

BOOK REVIEW

We Decide! Theories and Cases in Participatory Democracy, Temple University Press

Michael Menser

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Introduction

We Decide by Michael Menser, assistant professor of Philosophy and Urban Sustainability Studies at Brooklyn College and Assistant Professor of Earth and Environmental Sciences and Environmental Psychology at the City University of New York Graduate Centre, takes a wide-ranging look at the theories, models and applications of participatory democracy. It is of interest, not just to educators interested in citizenship, but all educators who find themselves tasked with developing employability skills and aptitudes, for it challenges educators to frame those employability skills within the wider political and environmental context of the increasingly challenging times both educators and learners face.

Analysis and Evaluation

The book sets out to provide

“comparative and critical examinations of (Participatory Democratic Projects) in order to identify best practices and help improve the weak ones and protect the strong ones, so that, in this moment of global chaos and system change, creating a more democratic, sustainable, and inclusive system is not a speculative fantasy but an engaged and multisector strategy.” (Menser 2018:6)

Menser is concerned to moving beyond critique of political schools of thought to creating a working model of participatory democracy. Central to his thesis is the claim that without economic democracy there cannot be political democracy. To support this thesis, he examines the oft cited basis of democracy, ancient Greece, noting the participation in democracy of its land owners relied upon the exploitation of a slave labour force and contrasts this to the living example of participatory democracy that the architects of the American constitution had access to, that of the Iroquois Federation. The Iroquois system, he argues, is of interest as it weds participatory and inclusive political processes to democratic economic practices that are environmentally sustainable. He also notes that the wide extent of the Iroquois Federation was not as a result of empire building but was founded on peace and sought to expand relations of reciprocity rather than domination. Menser reads the current global context as one in which economic, political and environmental concerns need to be understood and addressed together in a similar fashion. The book in effect takes a wide-ranging look at some of the most viable models that could do this.

He assumes no prior knowledge, but instead provides both a historical and theoretical overview in chapter one focussing on participatory democracy and in chapter three on economic democracy. In the second chapter of the book he lays out the criteria he uses throughout the book to examine different models of participatory decision making about resources through forms of governance, primarily participatory budgeting, and then models of participatory decision making across the wider economic system beyond state governance both in terms of production and consumption. These criteria are:

1. Enable effective and democratic community control of process and promote capability development of individuals and group in the process.
2. Promote effective and responsive governance to develop, choose, and implement quality projects that meet community needs.
3. Reduce political and economic inequality in terms of the process and the projects.
4. Strengthen "civil society" broadly construed to support associations and community-based organizations to enhance their participatory capabilities, their impact and their numbers.

He uses these criteria to assess the models of participatory budgeting adopted by stakeholders across the political spectrum, from neo-liberal designs to shrink the state through the efficiencies gained, through communitarian, associationist and anarchist-autonomous projects in chapter two and to assess the forms of economic democracy within worker and consumer cooperatives in chapters four and five.

The claim that the book's strength is its theoretical depth is not fully borne out by the coverage of the concepts. What Menser does is provide a useful genealogy of the developments over the years of various forms of participatory democracy and provides useful distinctions between the different key terms used. The section of case studies provides more scope to ground theories in an examination of practice. The case studies not only provide important information of process and consequences, they are used to test key theoretical premises such as Tocqueville's assertion that participation in democracy requires a strong civil society to work, and its converse, that participatory budgeting strengthens civil society.

Examples of participatory budgeting for the most part emphasise work in the Americas and would do well to draw on both the theoretical and empirical work done in other quarters. Interestingly, when Menser turns to look at examples of economic democracy, that of both worker and consumer cooperatives, the examples he turns to are European and Asian, that of the Basque country's Mondragon, and Japan's Seikatsu Club Cooperative Union. Both examples show that cooperative systems can be powerfully scaled up and present a viable alternative at a systemic level of economic activity. He uses these two examples to think through even more pervasive forms of system change. The penultimate chapter is entitled We Administer! From Public-Private to the Social-Public and attempts to help the reader imagine a bridge between the models articulated in the preceding chapters. Social Public is here defined as neither state or private ownership, but community management of affairs where the administration agenda is set by the community and constituents or serviced recipients are agents in the process such that the distinction between producer and user and/or governor/governed is blurred. He alludes back to the systems of self help that Benjamin Franklin championed in the formative stages of America's government and the associationist synergy de Tocqueville articulated.

In chapter seven he acknowledges there is much room for further research and action and that any project serious about scaling up participatory democracy needs to develop research centres but also banking capacity and mechanisms for ensuring multiple voices and perspectives are included in systemic change. Menser argues several different futures may open up space for different kinds of participatory democracy to evolve. Having assessed the arguments of different political perspectives, in the end he counsils that a checkerboard approach that tries different models in different contexts is the likely road ahead. As he concludes, climate change may well make it necessary to move from political theories preoccupation with why it won't work to what can we do to make it work.

Conclusion

Whilst the book leaves many questions unaddressed in a somewhat sketchy manner, it provides a useful roadmap for educators who hope to prepare learners who will help participatory democracy continue to “attract, evolve and surprise” with the innovations needed to make both social justice and environmental sustainability viable.