**Deliberative Democracy between Theory and Practice.** By Michael. A. Neblo. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. 215p. £49.99.

**Listening for Democracy: Recognition, Representation, Reconciliation.** By Andrew Dobson. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. 224p. £19.99.

John Boswell, *University of Southampton*

Pessimism abounds about democracy, both as it currently manifests in advanced post-industrial societies and in its apparent trajectory. The public appears to be losing faith in its core political institutions. Populist leaders show scant regard for the norms of civic and civil life. At such a time, the hopes of a more deliberative form of democracy—one that entails at heart the inclusive, respectful and considered discussion of matters of common concern –seem especially forlorn. Yet, of course, while the deliberative account has become the dominant account in normative theory, it encounters a long tradition of pessimism both conceptually and empirically. So it seems an opportune moment to look at two recent contributions in this area that seek to respond to prominent forms of skepticism: Michael Neblo’s *Deliberative Democracy between Theory and Practice* and Andrew Dobson’s *Listening for Democracy*. Both authors don’t just seek to wish away the objections of the critics, but to actively confront and address their chief concerns. In a context where we cannot simply wish away the forces that constrain and manipulate real-world deliberation either, both potentially contain important lessons for confronting and addressing the pessimism engulfing contemporary democratic practice.

The inspiration for Neblo comes from the assembled and long-established critics of the deliberative ideal of democracy within political science. These are scholars in the traditions of rational choice and social choice especially who see the hopes of inclusive, respectful and considered dialogue as naive to the realities of political communities and the capacities and behaviours of the individuals who inhabit them. Neblo confronts and debunks a series of received wisdoms within this tradition—chief among them, that deliberative democracy is too woolly a concept to be operationalised at significant scale. He sets out a deliberative democratic ‘system’ of differentiated but integrated sites, in the process showing not just that the deliberative ideal provides a useful set of normative standards towards which the concrete institutions and practices of democratic governance should aspire, but that it provides the tools against which these institutions and practices can be rigorously assessed.

Neblo’s account skilfully picks a path back and forth through democratic theory empirical politics scholarship, showing an impressive command of diverse subfields that is all too rare in contemporary political science. Chapter 3 confronts the notion that deliberative democracy is incoherent because individual preferences are inherently arbitrary and unstable. Instead, Neblo shows that citizens, enabled by processes of deliberation, are in a better position to ‘know their own minds’ than is typically presumed. Chapter 4 rebuffs the notion that deliberative democracy is naive to the naked power and self-interest that prevail in *realpolitik*, revealing the well-worn problems of instability, ambiguity and manipulability in democratic affairs. Instead, Neblo identifies flaws and gaps in the assumptions of the formal accounts that underpin this presumption, and highlights the vital role of deliberation in obviating these democratic problems. Chapter 5 tackles the critique of deliberative democracy as paternalistic in the way that it assigns a central role for citizens in deliberation that they are not asking for and do not want. Instead, Neblo draws on impressive empirical evidence to show that many citizens—especially those who feel alienated from dominant forms of partisan politics—actually are willing to participate in deliberation. Chapter 6 then confronts the presumption that deliberative democracy is inefficient, in the familiar and widespread refrain that citizens are not competent to deal with complex issues. Instead, Neblo argues that innovative institutional practices can be conducive to effective citizen deliberation, and that such practices—while no panacea—can play a role in enhancing efficiency and legitimacy overall.

None of these insights on their own are ground-breaking. Leading theorists in this field have long pushed back against formal critics, developing sophisticated accounts of distributed deliberation across complex systems (see especially Dryzek 2000; 2010). Leading empiricists have long argued both that citizens are willing to debate and that they possess the capacity to do so effectively (eg. Fishkin 1995; Niemeyer 2011). What Neblo brings to the table is a meticulous rigor that formalises this knowledge, and frames it within a coherently systemic account of deliberative democracy. The value here is not just that Neblo generates a rigorous account that is robust to the criticisms of mainstream political science, but that it is also one that is doubtless more credible and influential for its intended targets precisely because it engages on the skeptics’ terms.

Dobson’s account of *Listening for Democracy* has, in many respects, the opposite effect. His is a more speculative and exploratory account—one that addresses an absence of attention, rather than hotly contested territory; one that looks outward, rather than inward, searching for inspiration across disciplinary boundaries rather than staying within the confines of political science; and one that seeks to speak to a wider audience, relying more on folk wisdom and insightful anecdote than rigid theorising or rigorous social science evidence. Dobson’s scholarship is, in this sense, less likely to impact debates in mainstream political science, particularly on the other side of the Atlantic where rigor is typically prized over creativity. Yet, as this characterisation might suggest, it is also a much more novel endeavour, and thus more likely to push out the boundaries in thinking about democratic renewal and reform.

Where Neblo is animated primarily by a desire to respond to skepticism across political science, for Dobson the inspiration comes closer to home, in an increasingly realist-oriented democratic theory that appears to be abandoning the cause of deeper participation and deliberation in democracy. A key point of departure is Jeffrey Green’s (2010) provocative account of ‘spectator democracy’, in which Green rejects the prospect of meaningful citizen participation in complex, modern polities and instead favours a form of democratic politics as spectacle. Far from being hostile to Green’s account, Dobson muses thoughtfully on the challenge he presents. Indeed, Dobson acknowledges significant value in Green’s characterisation of democratic politics as a sensory experience. But he ultimately rejects Green’s pessimistic presumption of a passive citizenry. He seeks instead to resurrect the cause of active citizen empowerment through emphasis on a particular, and in Green’s account elided or ignored, aspect of spectatorship: listening.

Dobson begins with the observation that democratic theory is near silent on listening. Taken literally, this claim is exaggerated—of course, the spectre of listening recurs across multiple strands of democratic theory. But Dobson certainly makes a persuasive case that democratic theory has focused far more on the voicing of claims than on their reception. His point is not that listening is completely absent from the canon, but that its treatment remains underdeveloped, bitty, diffuse and, more often still, simply assumed. And so, having established the importance of listening for democratic theory in the opening chapter, he sets about trying to fill this space.

He turns first, in Chapter 2, to accounts of listening elsewhere, in diverse disciplinary settings such as philosophy and even counselling. Here he distinguishes specific types of listening. His most important contribution is to earmark ‘apophatic’ listening as the most promising variant for democratic purposes —an approach defined by a temporary suspension of prior assumptions by the listener, so that new or rival ideas might be fully and carefully understood before being subject to critical analysis and interpretation. In Chapter 3, he turns back with this new understanding of what listening involves to thinking about contemporary democratic governance. He identifies the key ways in which an emphasis on such listening might mitigate some of the most serious challenges facing contemporary democracy, enabling the recognition of difference in complex modern societies and enhancing trust and legitimacy in political institutions and practices. In Chapter 4, he takes on the deliberative account of democracy specifically and identifies how his own variant—a so-called ‘dialogical democracy’ underpinned by particular emphasis on listening—differs from and improves on the deliberative model. In Chapter 5, befitting Dobson’s distinguished position in green theory, he turns his attention to what we might gain from ‘listening for’, and then ‘listening to’, the non-human world. The effect here is to connect the account of listening with Dobson’s broader body of work on environmental citizenship. Chapter 6, then, turns back to the democratic polity more broadly. Dobson concludes with a particularly useful account of how the skills of listening, and apophatic listening especially, might be better embedded in some of the practices of democratic politics. His prescriptions include changes in the way representatives interact with one another in formal institutions and with their constituents, and in how democratic innovations are developed and integrated with existing governing architecture. The ideas – for example, having politicians act as ‘keynote listeners’ rather than ‘keynote speakers’ at public events—remain somewhat tentative and embryonic. More germane, though, is that Dobson develops a line of thought with significant potential to open up the range of possibilities for renewing and reforming democracy. He thereby makes a key contribution to the broader, daunting task of reimagining democratic practice in the face of the populist challenge.

Taken together, then, Neblo and Dobson’s quite different interventions in this debate provide something of a roadmap for hope amid the gloom. Neblo, focused as he is on the real-world challenges to deliberative ideals, provides a convincing and accurate chart of how far the cause of a more participatory and deliberative democracy has come in spite of pervasive skepticism. Dobson, encumbered less by mundane concerns and more by the horizons of the imagination, provides an interesting and challenging account of where it might look to next.

**References**

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