**Deliberative Democracy as a Critical Theory**

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**Abstract**

Deliberative democracy’s roots in critical theory are often invoked in relation to deliberative norms; yet critical theory also stands for an ambition, and imperative, to provoke tangible change in the real world of political practice. From this perspective, this paper re-considers what deliberative democracy ought to look like as a critical theory, concluding that it must be activist in an emancipatory sense, and democratic in a self-reflexive sense.

In terms of theory, the critical contribution of ideal theory is highlighted, suggesting the need for deliberative democracy to retain a sphere of normative theorising that abstracts from the real world. Yet at the same time, the paper argues, the real-world imperative of critical theory demands an ‘activist’ dimension, translating even its more radical norms into real-world change. This has not just theoretical and practical, but also methodological implications. Against conceptions of activism as pushing through one’s pregiven convictions by any means necessary and without considering others’ views, recent debates in critical theory highlight the necessity of a truly critical activism to be emancipatory in way that is enabling rather than imposing, and inclusive rather than ‘enlightened’.

Deliberative democracy, then, is at once a critical theory of democracy and a democratic critical theory. It is a critical theory of democracy insofar as it understands democracy to consist in political structures and norms that provide the foundation for emancipation. Yet to be truly critical in this sense, it must also be a democratic critical theory, committing itself to being an innately inclusive and reflexive project rather than a substantive theory to be implemented. Thus, interpreting deliberative democracy as a critical theory means to apply its own principles to itself, by being critically self-reflexive in its theorising, and democratising its own practice.

**Keywords**

Deliberative democracy; critical theory; emancipation; activist political theory; ideal theory

**Deliberative Democracy as a Critical Theory**

1. **Introduction**

Deliberative democratic theory is often said to have developed from two different traditions: The Rawlsian liberal tradition, on the one hand, and the Habermasian critical theory tradition, on the other (Rostbøll 2008a; Dryzek 2000). Although the concept of deliberation has since been taken up by a range of other literatures, many scholars still associate themselves with one of these main traditions. In particular, the Habermasian tradition is invoked when critical norms in deliberative democracy are discussed; yet, I argue, such association is often made unreflectively: Not all writing with Habermasian emphases actually fulfils the promise and purpose of critical theory – to promote emancipation against domination. In this paper, I re-examine what following the critical theory tradition ought to imply for deliberative democrats, with respect to both the content of their theorising and the nature and ambition of this practice itself. In terms of content, the paper argues, some deliberative theory indeed contributes to critical theory. Yet where the critical strand of deliberative democracy has been lacking is in its practice orientation, leaving the realm of real-world impact almost entirely to the non-critical strands of the theory, which risks losing sight of some of the most pervasive forms of domination. In order to live up to its professed character of a critical theory, therefore, critical deliberative theory ought to incorporate a new relationship with the real world by actively seeking critical impact based on its theorising and opening up its own practice to greater democratic inclusiveness and reflexivity.

The argument proceeds as follows. To start with, the next section retraces the critical theory tradition in deliberative democracy, while Section 3 considers the substantive norms that have made extant accounts of Habermasian deliberative theory critical in this sense. Based on this initial stock-taking, Section 4 then sheds light on a dimension of critical theory that has been overlooked: its ambition to instigate impact in real-world political practice. Such engagement with the real world is particularly important, I argue, in that critical theory must not only guide citizens to their emancipation, but likewise depends on reflective openness for its own resistance against oppressive belief systems as well. Thus, section 5 develops the key argument of the paper; that deliberative democratic theory, in order to meet the aims and self-understanding of critical theory, must take seriously the need for engagement with real-world political practice *in both directions:* It must not only find new ways of instigating impact in line with its critical norms, but also rethink its own practice as a result. In particular, the paper concludes, taking the practical side of critical theory seriously means for deliberative theory to see the citizens it addresses in more proactive and equal ways; and to thus democratise its own practice towards more self-reflective and open forms of theory development.

1. **Deliberative Democracy and the Critical Theory Tradition**

Critical theory, in opposition to ‘traditional theory’ (Horkheimer 1972), is defined as being not first and foremost oriented towards generating new understanding, but specifically ‘committed to bringing about […] social conditions free from fear and domination’ (Kompridis 2006, 20). The key to overcoming domination is to create the (mere) conditions for (individuals’ self-)
emancipation, which means for a subject to be able to break from any heteronomously predetermined role (Chambers 2013, 147-8). For this, critical theory concerns itself with ‘charting the progressive emancipation of individuals and society from oppressive forces’ such as ‘dominant discourses and ideologies’ as well as ‘structural economic forces’ (Dryzek 2000, 20-1). Since democracy is necessary for individuals to at least take part in controlling the social conditions of their lives (Bohman 2000, 11), one of critical theory’s central questions is an exploration of how a *democratic* political order can contribute to emancipation in this sense (Gregoratto 2015, 533). Although critical theory has itself developed in different strands and traditions, the version most applicable to this discussion is that coined by its foremost democratic theorist: Jürgen Habermas. This section discusses how deliberative democracy has been theorised as a critical theory based on its Habermasian origins, highlighting three different forms of domination that it can – and, for these theorists, ought to – address.

Given his influence on the critical theory of the Frankfurt School, deliberative democracy as critical theory is typically associated with the Habermasian strand of deliberative democracy. Based on the observation that, in modern societies, domination exists in the form of indirect manipulation more than direct personal power (Habermas 1974, 196), what drives Habermas’ democratic theorising is a concern for retaining individuals’ autonomy in the face of a *structural* form of domination inherent in complex modern polities, which requires resistance in particular against the ‘colonisation’ of people’s ‘lifeworld’ and the public sphere by administrative-instrumental rationality and capitalist imperatives (Habermas 1992; 1984; 1989). The basis for such resistance, for Habermas, lies in language and communication, with the ‘discourse principle’ and a communicatively formed rationality able to expose injustices and dysfunctions and thus transforming the society. By tying this function to the norm of legitimacy (Habermas 1996, 104), Habermas creates the normative grounds for a ‘discursive exercise of political autonomy’ (Habermas 1996, 121) that ensures citizens’ continued self-determination and emancipation from otherwise oppressive structures. Although Habermas’ later writings also transformed Frankfurt School critical theory by seeking to reconcile it to the institutions of modern Western societies (Dryzek 2000, 24), his account of deliberation still retains the ‘practical intention’ to underpin ‘the self-emancipation of people from domination’ (Held 2004, 250). In this sense, deliberative democracy in this tradition can indeed be understood as a critical theory (Young 2001, 687-8), or ‘theory of emancipation’ (Rostbøll 2008b, 4).

A number of theorists have built on Habermas’ account by theorising deliberative democracy’s critical potential in relation to other forms of domination. For John Dryzek, deliberation stands for communication that excludes any domination that would otherwise constrain it, such as coercion, manipulation, (self-)deception, and threats (Dryzek 2000, 2, 22). From this follows a deliberative norm of democratic legitimacy as demanding that political outcomes ‘receive reflective assent through participation in authentic deliberation by all those subject to the decision in question’ (Dryzek 2010, 23). Tying democratic legitimacy to the practice of deliberation thus exposes as illegitimate any specific political practices and forms of communication that exercise domination in this sense. Even if the ideal account of deliberation is never fully realised as such, a society’s being oriented towards it *as* an ideal ‘harbours an “emancipatory potential” … [in that] [i]t promises to hear otherwise powerless or oppressed groups and, insofar as their arguments are reasonable, to grant them influence’ (Knops 2006, 594).

This promotes emancipation on two further fronts. On the one hand, Rainer Forst sees the legitimacy norm demanding reflective assent by all as implicitly granting individuals a powerful ‘right to justification’ (Forst 2012) – the normative basis for objecting to authoritative acts and re-opening a justificatory debate whenever the demanding ideal is not met in reality (see also Rostbøll 2009). Only if reciprocally and generally justifiable reasons are given for a political claim can this gain legitimacy through the deliberative exchange; thus deliberative legitimacy ‘precludes the possibility of merely projecting one’s own beliefs, interests and reasons onto others’, creating instead an equal playing field in which no one can exclude themselves from questioning (Forst 2001, 362). In this sense, deliberation stands for that kind of mutual reason-giving that follows from respecting citizens as free and equal (Bohman 2000, 25). The normative supremacy of communicative over instrumental rationality acts as a critical force in society that counteracts and constrains any unjustified elitism – whether by governments or other actors in positions of power –, and thus retains citizens’ fundamental democratic status (Grodnick 2005, 400-1). Importantly, as Nancy Fraser highlights, it is this *critical* force (or what she calls ‘contestatory function’), demanding justification in the light of *inadequate* interactions, that is key; for merely ‘bracketing’ social inequalities in order to create some artificial equality (say, in an interpretation of deliberative democracy as something to be directly instituted in practice, rather than foremost a critical standard) would only work to the advantage of the already dominant groups (Fraser 1990: 64-7).

On the other hand, Christian Rostbøll argues deliberation takes emancipation more seriously than other forms of political decision-making in that it also ‘problematizes the status of the preferences people happen to have’ (Rostbøll 2008a, 708), demanding the preconditions for a high degree of internal autonomy on the part of individuals rather than uncritically and potentially heteronomously accepting their given interests as supposed facts. This points to the need for emancipation against domination in the form of ideological belief systems: the dominant traditions and symbolic structures of a particular time, which ‘stifle the demands for justification’ that could otherwise counteract domination, by presenting a false consensus (Habermas 1974, 12).

For Dryzek (2000), an authentic orientation towards deliberative legitimacy in all these senses cannot be easily accommodated into the ‘existing consensus’ of liberal democracy, but demands fundamental change in the structures of modern liberal societies; in particular, a revival of the informal public sphere of civil society (Dryzek 2000, 22-3). In his view, then, it is the refusal to shy away from fundamental challenge to existing dominant institutions (such as those of the modern liberal state), and thus the attention paid to a more comprehensive set of potential oppressive forces (such as extra-constitutional agents of distortion), that is key to rendering deliberative democracy a ‘true critical theory of democracy’ (Dryzek 2000, 27). If this is so, far from all contributions to contemporary deliberative democratic theory contribute to its function and tradition as a critical theory; for even though much attention has been paid to implementing deliberation in the real world – including, indeed, with an eye to how specific deliberative practices could facilitate emancipation against manipulative or unequal power dynamics (Niemeyer 2011; Knops 2006) – this has rarely challenged any fundamental structures. Yet at least those who continue to refer to deliberative democracy as a critical theory ought to pay attention to what it is that ‘qualifies’ their contributions as critical theory; for a failure to do so, this paper will show, risks losing track of its function to fight domination in all its forms.

The discussion so far has shown that critical theory – theorising oriented towards counteracting domination and promoting emancipation – must address as many as three different forms of (potential) domination: direct domination by specific agents or governments (such as discriminatory or otherwise oppressive policy); direct domination by extra-constitutional ‘agents of distortion’ (such as economic lobbies able to bypass democratic procedures); and indirect domination in the form of ideological belief systems. In the remainder of the paper, I argue that whereas the first two are challenged by critical theories’ (including deliberative democracy’s) *substantive* focus on emancipation – as developed by some of the authors discussed –, the dominating effects of ideology imply that substantive theorising is not enough, as this is precisely the mode of theorising that is itself susceptible to ideological infiltration. Thus, to address domination comprehensively, more important than its substantive focus is the *practice* of theorising. To develop this argument, the following two sections consider what deliberative democracy must look like in order to curb domination both through its substantive norms (Section 3) and, importantly, its practice and methodology (Section 4).

1. **The Critical Substance of Deliberative Democracy**

In terms of substance, the first obvious point is that, to be a critical theory, deliberative democracy must indeed be oriented towards the goal of emancipation against structures of domination. Since deliberation in practice can serve a whole plethora of functions (see e.g. Fung 2003; Warren 2002), not all deliberative theory does this. For instance, through experimentation with its most important practical innovation – the small-scale citizen forums collectively known as ‘mini-publics’ (Grönlund et al. 2014) – deliberation has also been deemed useful for pooling information (Warren 2002, 194); informing and educating citizens (Ackerman and Fishkin 2004; Fung 2003, 340-1); addressing moral disagreements between citizens (Gutmann and Thompson 2004); or as a type of ‘market-testing’ for politicians and even corporations (Goodin 2008, 25); and it has hence been employed as a consultative instrument for policy-makers more than playing a role in social critique (see Grönlund et al. 2014, 3). Although these are useful functions in their own right, for deliberative theory to contribute specifically to emancipation ‘it is vital that [its] critical voice … be retrieved’ (Dryzek 2000, 30), which too strong a focus on deliberation’s practical utility within existing institutional frameworks can threaten (Elstub 2010, 305) (although some scholars have also focused on emancipation within practical applications of deliberation [Niemeyer 2011]). As the previous section has elaborated, the ‘critical voice’ in deliberative democracy is that which sets the standard of democratic legitimacy that normatively demands citizens to be in an autonomous and emancipatory position, and thereby challenges the existing liberal social order in which this is insufficiently so. Thus, while some strands of deliberative democratic theory have evolved from *within* liberal theory (such as the Rawlsian norm of public reason), and more recent theory has paid attention to a range of norms – and their institutional implications – other than emancipation, taking seriously deliberative democracy’s function as critical theory implies a re-orientation towards the theory’s critical norms on the role of democratic legitimacy in normatively demanding and practically enabling emancipation against illegitimate authority (Böker 2017).

However, in addition to its *substantive* focus on emancipation from authority, deliberative democracy also contributes to critical theory via its *general* practice of developing ideal norms. Methodologically, critical theory is based on the rejection of positivist ontologies that foster belief in the ‘unchangeableness of the social structure’ (Brincat 2011, 224). Lack of belief in the very possibility of change, by providing an unjustified *stability* of a social order that benefits those with a stake in the status quo, erodes the very basis of emancipation. Against this, ideal political theory can serve as a device to ‘defamiliarize the familiar’ (Levitas 2009, 56), enabling a critical problematisation of the reality for both theorists themselves and the wider society whose discourses they help inform. Far from constituting mere ‘wishful thinking’ by ‘political fools’ (Fung 2005, 399), ideal theorising in deliberative democracy can thus provide the kind of ‘dislocation’ that, by helping individuals see the existing reality in a different light, is the necessary first step towards emancipating oneself from a given ‘political grammar’ (see Norval 2006, 238). For instance, Habermas’ ideal speech situation, much criticised for its idealism (e.g. Tucker 2008; Sanders 1997), was in fact intended as an instrument for critique (Dryzek 1987, 661): It is precisely its setting a new *normative* standard that allows the ‘observer of public communication’ to identify and criticise illegitimate practices in the real world, thus providing the necessary basis for dissent (Rostbøll 2009, 21-2). The practice of ideal theory creates a conceptual space for exploring what may lie beyond the (otherwise taken-for-granted) status quo, establishing the ‘normative expectations’ whose very disappointment can thus act as a ‘source of moral demands’ for citizens – that is, a general emancipatory mindset of a much wider reach, going as it then does ‘beyond specifically established forms of domination’ (Honneth 2007, 69).

Thus, at least insofar as it has engaged in ideal theorising both generally and specifically with a substantive focus on emancipation, deliberative democracy can already be described as a critical theory. In order to take seriously its critical purpose, the theory ought to continue to theorise the link between democracy and emancipation, including by regarding democracy itself as a forever ongoing process of democratisation driven by ideal theorising. Yet what is often overlooked is that critical theory is defined not only by its substantive focus, but also by the wider ambition it has for its political theorising: It aims to not only analyse structures of domination and advocate solutions, but it is driven by an ambition for this theorising to have an impact in the real world it describes. The next section explores what this means for the practice and methodology of deliberative democracy as a critical theory, in particular if one form of the domination it seeks to redress – ideology – is not just an external threat, but potentially internal to democratic theory itself.

1. **Critical Theory as a Practical Project**

Critical theory is based on the idea that an important part of the purpose of social science and theory is to play a role in *changing* the world, by providing the insights and intellectual tools that support the real emancipatory struggles of the oppressed (Leonard 1990; Hoy and McCarthy 1994, 16). Thus, methodologically, it needs tools that ‘are capable not only of understanding the conditions of human emancipation but in promoting them’ (Brincat 2011, 227-8). Specifically, a critical theory of democracy is then ‘not just about the identification of [oppressive forces] and contemplation of what might be done to counteract them. It is also concerned with the competence of citizens themselves to recognize and oppose such forces’ (Dryzek 2000, 21).

The problem with such an ambition is that critical theory as a *comprehensive* social theory – akin to its predecessor, Marxism – could be accused of seeking to impose a *particular* vision onto complex and pluralistic societies. Insofar as its ambition to be ‘practical’ ‘does not simply mean useful, or nor does it mean that critical theories are connected to practice generally, but rather to a particular purpose’ (Bohman 1999, 459), it might implicitly tempt theorists to formulate ‘the one and only correct comprehensive theory of society that allows … the specification of the goals of the appropriate form of political practice’ (Strydom 2011, 85). Even if the underlying goal were a desirable one, a critical theory could not impose any such application of its theory without contradicting its own norms (see Dryzek 1987, 664-5). For emancipation cannot be achieved *on behalf of* its subjects; any outside ‘help’, including from critical theorists, can only hope to establish the preconditions for individuals to emancipate themselves, through their own recognition of their oppressed situation and determination and action to overcome it. This includes shedding light precisely on the contradictory and antagonistic elements of society, as opposed to supposedly overcoming these – and hence obviating any further critical engagement – by offering a comprehensive and final account (Brincat 2011, 227).

Thus, not only would such imposition contradict a critical theory’s own principles, but it could not achieve emancipation in the first place. As I highlighted at the beginning, emancipation means to overcome domination and oppression *in all of their forms*. This recognises that there can be instances of domination where formal equality and freedom reign yet ‘extra-constitutional agents of distortion’, such as powerful lobbies, still impose oppressive ideologies onto society (Dryzek 2000, 21). Most starkly, in the form of ideology, domination and oppression apply not just to direct, tangible constraints on people’s actions, but penetrate their very thinking. Although ideology can be defined in different senses of the word (Geuss 1981), ideologies in the sense relevant to critical theory are false belief systems that nevertheless come to dominate people’s thinking in such a way as to (falsely) legitimate existing social forms and conditions, cementing a culture of acceptance of these conditions in light of their apparent inevitability (Ibsen 2016). Ideology, in this sense, can be seen as the most pervasive form of a ‘modern’ exercise of power: By ‘categoriz[ing] increasingly large areas of human behavior into normal and abnormal’ (White 1986, 421), it renders a given social order, and an individual’s perceived place in it, ‘normatively unassailable – … simply not the kind of object that one can meaningfully subject to critique’ (Ibsen 2016, 8). In contrast to structures of outright, direct repression, domination via the effects of people’s ideological beliefs is even more pervasive and difficult to escape from, for it tends to make the social order more, rather than less, stable (Ibsen 2016, 15). In recognition of this, critical theory must engage – and indeed has long engaged, as one of its defining approaches – with the methodology of ideology critique. The critique of ideology seeks to uncover such pervasive structures of ideology, thus providing the intellectual resources for individuals to understand their situation in a new light, as the first step for overcoming its oppressiveness(Habermas 1974, 235-42).

However, as both early (Horkheimer 1972, 212) and more recent (Chambers 2013, 149-56) debates in critical theory highlight, narrow and even oppressive belief systems are not limited to supposedly ‘uninformed’ or otherwise unassuming citizens, but also invade the thinking of critical theorists themselves. This often goes unacknowledged: While the pervasiveness of ideology supports the need for critical social and political theory, and perhaps even a ‘duty’ for political philosophers to engage in ideology critique (Ibsen 2016, 1), such arguments assume political philosophers themselves to be immune from the influence of ideological beliefs. Yet, since power operates in *all* structures of thinking (White 1986, 421), theorists must also pay attention to the ideological nature of their own thinking (Freeden 2006, 4-5, 14; Cohen 2008, 1). Even expressly critical theories can *themselves* become ideological, and the practice of critical theory is thus in as much need of external ideology critique as are citizens and the society at large (Hoy and McCarthy 1994, 19). Even critical theory itself must, then, ‘continually hold itself open to the possibility that its own concepts make it blind to some dimensions of power and self-deception’ (White 1986, 424); and so their goal of emancipation must retain room for its subjects to emancipate themselves even from critical theorists’ very goal and definition of emancipation – so long as this is in turn an autonomous process itself, rather than a new instance of domination.

Thus, the very practice of critical theory relies on contestation as a way of overcoming the otherwise inevitable narrowing of its own practices, assumptions and theoretical foci. Since critical theorists are themselves inescapably participants in the social life and interrelationships they address (Hoy and McCarthy 1994, 21; Habermas 1974, 210), critical theory must become ‘conscious of its own peculiar involvement in the object of its criticism’ in concrete social situations (Habermas 1974, 214, 241). This means renouncing theory in a ‘monologic’ or privileged sense (Habermas 1974, 2) in favour of a ‘fallibilistic and open’ practice that engages its audience dialectically (Hoy and McCarthy 1994, 19-20). Critical theory cannot rely purely on its own assessment of normative rightness, for if it did, it would itself be susceptible to the oppressive effects of ideological belief systems, and thus in an implausible position to provide intellectual resources for emancipation. Instead, it relies on ‘creating the reflective conditions necessary for its own practical *verification’* in an external context (Bohman 1999, 477, emphasis added).

The decisive verification in this sense is ‘not by experimental test or by interpretive plausibility, but rather by action on the part of its audience’ (Dryzek 1995, 99; also 103). In contrast to positivist theories and theories aimed at instrumental problem-solving, critical theory must establish a new kind of relationship between the theorist and the social actors they address: Rather than viewing lay citizens as mere ‘passive recipient[s]’ (Brincat 2011, 223) of the theorist’s specialist input, and judging their actions according to set standards of rationality, it demands a relationship of equal standing between the theorist and the ‘reflective participant’ (Bohman 1999, 463-4). It can only achieve its emancipatory imperative to ‘liberat[e] human beings from relations of force, unconscious constraints, and dependence’ (Bohman 1999, 468) if it does not, during this attempt, render the people it addresses newly dependent on and constrained by itself, either. This presupposes a more dialogical, or, in Bohman’s words, more *democratic* form of theorising: one that recognises that its ‘criticism must be verified by those participating in the practice’ as a core component of the very process of critical inquiry (Bohman 1999, 472). Its goal can never be to ‘control social processes or even to influence the sorts of decisions that agents might make in any determinate sort of way … but [must instead be] to initiate public processes of self-reflection, … *the outcomes of which agents determine for themselves’* (Bohman 1999, 475 emphasis added). Only by organising itself as a collaborative, dialogical democratic practice, ‘engaging in an ongoing process of [its own] deliberation and self-reflection’ (Bohman 1999, 476), can critical theory hope to provide what must thus be seen as the key intellectual resources for emancipation – individuals’ capacity for *their own* critical reflection – whilst at the same time arming itself against its own internal ideological distortions.

From this perspective, deliberative democracy can claim to be a critical theory only insofar as it is not just substantively oriented towards emancipation, but incorporates an emancipatory ambition also in its practice-oriented dimension (Bohman 2000). So far, this is not the case: Whilst the normative theory of the Habermasian strand demands far-reaching changes to the functioning of modern societies, precisely those parts of the theory that have developed a practice dimension to this have been criticised for failing to stay true to the original critical norms (Böker and Elstub 2015; Böker 2017), focusing instead on more easily achievable practical aims that support standard policy-making processes.

Indeed, some of the theorists most strongly associated with the critical theory tradition soon followed suit in this empirical turn, seeking the kinds of direct practical achievements that, against their own earlier warnings, inadvertently reconcile the theory with the ideological status quo. Most notably, in the twenty years between his first and most recent comprehensive account of deliberative democracy (Dryzek 1990; 2010), John Dryzek has moved from advocating discursive democracy as a form of ‘resistance’ against ‘monopolizing “expert cultures”’ (Dryzek 1990, 12) – *explicitly* as the much-needed ‘constructive dimension’ of a ‘critical theory of society’ (Dryzek 1990, 21) – to an account of deliberative *governance* as opposed to deliberative democracy, which is usefully ‘informed’ by practical experiments with mini-publics that help show what is ‘possible and likely’ (Dryzek 2010, 9) and in which he argues ‘high-quality and inclusive deliberation’ is ‘easy to obtain’ in a strategic sense (Dryzek 2010, 73-4). Although he still highlights the contestation of discourses as crucial for avoiding the ‘domination’ of a particular discourse (Dryzek 2010, 127), this is related to prospects for ‘problem-solving’ (Dryzek 2010, 129), the ‘production’ of particular purposive ‘outcomes’ (Dryzek 2010, 73; 10) and citizens’ reflection on their ‘preferences’ only (Dryzek 2010, 10) – a distinct ‘policy-making rationality’ (Dryzek 2010, 46) as opposed to the earlier focus on the structural foundations for emancipatory ‘communicative rationality’ within the society at large (Dryzek 1990, 12).

This representation manifests a functionalist perspective, in which the goal is to turn citizens into ‘capable deliberators’ (Dryzek 2010, 51) based, presumably, on a *preconceived account of what this means* – strategically promoting the right kind of deliberative practice via institutional design in light of ‘the many things we might want deliberative democracy to accomplish’ (Dryzek 2010, 85). Thus Dryzek notes that comprehensive normative accounts of deliberative democracy are now a thing of the past (Dryzek 2010, 4) and that theorists – himself included – have become practitioners instead (Dryzek 2010, 157). From a critical perspective, however, this shift fails to account for the danger inherent in the pervasiveness of ideology, which Dryzek himself warned about in his earlier work: that even political scientists can inadvertently help reinforce hegemonic political and economic institutions, and are thus, as he put it, in need of ‘communicative rationalization’ themselves so as to avoid becoming complicit in such domination (Dryzek 1990, 21).

Dryzek’s own earlier warnings show that those who interpret, and purportedly seek to advance, deliberative democracy as a critical theory ought to be alert to any status quo bias, and thus wary of such a functionalist turn in deliberative theory. Both the gist of how the ideal theory is commonly critiqued (e.g. the charge that the ideal of consensus in the ideal speech situation is not only unrealistic but dangerous [e.g. Sanders 1997; Young 2000; Tucker 2008]), and the subsequent praise for deliberative experimentation (such as the use of purposive ‘mini-publics’ as a way of testing the effects of deliberation [e.g. Dryzek 2010, 9]), make sense within a science-philosophical framework of judging theory ‘by experimental test or by interpretive plausibility’ (Dryzek 1995, 99), but not from the perspective of critical theory. The former tests whether the theory ‘works’ as predicted, whereas what matters for the latter is its potential to promote *emancipatory*, that is, innately unpredictable and unsteered, action. From the latter perspective, criticising the abstract norms as useless or implausible, and ‘verifying’ only the *non-critical* elements of deliberation in lab-like experiments, misses the point. In fact, the early critical theory is yet to be subjected to its real practice test – advancing its *critical* message in real-world political practice, and reacting to its reception by those who ought to matter the most: the subjects not of gratefully received guidance and obediently facilitated experimentation, but of their own independent emancipatory struggle.

As a result, by mostly conceding the practical implementation of deliberative democracy to the less critically oriented scholarship, even the strand of deliberative theory whose *theoretical* norms match the self-understanding and purpose of critical theory is missing the crucial *practice*-oriented side of critical theory. Successful though they might be at challenging direct forms of domination by those evidently in positions of power, by leaving the practice-oriented dimension of deliberative theory to other strands, critical deliberative theorists fail to address the third, most pervasive form of ideological domination; and are therefore not just threatening their overall emancipatory endeavour, but also insufficiently guarding their own practice against domination.

1. **Deliberative Democracy as a Critical Theory**

Thus, aiming for deliberative democracy to fully constitute a critical theory has implications not just for the substantive content of deliberative theorising, but for its very practice and methodology. In the following, I discuss both in turn.

***A critical practice orientation: ‘Activist’ deliberative democratic theory***

To start with, to take seriously the meaning of critical theory, deliberative theory ought to take on what can be called an ‘activist’ dimension: It must strive to enable and inspire the emancipation it normatively advocates in real-world practice. Although it may not be in the hands of deliberative scholars to successfully induce, let alone guarantee, any such impact, it still would not be a complete critical theory if it did not count such an ambition amongst its self-understood commitments. Such an ‘activist posture’, in turn, demands a specific set of methodological approaches and tools, ‘as critical weapons to help realise human emancipation’ (Brincat 2011, 228).

Conceptions of activist political theory, in various forms, have of late gained some momentum (e.g. Ypi 2012; Lu 2013; Owen 2013; Tully 2002; Smith 1990). Perhaps most prominently, Lea Ypi (2012) advocates an ‘activist political theory’ that is ‘concerned not merely with interpreting the world but also with changing it’ (Ypi 2012, 40). Key to this, for Ypi, is the right balance between ideal and non-ideal theorising: Normative political theory ought to engage with principles underlying social practices and institutions in such a way as to improve both their functionality and their responsiveness to the concerns of real-world agents (see also Lu 2013, 65). This appears to revolve primarily around the *content* of the theories: An activist political theorist must ‘speak to concerns arising in the real world’ in terms of problems experienced by specific agents (Ypi 2012, 40). A ‘dialectic’ method enables the theorist to focus on the types of normative ‘categories’ that promise to be the most ‘politically effective’ and ‘motivationally sustainable’ (Ypi 2012, 40-1). The usefulness of a dialectic approach in this context, Ypi highlights (2012, 42-4), consists in allowing for learning from the trials and failures of the past when re-interpreting and adapting normative principles.

However, from a critical theory point of view, a theory that is ‘activist’ in a substantive content-related sense can potentially be problematic more than it would be beneficial. To the extent that normative political theory is indeed able to deliberately influence real socio-political contexts, it has an ability precisely to *undermine* the conditions for emancipation. It would do so if it implicitly, in Sam Chambers’ words, ‘relie[d] on the ignorance of the student’ – that is, if it practiced a now outdated form of critical theory that in fact “stultifies”’ (Chambers 2013, 151). Inasmuch as critical theory recognises that emancipation cannot be deliberately induced, but can only be the product of people’s own conclusions, activist political theory is critical only if it ‘eschews the goal of knowledge production’ and ‘refuses to impose blindness’, in the sense of perpetuating its own privileged position in relation to ‘truth’ (Chambers 2013, 151, 156; also Hoy and McCarthy 1994, 14-5), and for this reason engages in a democratic approach to politics instead. In this sense, as Christian Rostbøll puts it, ‘not only [does] deliberative democracy [need] critical theory, [but] it is also the other way around’ (Rostbøll 2008b, 8): The best way for critical theory to guard itself against coming to falsely presume capability for the necessary reflective critique to lie exclusively with critical theorists, who, as the ‘sighted’, must enable the ‘blind’ masses to see the domination they are subjected to, is to understand its wider project to rest in a fundamentally open, dispersed realm of critical and self-critical argumentation; in a wider societal ethos more than in a distinctly academic project. At the same time, critical theory – as well as all critical theories – must themselves be seen as contingent and hence open to challenge and reinterpretation (Chambers 2013, 154-5; Hoy and McCarthy 1994, 19).

As a result, any theory committed to emancipation (such as deliberative democracy in the critical theory tradition) constitutes a special case when it comes to the merit and nature of activist political theory. In terms of ‘expressly aim[ing] at becoming a factor in social change’ (Hoy and McCarthy 1994, 16), an activist dimension is at its very core; yet critical theorists might also rightly be wary of turning to activism insofar as this might suggest a flawed claim to epistemic superiority over ‘lay’ citizens. Overall, the critical value of ‘activism’ is then ambiguous and context-specific, depending on the critical awareness and independent reflectiveness of the wider social discourse within which it is received (Habermas 1974). An activist approach to a critical theory of democracy is then more constrained in its methodology than other, non-critical activist theories; it cannot regard the mere provision of knowledge as an appropriate form of activism (Chambers 2013, 151), or it would effectively undermine what it actually seeks to nurture.

Hence, in the case of deliberative democracy as a critical theory, an activist ‘mode’ of theorising would seek to inspire in social practice the ways in which democratic discourse *generally* enables citizens to discern and challenge domination. For this, it must focus on the wider conditions that deliberative democracy theorises to play a role in emancipation, rather than just ‘deliberation’ as such, as in studies that use the ideal speech situation as a realistic reference point for the organisation of mini-publics (Landwehr 2004, 78), or analyse parliamentary debates using a ‘discourse quality index’ on the same basis (Steenbergen et al. 2003); and engage in institutional experimentation only if the context suggests these can be theorised to support emancipation at large, which might not always be the case (see Curato and Böker 2016; Dryzek 2016, 3).

As a way to strike the right balance, Tully suggests

‘…the aim [of critical political theory] [must be] not to develop a normative theory as a *solution* to … problems …, but to disclose the conditions of possibility of [the given] historically singular set of practices of governance … [and] to characterise [these] conditions … in a redescription … that transforms the *self*-understanding of those subject to and struggling within it, enabling them to see its contingent conditions and the possibilities of governing themselves differently’ (Tully 2002, 534, emphases added).

In other words, against Fung (2005), who interprets an activist dimension of deliberative democratic theory as justifying ‘even coercive methods for the sake of deliberative goals’ (Fung 2005, 399) (as well as against Young [2001], who sees activism as opposed to deliberation for that same reason), activist deliberative democracy in a critical theory sense should not strive to provide solutions, but only to prompt citizens, assumed as equally as ‘capable agents’ for this (see Chambers 2013, 150), to develop their own, based on their own reflection (Dryzek 1987, 663). (Interestingly, although the most iconic practical proposal for this again comes from Dryzek’s own earlier work on ‘discursive designs’ for citizen participation [Dryzek 1987; 1990] and ‘reconstructive democratic theory’ [Dryzek and Berejikian 1993], he now encourages strategically designed mini-publics [Dryzek 2010, 176], for these arguably allow more ‘authentic deliberation’ than the discursive designs [Dryzek 2010, 156].)

Thus, rather than defining specific aims of deliberative encounters and ‘orchestrating’ them in a deliberately controlled manner (Escobar 2015, 273), aiming for citizens to be critical themselves means to avoid ‘design’ in any instrumental or even manipulative sense (Böker 2017), and instead to make institutional experimentation itself a participatory exercise (Dryzek 1987, 665). Beyond small-scale experiments, it means to also encompass – and if in doubt, to prioritise (see Curato and Böker 2016) – the wider, non-institutional conditions that are key to emancipation. This might include the ‘social competences of individuals’, but, crucially, in an inductive as opposed to prescriptive sense (Dryzek and Berejikian 1993, 49); as well as broader preconditions such as the availability of political information, spaces and platforms for socio-political engagement and dialogue, and a wider atmosphere of belief in the possibility of change.

***Meta-theoretical and methodological implications***

Moreover, such an activist dimension then requires deliberative democratic theory to critically revise its own (meta-)practice as well. Since deliberative theory must guard itself against distorting ideological influences on its own practice, it must remain deeply self-reflective, and resist seeing itself as an ‘accomplished’ or ‘complete’ theory that now (e.g., having ‘come of age’, as in Bohman [1998]) only has to be implemented in real-world practice. Rather, it must understand itself as a *never*-complete, forever contestatory process of theorising whose very purpose is the continuation of its own practice. To be sure, deliberative theorists – particularly those of the critical tradition – have long insisted on deliberative theorising being a self-reflective practice. For instance, Bohman gives citizens a role (albeit only conceptually) in shaping the theory by arguing ‘since deliberation extends to the normative framework for deliberation, it too can be revised according to the public reasons of participants in deliberation’ (Bohman 2000, 17). Hendriks et al. stress that ‘[d]eliberative democratisation must itself be a deliberative process, as opposed to the application of some standard set of institutional design’ (Hendriks et al. 2007, 379); which, for Dryzek, follows from the recognition that ‘[d]emocracy is not a static concept, whose essence could ever be decided once and for all [but rather] a dynamic and open-ended concept’ (Dryzek 2000, 28). However, this has so far referred either to co-development and mutual learning as part of deliberative experimentation in the real world (as in Hendriks et al.’s case) or to self-reflectiveness or practice-oriented focus (in Dryzek’s and Bohman’s cases) among deliberative theorists themselves. Yet inasmuch as there is a risk critical theory could itself succumb to narrowing, distorting ideological influences, and this can be prevented by external critical challenge, political theory *as such* must find a source of such ‘outsider perspectives’ on its own practice (Hoy and McCarthy 1994, 19). Thus, in addition to finding new ways of creating impacts from its normative theorising in the real world, critical deliberative theory ought to incorporate new forms of impacts *from* the real world in its own practice, as the unique kind of ‘verifications’ that critical theories rely on (Bohman 1999, 477).

On one level, this affects how citizens are portrayed in the normative theory and its institutional recommendations. Notwithstanding the content of their normative arguments, deliberative theorists fail to further the emancipatory cause if they see the citizen ‘subjects’ they describe as mere ‘takers’ of the norms they advance. The conventional mini-publics perspective, for instance, tends to treat citizens in an anonymous and statistical fashion; all that matters is that enough citizens, with the right socio-demographic characteristics, are present to make up the required numbers for the mini-public to allow for statistical representativeness. Yet not only does this approach run into practical difficulties, systematically failing to include all societal groups equally or even at all (O’Flynn and Sood 2014, 45), but it *reduces* citizens to their socio-demographic characteristics, when from a critically oriented perspective their individuality and autonomy are in fact key. As a critical theory reliant for its coherence on ‘reflective participants’ (Bohman 1999, 463-4), deliberative democracy ought to portray and treat citizens as equal subjects in fundamentally open reflective exchanges. Put differently, a critical theory of democracy must at the same time be a democratic critical theory – democratising the sphere of socio-political reflection and engagement that drives its own theory development. The more the theory realises an activist stance, the more does such internal democratisation become imperative.[[1]](#footnote-1) Several new approaches suggest themselves.

First, deliberative democratic theory must portray citizens in a more autonomous capacity in both its normative and its practical-institutional dimensions. Rather than treating the citizens it engages as subjects that are instructed to follow certain rules and behaviours, it must ‘avoid any distinction between “subjects” and experimenters’, with the ‘experiment’ instead evolving out of the self-driven reflection of all its participants (Dryzek 1987, 663). More open designs, in a wide variety of forms and settings, might facilitate this inasmuch as they nurture a general ethos of democratic innovation, in which citizens themselves can proactively engage in democratic experimentation on their own terms. An example of this are ‘open’ mini-publics designed to be part of open-ended political processes and able to interrogate the power structures they take place within (Ward et al. 2003).

Second, in order to be able to gauge (or ‘verify’) any real-world impact of the relevant type, deliberative democratic theory must develop ways of *tracking* more closely how its practice informs real-world practice; not just in purposive experimental ways (such as by evaluating mini-publics), but especially in broader, unexpected and multifarious ways. For this, it would benefit from interdisciplinary collaboration with empirical social science as well as interpretive social and political theory (see e.g. Ercan et al. forthcoming). The aim therein is to pick up any new discourses, activities, and instances of emancipation within the wider society that relate to, and might thus usefully engage with, the kinds of issues and norms that deliberative democracy addresses at the theoretical level. Whereas it has so far been assumed that deliberative democrats’ real-world stance should consist in ‘foster[ing] the creation of sites and processes of deliberation’ (Young 2001, 672), from a critical perspective, advocacy for ‘processes and action to implement deliberative procedures in actually existing democracy’ (Young 2001, 672) must in the first instance centre around fostering citizens’ own critical reflection and engagement with their socio-political environment. For this, Habermas himself reminds us, it ‘cannot rely solely on the channels of procedurally regulated deliberation and decision-making’, but rests on ‘informal communication’, too (Habermas 1996, 308), which therefore ought to be included in the empirical agenda of deliberative democracy alongside the focus on purposive institutional innovation. At the same time, this agenda must be not just proactive in *driving* purposive change, but must also include sociological research to help *understand* the conditions that explain its own emergence and the emancipatory momentum it relates to (Honneth 2007, 64-5).

Finally, deliberative theorists’ understanding themselves as participants in a wider socio-political discourse, as opposed to privileged outside observers and instructors, indeed suggests their playing a stronger role in the public media and accessible outlets. The public role and even responsibility of political theorists is increasingly thematised in the political and philosophical literature (e.g. Ibsen 2016; Ypi 2012), yet often cast in non-critical terms. To influence socio-political discourse in a way consistent with critical theory, theorists must understand themselves not in a role of providing solutions or ‘enlightening’ the otherwise ‘blind’, but rather in a ‘communicative relationship of reciprocal elucidation and mutual benefit’ (Tully 2002, 551) with the rest of society. Thus, while a duty to reach beyond the academic community, such as via newspaper commentaries, blog posts, public talks, or engagement in social movements, might indeed be inferred from an understanding of political theorists in a critical role, the theorist must understand their own role as an equal contributor to others, and thus engaging in a genuinely reciprocal relationship with other social agents. All recent academic ‘impact’ notwithstanding, such reciprocity is rare; but it is not nonexistent. Promising examples of more dialogical engagement include projects that ‘co-produce’ research together with their audience (e.g. Dryzek and Berejikian 1993; Fung and Warren 2011); and calls for ‘extended peer communities’ that involve concerned citizens in driving academic practice to develop ‘shared meaning’ and dialogue as opposed to one-sided strategic interventions (Healy 1999, 657).

This list is of course only suggestive, exploratory, and far from complete. The point, however, is that taking seriously the critical theory tradition demands of deliberative theorists to make *some* foray into new research ethics, methods, and self-perceptions, so as to achieve greater impact in their societies whilst also making such engagement a self-reflexive, and to an extent self-limiting, dynamic, impacting on their own practice as well.

1. **Conclusion**

Whilst many contributions to deliberative democratic theory style themselves as following the Habermasian critical theory tradition, it is not often acknowledged what this actually implies. In particular, this paper has highlighted, the supposedly critical strand of deliberative democracy has come to content itself with a critical *substantive* focus, revolving around theoretical norms of democratic emancipation. Although such a focus indeed contributes to the project of critical theory, what is missing is the vital *practical* dimension of critical theory that seeks to not just explore the conditions for, and barriers to, emancipation in theoretical terms, but also to promote it in actual practice; thus, its real test is not just its normative plausibility, but more importantly its uptake in the real world.

At first sight, this makes critical deliberative theory a suitable candidate for recently revived accounts of ‘activist political theory’: normative political theory that strives to make an impact on the real world. However, critical theory, to take seriously its own warnings against the subtle forms of domination of ideology, cannot claim to produce any superior knowledge or a comprehensive social theory that would warrant such direct application in a conventionally activist manner. Recognising that critical theorists themselves are not immune from ideological influences, a critical theory must view the social agents it describes not as mere passive recipients of its ‘enlightened’ theory, but rather as equal participants in a collaborative reflective exercise. Anything else would not only undermine its own goal of nurturing citizens’ capacities for autonomous, emancipatory reflection, but it would also fail to guard critical theory itself from the possibility of ideological influences. Thus, a critical theory of democracy presents a special case for activist political theory. The activist dimension is necessary for the theory to be truly critical, but it comes with additional demands: It cannot be a one-sided relationship, but the activist influence from theorists on the socio-political reality simultaneously presupposes a like influence from real-world social agents on the normative theory as well. Only by ‘democratising’ its own practice – that is, by accepting its equal rather than epistemically superior standing and by opening itself up to challenges from ‘outside’ critics – can a critical theory safely ‘afford’ to fulfil its own ambitions for emancipation in the real world.

Deliberative democracy, then, is necessarily at once a critical theory of democracy and a democratic critical theory. In its theoretical dimension, it is a critical theory of democracy in the sense of a theory that understands democracy to consist in a form of politics that provides the foundation for emancipation. At the same time, in its activist dimension, it is a democratic critical theory in that it therefore commits itself to being a constantly evolving, itself reflective and self-reflective project rather than a fixed substantive or ‘knowledge-producing’ theory. Its key impact must lie not in successful democratic innovations, but in the wider societal conditions for critical reflectiveness through which deliberation promises to challenge illegitimate authority and which create, at the same time, the necessary realm for any truly self-critical critical theory.

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1. And indeed, the timing for such a change in self-perception might be just right. The current political context of rising populism and ‘protest voting’ by the ‘left behind’ might well illustrate a failure of democratic theory’s empirical turn to sufficiently engage with people’s real concerns for the scholarly enthusiasm about novel innovations to be matched by actual public interest and trust in these. At the same time, this very context has prompted scholars to publish commentaries through non-academic channels, presumably out of a perceived need to now reach a broader audience (e.g. Mouffe 2016; Moore 2016; Parkinson 2016). It might be argued that in times of ‘post-truth’ and rejection of experts, academics’ refraining from making their voice heard will only make matters worse; and it is thus no coincidence that ‘impact’ and ‘public engagement’ agendas increasingly drive research pursuits. Still, inasmuch as the stance of those ‘left behind’ may be the result precisely of having been treated as a merely reactive, ‘blind’ audience in the past, continuation of the same practice of one-sided messages is unlikely to lead to more reflective engagement. From a critical perspective, ‘activist’ channels such as online blog posts still remain problematically one-directional, and like a mere extension of the academy’s own ‘echo chamber’. Thus, in this overall constellation, it seems particularly important to exploit scholars’ renewed interest in genuine public engagement, yet explore new ways towards rendering it dialogic and emancipatory as opposed to one-sided and top-down. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)