. 84.

19. Ibid., pp. 61–62.

20. Ibid., pp. 142–43.


