Giambattista Vico and Democratic Pluralism: Lessons for Deliberative Democracy

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I. Introduction

Giambattista Vico (1668-1744) offered one of the first thoroughgoing criticisms of the strain of Enlightenment thinking that tended to overvalue abstract rationalism at the expense of the historical and imaginative dimensions of human understanding. Paradoxically, Vico employed the famous skepticism and empiricism of his philosophical rival René Descartes (1596-1650) to arrive at conclusions about human affairs and culture opposite of Descartes and other Enlightenment rationalists. Instead of "I think, therefore I am," Vico concluded something like, "I create, therefore I know." For Vico, imagination is the faculty through which humans create social reality, and it is likewise the faculty through which we can know and reflect upon that reality. In fact, we can have *certain* knowledge—the only kind that Descartes considered authoritative—*only* of that which we create, namely our history, culture, symbols, language, and other human artifacts. Therefore, the type of knowledge that comes from abstract theorizing such as Descartes prioritizes, Vico insists cannot be *certain* knowledge but merely abstract speculation.

Following other Enlightenment thinkers, Vico too hoped to begin "as if there were no books in the world".[1] He wanted to start fresh an inquiry into the basis of human knowledge and establish an epistemological theory that would also be empirically rigorous. Paradoxically, Vico concluded that the prevailing Enlightenment epistemology of reason could not be the basis of certitude. Not reason, but history, Vico insists. Applying Vico's criticism of Cartesian rationalism to a contemporary school of thought within political science, deliberative democracy, can help to shed light on the extent to which a major area of research in modern political science and democratic thought relies on the Enlightenment paradigm of which Vico was so critical. By examining this school of thought in conjunction with Vico's philosophy, I hope to elucidate Vico's historical and epistemological insights while analyzing some of the normative assumptions of deliberative democracy.

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[1] Thomas Goddard Bergin and Max Harold Fisch, ed. *The New Science of Giambattista Vico* (Ithaca:

Deliberative democracy hopes to provide the theoretical basis for a new type of democracy, one based not on an aggregation of votes but on reason. Fraught as modern, liberal democracies are with competing worldviews and differing "comprehensive doctrines," this school of thought contends that we must have recourse to an objective standard by which social norms can be judged legitimate. It holds that abstract reasoning provides that standard. In general, deliberative democracy argues that the norms governing society ought to be justified through reasoned discourse, which would generally cause seemingly irrational and inherited ways of life to give way to more reasonable practices that all could rationally assent to.[2] This philosophy draws heavily on Enlightenment thinking, particularly the epistemologically primary role of reason over, say, imagination, history, tradition, or other modes of knowledge, although some variants try to make room for some of these other dimensions.[3]

Vico's understanding of the human mind would preclude a theory of politics that rests on the assumption that we may accept or reject inherited norms based on a "reasonableness" criterion. According to Vico, our deepest held cultural and political beliefs are not subject to the powers of reason but to something much more powerful and inescapable. Engrained as it is in the structure of the human mind, the imagination not only informs our sense of reality, it actually generates that reality, Vico believes. Reason or dialogue, alone, cannot significantly change our system of beliefs or social institutions because reason is not the basis for human understanding and conviction. In fact, its epistemic role is subordinate to the imagination. Vico's findings suggest that we ought to take differences in worldview or ideology seriously, and that attempting to resolve major differences by appealing to reason or rationality, as if it were an objective means of discerning truth, would be foolish. His findings even suggest that attempts to "rationalize" politics and social conditions can lead to dangerous attempts to erase cultures and norms that do not conform to an abstract standard of "reasonableness." Likely, this standard would be determined by the political class in power. This might be done under

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[2] The recent *Oxford Handbook of Deliberative Democracy* presents numerous takes on this school of thought. For its general direction and philosophy, see the introduction. Bächtiger et. al., "Deliberative Democracy: An Introduction," in *The Oxford Handbook of Deliberative Democracy*, ed. Andre Bächtiger et al. (New York: Oxford University Press), pp. 1-34.

[3] Second generation deliberative democrats broaden the notion of rationality to include "differing styles of communication such as narrative and rhetoric" and to account for the role of emotion in discourse. See Bächtiger et. al., "Deliberative Democracy: An Introduction," 3.

the auspices of "science," "reason," and "expert knowledge," a phenomenon not unfamiliar to many Western countries.

This chapter will first examine Vico's theory of knowledge and specifically his understanding of historiography and philosophy of imagination. It will then contrast this epistemological perspective with that of deliberative democracy, which gives priority to reason over will or imagination in human understanding. This view is by no means exclusive to deliberative democracy but is often taken for granted in modern political science and the popular imagination. This chapter will assess the limitations of deliberative democracy's theory of democracy from the Vichean perspective. It will conclude by offering a Vichean theory of democratic pluralism and suggesting the ways in which Vico's insights about the imagination and history might be profitably applied to contemporary challenges in democratic societies.

II. Vico and a New Historical Methodology

The name of Vico's magnum opus, *The New Science*, suggests its place within Enlightenment thinking. First published in 1725 and edited and republished a third and final time in 1744, this rather unsystematic work posed the first serious philosophical challenge to Cartesian rationalism. It was largely ignored by scholars outside of Italy until it made its way into German philosophical circles, first mentioned by Johann-George Hamman to his pupil J. G. von Herder. Later F. H. Jacobi and Franz von Baader picked up some of Vico's core ideas. Jacobi proclaimed that Vico had "anticipated the core of Kant's philosophy, namely that 'we can comprehend an object only if . . . we are capable of creating it in our mind.'"[4] Although reluctantly acknowledged within Germany, Vico was a major forerunner to German idealism and the German historicist school.[5]

In the *New Science*, Vico develops a theory of knowledge that he hopes will rest on an unshakable foundation, just as Descartes had sought to do for his epistemological theory. Yet, rather than discarding historical knowledge as Descartes had, Vico finds that the only knowable phenomena are the creations of human beings, that is, our history. The "light of a

[4] Lienhard Bergel, "Vico and the Germany of Goethe," in *Forum Italicum: A Journal of Italian Studies*, vol. 2, no. 4 (Dec., 1968) pp. 566-588, 582.
[5] See Bergel, "Vico and the Germany of Goethe," pp. 566-588.

truth beyond all question" is "that the world of civil society has certainly been made by men, and that its principles are therefore to be found within the modifications of our own human mind."[6] Human beings created civil society, so we can know it. Vico concludes, "*verum est ipsum factum*," the true is that which is created.

Vico says that man can have certainty [*certum*] of what he creates [*factum*], that is, certainty of the particular in history; he can have knowledge [*scienza*] of the true [*verum*], or knowledge of the universal.[7] How do we move from awareness of historical particulars to consciousness of the universal significance of historical facts? Through philosophical-historical reflection, Vico believes. In the past, philosophers and historians (Vico uses the older term, philologians) each "failed by half" in refusing to make use of the other's method, thereby turning history into discreet facts without meaning, on the one hand, and philosophical reflections into mere abstractions, on the other hand. These latter philosophical reflections, twentieth-century Vico scholar Benedetto Croce derided as mere "circlings in the void," untethered to human reality.[8] Historians failed, according to Vico, "in not taking care to give their authority the sanction of truth by appeal to the reasoning of the philosophers."[9] It is up to the true historian-philosopher to *interpret*, not merely chronicle, the facts of history in order to acquire knowledge, *scienza*, based in truth. Cecilia Miller says that Vico's *New Science* might more accurately be titled *La coscienza nuova* to indicate its method as not simply a science of discreet facts, but knowledge or *consciousness* of history. A new historical awareness, synthesizing the method of the philosopher and the historian, Vico hopes will contribute to a new science of knowledge, one that rests on a truly unshakable foundation.

Vico's great accomplishment, Robert Caponigri says, "is to have stated and, within his own terms, to have resolved the philosophical problem of history as the basic problem of the philosophical study of man."[10] Vico's becomes the first thoroughgoing philosophical treatment of historiography, an idea that would become known in the nineteenth century as

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[6] *NS*, §331.
[7] *NS* §138.
[8] Benedetto Croce, *History as the Story of Liberty* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2000), 27. *NS* §131. Vico says that historians or philologians are "all the grammarians, historians, critics, who have occupied themselves with the study of the languages and deeds of people: both at home, as in their customs and laws, and abroad, as in their wars, peaces, alliances, travels, and commerce," *NS* §139.
[9] *NS* §140.
[10] A. Robert Caponigri, *Time and Idea: The Theory of History in Giambattista Vico* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2004), 6.

"historicism." Historicism, or the "science of history," Croce says, is "the affirmation that life and reality are history and history alone."[11] This novel insight, first broached by Vico, rests on a corresponding philosophy of imagination. Vico's *New Science* is as profound for its insights into a new historical methodology as it is for its novel epistemology of the imagination. The one, in fact, depends on the other, according to Vico.

III. Vico's Philosophy of Imagination

The faculty of imagination or *fantasia*, for Vico, is crucial for understanding our history and therefore ourselves. The goal of Vico's *New Science*—providing a method for acquiring certain knowledge—is to be achieved primarily through the imagination reflecting on and interpreting human history. Vico's disciple Croce again clarifies this idea. History—in art, in the written word, "in technical equipment, in alterations of the crust of the earth, in profoundly spiritual transformation, in the changes suffered by political, moral and religious institutions . . . [these] are the documents which as they are gathered from time to time in our minds unite with abilities and thoughts and sentiments we have acquired to make possible a knowledge of what has happened," Croce says. This occurs "by virtue of Vico's principle of the interchangeableness of truth and fact through which man, who has created history, eternally recognizes it and recreates it in his thought."[12] The imagination, according to Vico, is the mode of cognition by which we reenter the thoughts and actions of our ancestors and their actions and thoughts, near and distant. It is how we comprehend, create, and recreate history and therefore knowledge.

We may reenter the past and come to understand it by way of the imagination because it was through that cognitive mode that society was first created. "[D]octrines must take their beginnings from that of the matters of which they treat," Vico said. Social and political reality first sprung into being, according to Vico, thanks to an inborn imaginative myth-making capacity. The first men "felt and imagined" and, "without power of ratiocination, were all robust sense and vigorous imagination."[13] They thought in "imaginative universals," Vico says, which were symbolic representations that would come to generate entire social structures,

[11] Croce, *History as the Story of Liberty*, 61.
[12] Croce, *History as the Story of Liberty*,119.
[13] *NS* §374.

norms, and narratives. A giant clap of thunder, for our ancient ancestors, was Jove himself, inciting fear and shame.[14] Myth, contrary to the modern popular understanding, was not, according to Vico, a false explanation for otherwise inexplicable phenomena, such as thunder. Instead, myth was a creative act that forged the parameters and experience of reality. The thunder *is* Jove, and we must retreat to caves when he threatens. Such was the origin of the first families, Vico says.

Myths, which might be more or less elaborate, are the poetic expressions and devices that created and then recreated primitive cultures. Contained in a society's myths are its taboos, injunctions, sensibilities, rules of behavior, and historical memories. These cultural artifacts transmit and represent the collective memory of society while at the same building the actual society, Vico says. Myths parallel and represent social institutions and arise organically and of necessity. They are not mere rationalizations of otherwise inexplicable phenomena, as later philosophers would assume—something Vico derides as a "conceit of scholars."[15] One of Vico's novel contributions was to revise our understanding of Homer, who, he argued, was not a single great poet but the collected wisdom and experience in the form of verse of many generations.[16]

IV. The Origins of Social Institutions

Far from human beings having rationally designed social institutions, they instead created them out of concrete, practical need—utilitarian but also spiritual, social, moral—over the course of decades, centuries, and millennia. "Humanity is not a presupposition," Max Harold Fisch says in the introduction to the 1948 English translation of Vico's *New Science*, "but a consequence, an effect, a product of institution building." It is worth quoting Fisch at some length:

> The kind of making involved in the making of the world of nations by men was therefore not that of deliberate contrivance, but that conveyed by the term 'poet,' which in Greek means maker; conveyed at least when once with Vico we have abandoned the rationalistic

[14] See *NS* §375-80.
[15] See *NS* §346.
[16] See *NS* §873-904.

> theory of poetry itself and adopted a theory according to which the essence of poetry is imagination, passion, sense, rather than intellect.[17]

Not only were these primitive people creating society from the interplay of imagination, "corporature" or bodily action, and perceived necessity, they were doing so contrary to what may have been their own intentions.[18] "Men have themselves made this world of nations, but it was not only without drafting, it was even without seeing the plan that they did just what the plan called for," Fisch says summarizing Vico. "The plan" refers to the larger design of "providence," as Vico says. Yet Vico's providence has been compared to Mandeville's "private vices, public benefits," Adam Smith's "invisible hand," and Hegel's "cunning of reason."[19] What might appear to be "spontaneous order" emerges from the myriad, complex, and even contradictory ways of human beings. Vico would say that this is owing to our common human nature or *sensus communis*. Certain patterns of thought and behavior form according to the inclinations and limitations of human nature. Vico finds evidence of these patterns or this core of human behavior in the cultural commonalities among all peoples. "Uniform ideas originating among entire peoples *unknown to each other* must have a common ground of truth."[20] Religion, marriage, and burial are the three practices that Vico identifies as common to humans across time and space.[21]

V. Deliberative Democracy

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[17] Max Harold Fisch, introduction to *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*, xliv.

[18] It is interesting to compare what the first (and perhaps only) "genetic epistemologist" Jean Piaget says about the development of abstract thought from coordinated bodily actions. Piaget theorizes that "the roots of logical thought are not to be found in language alone, even though language coordinations are important, but are to be found more generally in the coordination of actions, which are the basis of reflective abstraction." Piaget comes to many of his conclusions about the origins of human epistemology through his study of children. Yet Piaget shares many of the same conclusions about the development of the human mind as Vico, only Piaget studies the individual while Vico studies humanity. Jean Piaget, *Genetic Epistemology* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1970), trans. Eleanor Duckworth, 18-19. For a comparison of some of the similarities between Vico and Piaget, see George Mora and John Michael Krois, Vico and Piaget: Parallels and Differences in Social Research, Winter 1976, Vol. 43, No. 4, pp. 698-714.

[19] Fisch points out that Vico's "'rational civil theology of divine providence' may best be understood as a hypothesis to account for what Wundt later called 'the heterogony of ends'; that is, for the uniform ways in which, while consciously pursuing their particular ends, men have unconsciously served wider ends." See Fisch, introduction, *New Science*, xxxii.

[20] *NS* §144.

[21] *NS* §333.

The belief that rationality is a disinterested mode of inquiry is quintessential of a particular rationalistic strain of Enlightenment thinking and is at the foundation of the school of thought prominent within political science and democratic theory known as deliberative democracy. To understand the political implications of Vico's novel epistemological theory and his elevation of historiography as a primary science of knowledge, it is useful to contrast his philosophy with that of deliberative democracy. This latter philosophy contends that political norms in pluralistic societies require rational legitimation.[22] Dennis F. Thompson summarizes: "At the core of all theories of deliberative democracy is what may be called a reason-giving requirement. Citizens and their representatives are expected to justify the laws they would impose on one another by giving reasons for their political claims and responding to others' reasons in return."[23] Without a common religious, philosophical, or metaphysical system of belief, inherited social norms cannot be taken for granted. Moreover, "Power is a social resource and a social relation in need of legitimation," Seyla Benhabib, a disciple of the deliberative democracy pioneer Jürgen Habermas, explains. "Legitimacy means that there are good and justifiable reasons why one set of power relations and institutional arrangements are better than and to be preferred to others. I maintain that the legitimation of power should be thought of as a public dialogue."[24] Joshua Cohen, a student of John Rawls, describes deliberative democracy as

> a framework of social and institutional conditions that facilitates free discussion among equal citizens—by providing favorable conditions for participation, association, and

[22] Second generation deliberative democrats broaden the notion of rationality to include "differing styles of communication such as narrative and rhetoric" and to account for the role of emotion in discourse. See Bächtiger et. al., "Deliberative Democracy: An Introduction," 3.
[23] Dennis F. Thompson, "Deliberative Democratic Theory and Empirical Political Science," in the *Annual Review of Political Science* 11 (2008), 498.
[24] Seyla Benhabib, "Liberal Dialogue Versus a Critical Theory of Discursive Legitimation" in *Liberalism and the Moral Life*, ed. Nancy L. Rosenblum (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 143.

> expression—and ties the authorization to exercise public power (and the exercise itself) to such discussion by establishing a framework ensuring the responsiveness and accountability of political power to it through regular competitive elections, conditions of publicity, legislative oversight, and so on.[25]

Rawls, one of the most prominent political theorists of the twentieth century, is a major contributor to deliberative democracy. Rawls's famous "veil of ignorance" is a hypothetical device by which we are invited to imagine new political norms that are not shaped according to personal, social, national, and historical circumstances but are informed by objective reasoning. Among citizens, "public reason" is, according to Rawls, the acceptable mode of deliberation. "A citizen engages in public reason when he or she deliberates within a framework of what he or she sincerely regards as the most reasonable political conception of justice, a conception that expresses political values that others, as free and equal citizens, might reasonably be expected reasonably to endorse."[26] Rawls stresses that discussion is to be guided by the principle of reciprocity, that "citizens are to think of themselves as if they were legislators and ask themselves what statutes, supported by what reasons satisfying the criterion of reciprocity, they would think it most reasonable to enact."[27]

Deliberative democracy holds that that when reason is permitted to "float freely," it will have a purifying effect on discussion.[28] Narrow, parochial beliefs will tend to give way to more reasonable ideas that support the common good. Citizens, permitting themselves only to think and discuss ideas that fit within deliberative democracy's framework of "reasonableness," will postulate ideas and norms of justice that others can at least consent to, if not wholeheartedly agree with. "Political reason," Rawls's student Cohen says, is "autonomous" and does not need to rely on "an encompassing philosophy of life" in order to formulate a conception of justice.[29] That is, reason is a disinterested mode of cognition that must be engaged, freed from particular biases, in order to judge fairly the legitimacy of public norms. All citizens must agree, Cohen says, "that autonomous political argument is

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[25] Cohen, "Procedure and Substance in Deliberative Democracy," 21.
[26] John Rawls, "The Idea of Public Reason Revisited," in *The University of Chicago Law Review*, Vol. 64, No. 3 (Summer, 1997) 773.
[27] Rawls, "The Idea of Public Reason Revisited," 769.
[28] Jürgen Habermas, *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*, trans. William Rehg (Cambridge, M.A.: The MIT Press, 1996), 304; Cohen, "Reflections on Habermas on Democracy," 400.
[29] Cohen, "Reflections on Habermas on Democracy," 387.

appropriate, and accept, as a public matter, that the diversity of such [individual] philosophies recommends an autonomous political reason."[30] In a pluralistic society with many competing worldviews, this disinterested and objective method for finding common ground can be the only legitimate way, deliberative democracy declares. Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson echo this view:

> "We expect citizens and officials to espouse their moral positions independently of the circumstances in which they speak. This is consistency in speech and is a sign of political sincerity: it indicates that a person holds the position because it is a moral position, not for reasons of political advantage."[31]

According to deliberative democracy, the diversity of religious, philosophical, and other "comprehensive" views mandates that we come together around a shared belief in reason, divorced from any person's or group's particular viewpoint, in order to judge objectively the merits of political decisions and systems.

Among the procedures and constraints that deliberative democracy holds as indispensable for its method to work properly is that citizens consider each other as equals, even as they recognize varying disparities among one another.[32] They must also practice "mutual respect" and "conversational restraint" and be prepared to listen and consider the viewpoint of others. In addition, a citizen is not permitted to "respond by appealing to (his understanding of) the moral truth; he must instead be prepared, in principle, to engage in a restrained dialogic effort to locate normative premises that both sides find reasonable," Bruce Ackerman says.[33] These and other requirements constitute the basis of the procedures that must guide discussion in order for it to result in an outcome that deliberative democracy considers legitimate.

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[30] Cohen, "Reflections on Habermas on Democracy," 387.
[31] Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson, "Moral Conflict and Political Consensus," *Ethics*, Vol. 101, No. 1 (Oct., 1990), pp. 64-88, 78.
[32] See, for example, Seyla Benhabib, "Liberal Dialogue versus a Critical Theory of Legitimacy," in *Liberalism and the Moral Life*, ed. Nancy L. Rosenblum (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 150; and Thompson, "Deliberative Democratic Theory and Empirical Political Science," in the *Annual Review of Political Science* 11 (2008), 509.
[33] Ackerman, "Why Dialogue?," 17-18.

VI. Vico and the Symbolic Value of Deliberative Democracy

Vico would agree with deliberative democracy that our inherited norms and existing political practices largely defy reason in the purely abstract sense and instead owe to historical circumstance, political or practical expediency, and other factors, rather than logical planning. Yet, Vico would say that there is a permanence to certain social and political institutions because they reflect needs and desires fundamental to human nature or the human mind. Some practices might be amended in small, gradual ways, but in general attempting to subject social institutions to the test of reason would be foolish. Such a test would allow us to assess but one dimension of any given practice: its seeming logical integrity. This criterion may or may not even its true social worth. Civic needs are often shrouded in the accumulations of history and might become vividly apparent only once the practice has been abruptly discarded.

The major premise of deliberative democracy, that reasoned dialogue among citizens can rationalize and legitimize otherwise confused and arbitrary political norms, derives from a fundamental Enlightenment faith in reason. A conceit of scholars, Vico says, was to read back into primitive history modern beliefs.[34] The Enlightenment fallacy with which Vico took issue was the belief that primitive societies were founded by wise lawgivers and "social contracts" among people wishing to exit the violent or uncertain state of nature. Nothing could be further form the truth, Vico asserted. Instead, "vulgar wisdom" in the form of myth and poetry—itself in response to environmental conditions—allowed salutary social practices to take shape. It began with such rudimentary moral inclinations as families forming by entering the caves in units, frightened as they were by Jove. "Thus through the terror of this imagined divinity, [primitive peoples] began to put themselves in some order," Vico says.[35] This was the first beacon of morality and the first building block of civilization and political order, he says.

The power of ratiocination and abstract logic developed only at a relatively late stage in human development, Vico says. This cognitive capacity, the same that is used in the investigation of the natural sciences or in a logic course, cannot unaided grasp the meaning and significance of human history. Vico says that the same faculty that built our human

[34] See *NS* §122-28 and §179-81.
[35] *NS* §178.

institutions, *fantasia*, must be engaged to recreate and therefore understand our history. We might extend this insight to conclude that engaging the imagination is also a prerequisite for trying to change social institutions. Trying to alter social norms by engaging abstract reasoning would be futile, Vico would say, because logic does not generate social norms, myth does.

However, the overall vision of deliberative democracy may be brought about through the symbols it intentionally or unintentionally draws on and also creates. For example, deliberative democracy makes use of and helps to encourage the idea of a "national conversation," a phrase with which modern ears are doubtless familiar. A "national conversation," like certain aspects of deliberative democracy, holds more power as an ideal or symbol than an actual practice. However, it is politically powerful precisely because it is symbolically powerful. The idea of a "national conversation," like deliberative democracy, garners almost instinctive reception for the notions it inspires of democracy, equality, dialogue, transparency, and other ideals that hold sway over the imagination in the democratic age. Yet, in practice, thought leaders and political and media elites calling for a "national conversation" select and frame the topic that they deem important, largely determining its meaning and significance. The nation at large can be but an audience for the media's select presentation of this "conversation." Nonetheless, the invocation of the phrase "national conversation" and the stated need for one, gives the impression that citizens have a voice and part in the dialogue.

The deliberative democracy procedures that are to guide citizen dialogue can similarly seem supremely democratic, but the predetermined structure makes certain normative assumptions about human nature and what is or is not desirable in society. Jürgen Habermas admits that "The normative content arises from the very structure of communicative actions."[36] Habermas means human communication in general generates normative content, but deliberative democracy's careful framing of the debate has the effect of generating normative content of its own. Some have accused John Rawls's *Theory of Justice* of precluding any outcome other than his own conception of justice, despite its aim of merely establishing

[36] Habermas, "Three Normative Models of Democracy," 6.

the rules of the game, and allowing each community to find its own conception of justice.[37] Michael Saward argues that the citizen engaged in Rawls's "public reason" is constrained by a theoretical framework in which only "certain sorts of arguments about courses of action are appropriate or acceptable."[38]

Symbolically, deliberative democracy can be quite powerful in giving the impression that it facilitates free democratic exchange among equal citizens, whether or not it actually does this.[39] Deliberative democracy has often grappled with the seeming chimeric nature of its program and sometimes accepts that alternatives to the "free and equal" exchange it originally envisioned may even be desirable. For example, in a controlled study in Switzerland, André Bächtiger et al. found that participants presented with "carefully balanced materials" changed their minds about a contentious issue prior to voting.[40] The "preference transformations via deliberation . . . happened before the discussion, as a result of information as well as internal reflection," the authors reported. This finding, the authors claim, supports one deliberative democracy theory that "the discussion component may be less important for opinion change than the information phase and the internal-reflective process in participants' heads prior to discussion."[41] Finding that "deliberating citizens change their opinions quite dramatically, frequently in the direction of more common good-oriented policies," the authors conclude that

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[37] In *A Theory of Justice* Rawls makes explicit his assumption that "social justice in the modern state" means government assurance of competitive markets, full employment, redistribution of property and wealth, and education for all. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice: Original Edition*, 87.

[38] Michael Saward, "Rawls and Deliberative Democracy," in *Democracy as Public Deliberation: New Perspectives*, ed. Maurizio Passerin D'Entreves (New York: Manchester University Press, 2002), 117. In "The Idea of Public Reason," Rawls says that "three main features" necessarily arise from public reason: "First, a list of certain basic rights, liberties, and opportunities (such as those familiar from constitutional regimes); Second, an assignment of special priority to those rights, liberties, and opportunities, especially with respect to the claims of the general good and perfectionist values; and Third, measures ensuring for all citizens adequate all-purpose means to make effective use of their freedoms. Rawls, "The Idea of Public Reason Revisited," 774.

[39] Many address the problem of equality within deliberative democracy and specifically the need to equalize conditions among citizens. The more the "deliberation is influenced by unequal economic resources and social status, the more deficient it is." See, Thompson, "Deliberative Democratic Theory and Empirical Political Science," 506. Acknowledging that achieving equal status among citizens would require "'equality of resources,' including 'material wealth and educational treatment,'" many deliberative democrats believe this ideal is worthy and possible with the right rearrangement of social conditions. See, for example, Bächtiger et. al., "Deliberative Democracy: An Introduction," 6.

[40] André Bächtiger, Marco Steenbergen, Thomas Gautschi and Seraina Pedrini, "Deliberation in Swiss Direct Democracy: A Field Experiment on the Expulsion Initiative," in The National Centres of Competence in Research (NCCR) Newsletter, February 2011, 5.

[41] Bächtiger, et. al., "Deliberation in Swiss Direct Democracy," 6-7.

this form of deliberative democracy might be "a cure against populism, making citizens aware of the dangers related to simplistic populist initiatives."[42] It is important to observe that this carefully curated study of "deliberative democracy" does not actually involve deliberation or exchange among participants. It was simply the conductors of the study presenting information to participants to measure any change of opinions. Insofar as deliberative democracy functions as a *symbol* in the Vichean sense of moving the imagination, then it may effect real social changes. However, as Vico predicts, those changes will quite likely be against the original design and theory of deliberative democracy.

At least in the Swiss study, deliberative democracy functions *symbolically* rather than as a method of deliberation and exchange. That one of the authors of the study is a leading scholar of deliberative democracy alongside the study's title, "Deliberation in Swiss Direct Democracy," might lead the inattentive reader to assume that swaying opinions by presenting selected information is consistent with the theoretic aims of deliberative democracy. However, this particular study draws on the symbolic and nominal value of "deliberative democracy" and its assumed place within democratic theory. The effect of this is that it further strengthens deliberative democracy's perceived democratic value while also changing the meaning of "deliberative" and "democracy." These words can signify at the level of imagination their original meanings while, in practice, requiring little or no deliberation or practice of democracy. We can extend this line of thinking to see how deliberative democracy might, through advocating for the suppression of some viewpoints or pieces of information while encouraging others, work towards social change in a way that is undemocratic but nonetheless assumes the appearance of being wholly democratic. The symbolic value of deliberative democracy's interpretation of the words "deliberation" and "democracy" plays a dialectical role. Its influence is not merely limited to academic papers, but might manifest in, say, social media platforms curating or censoring information, claiming that it is doing so in the name of democracy. Deliberative democracy has helped to imbue words like "deliberation" and "democracy" with new, even contradictory, purely symbolic meaning.

Vico would contend that a program such as deliberative democracy envisions could not come about but through its use of *symbolism* translated into action. As its vision holds sway over the imagination, it can impact social practices. Deliberative democracy may make use of

[42] Bächtiger, et. al., "Deliberation in Swiss Direct Democracy," 5.

the preexisting symbolic currency—the way in which words like "democracy," "civic exchange," and "deliberation" have power over the imagination in the West—to wield political power. But, Vico would say, its program would not be implemented as its theory postulates, that is, with citizens deliberating in a forum and determining their political norms. Some researchers who have tried to test deliberative democratic theories empirically have concluded "that deliberation does not produce the benefits the theory promised and may even be counterproductive."[43] Deliberative democracy theorists, such as Bächtiger et al., similarly have indicated that the practice can look very different from the theory.[44]

Even small, controlled studies of so-called democratic deliberation attest to the difficulty of approaching deliberative democracy's ideals.[45] Thompson admits, "The conditions under which deliberative democracy thrives may be quite rare and difficult to achieve."[46] While deliberative democracy holds that we ought nevertheless to strive for the ideal, however impossible, Vico would argue that this type of longing is counterproductive. Upholding as normative an ideal devised rationally and in the abstract leads us away from the type of humanistic, self-knowledge that makes understanding—and hence changing—our social conditions possible. We must appreciate that human beings are not foremost rational but imaginative, symbolic, and "mythopoeic," according to Vico. Along these same lines, Vico would call on deliberative democracy to understand and accept the ways in which human beings form opinions and attachments. Pleas for equality and reciprocity cannot change that

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[43] Dennis F. Thompson, "Deliberative Democratic Theory and Empirical Political Science," in the *Annual Review of Political Science* 11 (2008), 499. John Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse argue that, contrary to the assumption of theorists, Americans actually do not like political deliberation. Nor do they wish to increase their participation in the political decision-making process. "Real-life deliberation can fan emotions unproductively, can exacerbate rather than diminish power differentials among those deliberating, can make people feel frustrated with the system that made them deliberate, is ill-suited to many issues and can lead to worse decisions than would have occurred if no deliberation had taken place," Hibbing and Theiss-Morse argue. John Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse, *Stealth Democracy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 191.

[44] Many deliberative democrats acknowledge the "aspirational" or "idealistic" nature of deliberative democracy, but nonetheless argue that it is an ideal worth pursuing. See, for example, Bächtiger et. al., "Deliberative Democracy: An Introduction," 3. Those who have taken an empirical approach to the study of deliberative democracy have discovered that the actual practice of something resembling deliberative democracy's ideals strays far from the theory. "The conditions under which deliberative democracy thrives may be quite rare and difficult to achieve," Dennis Thompson admits. See Thompson, "Deliberative Democratic Theory and Empirical Political Science," 500.

[45] See Thompson, "Deliberative Democratic Theory and Empirical Political Science," 498-500.

[46] See Thompson, "Deliberative Democratic Theory and Empirical Political Science," 500.

human beings instinctively look for symbols denoting authority, of one sort or another.[47] Or that they instinctively desire their own welfare and that of those closest to them before desiring the welfare of distant members of the human race.[48] These primal attachments form first out of utility, Vico says. The passage of time does not change these fundamental human inclinations and primordial bases of action and attachment.[49]

Vico would say that the chimeric element of deliberative democracy owes to its rationalistic and ahistorical assumptions. It calls on us to deny those aspects of ourselves that Vico believes are fundamentally human and engrained in the very makeup of the human mind. For Rawls, the "procedural justice" of deliberative democracy eliminates the need to take into account the "endless variety of circumstances" of human life.[50] He calls this ethics, "moral geometry."[51] This logic of deliberative democracy is meant to render the "relative positions of particular persons" unimportant in matters of justice. "It is the arrangement of the basic structure which is to be judged, and judged from a general point of view," Rawls says.[52] Vico, as if anticipating this Rawlsian science of politics states, "if you were to apply the geometrical method to practical life, 'you would no more than spend your labor on going mad rationally,' and you would drive a straight furrow through the vicissitudes of life as if whim, rashness,

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[47] An interesting deliberative democracy study is one on juries. It found that even in small, deliberative settings such as jury trials, the members of the jury spoke less or more often and asserted themselves to a greater or lesser degree depending on traditional status markers such as sex, wealth, and education, with the result that educated men typically dominated the debates and swayed the outcome to a greater degree than other jurors. See Delli Carpini et. al., "Public Deliberation, Discursive Participation, and Citizen Engagement: A Review of the Empirical Literature," in Annual Review of Political Science *7* (2004), 325.

[48] "We thereby establish the fact that man in the bestial state desires only his own welfare; having taken wife and begotten children, he desires his own welfare along with that of his family; having entered upon civil life, he desires his own welfare along with that of his city . . ." followed by nation and finally "the entire human race." *NS* §341. This insight also bears obvious resemblance to the great critic of Enlightenment rationalism, Edmund Burke, contends along similar lines "To be attached to the subdivision, to love the little platoon we belong to in society, is the first principle (the germ as it were) of public affections. It is the first link in the series by which we proceed toward a love to our country and to mankind." See Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. J. G. A. Pocock (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987), 41.

[49] This is the starting premise of Vico's *New Science*, namely that to have knowledge of ourselves *now*, we must "begin where [our] subject matter began," *NS* §338.

[50] Rawls, *A Theory of Justice: Original Edition*, 87.

[51] Rawls, *A Theory of Justice: Original Edition*, 20.

[52] Rawls, *A Theory of Justice: Original Edition*, 87-88.

opportunity, and luck did not dominate the human condition."[53] Rawls, on the other hand, believes that in forming a theory of politics we ought to "discard as irrelevant" the "complications of everyday life."[54]

In one sense, deliberative democracy would seem to wish to do away with culture for the purposes of lawmaking. If, however, culture is to be understood as the Vico admirer Ernst Cassirer understands it, as encompassing all human activity—religious, philosophical, scientific, linguistic, aesthetic—and transmitted by way of symbol, then there is no possibility of escaping or bracketing what constitutes the very substance of human existence itself.[55] That is, reasoned discourse about social and political norms inherently takes place among persons formed by particular assumptions, prejudices, attachments, and beliefs not easily shed. Deliberative democracy insists that citizens "can *learn* how to" reason objectively, but according to the Vichean perspective, this is no easy or natural task given the epistemically primary role of the imagination.[56]

As if responding to deliberative democracy, Vico scholar Donald Phillip Verene says that for Vico, "A society of reasoners who are held together by their processes of evaluating arguments and good reasons for acting or not acting in certain ways (a dream held in high regard by all sorts of modern ethicists and cognitive scienticists) is not meaningful or desirable."[57] Verene is here elucidating a particular passage of Vico's *New Science* in which Vico refutes Polybius's observation that "if there were philosophers in the world there would be no need of religions."[58] Polybius believes that the Roman state is cohesive due to commonly held religious superstitions but if wise persons composed the state, seemingly irrational superstitions would be unnecessary as a social bonding agent. Vico argues, however, that religion—formed as it is by myth-making—makes civilization and itself creates wise

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[53] Vico, *On the Most Ancient Wisdom of the Italians: Unearthed from the Origins of the Latin Language*, trans. L. M. Palmer (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 98-99.
[54] Rawls, *A Theory of Justice: Original Edition*, 88.
[55] See Ernst Cassirer, "Critical Idealism as a Philosophy of Culture," in *Symbol, Myth, and Culture: Essays and Lectures of Ernst Cassirer 1935-1945*, ed. Donald Phillip Verene (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979),pp. 64-91, esp. pp. 65 and 81-83.
[56] Gutmann and Thompson, "Moral Conflict and Political Consensus," 77. See J. Knight and J. Johnson, "What Sort of Political Equality does Democratic Deliberation Require?" in *Deliberative Democracy*, ed. J. Bohman and W. Rehg (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), 280, 292.
[57] Donald Phillip Verene, "Metaphysical Narration, Science, and Symbolic Form," Review of Metaphysics 47 (September 1993): 115-132, 124.
[58] *NS* §179.

statesmen. Deliberative democracy seems to share the perspective of Polybius in a certain respect in that it contends that if society were composed of objective reasoners, its social norms would similarly be rational and objective and not dependent on irrational historical and ancestral traditions.

VII. Conclusion: Two Competing Visions of Democratic Pluralism

Borrowing from Vico's insights about the primal and organic nature of human attachments, beliefs, and social organization, it is possible to construct a theory of politics that treats inherited practices and customs as legitimate expressions of the people's will, even as democratic in a certain sense. That is, it would hold that traditional and customary norms that have evolved and developed through widespread and repeated practice among the majority of the population can be considered democratic. The people "consent" to practices and norms insofar as they continue to do them. The consent, in this instance, is not necessarily explicitly rational but practical consent. This understanding of democracy might be considered *more* democratic in important ways than that of deliberative democracy. Under the auspices of words like reason and impartial logic, thinkers like Rawls argue that "procedural justice" is simply logically discerned from self-evident starting premises, but Rawls and many other leading deliberative democrats such as Gutmann, Thompson, and Bächtiger suggest that reasoning in an objective manner may not be natural at all. These thinkers suggest through their theoretical and empirical work that citizens, in fact, must be taught how to reason properly or perhaps even be coerced into the type of reasoning that deliberative democratic theory considers objective. If the reasoning faculty were truly objective, it would seem unnecessary for such a vast body of research and literature to detail the ways in which citizens can learn to use that faculty. Certainly there must be something else in play that interferes with objective reason, such as the imagination and the passions.

A Vichean theory of democracy would tend to defer to the organically developed customs of a particular people and would assume that their ways of life largely reflect various practical solutions to challenges over generations. It would not require rational, after-the-fact justification for social norms that, having the consent through practice of the majority of the population, may not conform to such a standard of rationalization. Yet a Vichean theory of

democracy would allow for change in society, provided that it is organic rather than the product of intellectual activity divorced from actual practice. Communities naturally adapt symbols and practices according to circumstance, Vico says.[59] As circumstances evolve, societies and their laws must adapt or risk decay or war, externally or internally. Edmund Burke echoes this idea when he observes, "A state without the means of some change is without the means of its conservation."[60]

While deliberative democracy would seem to agree on one level with a Vichean theory of pluralistic democracy, its stress on the need for reason or rationality to justify social practices and laws betrays a competing vision. While deliberative democracy eschews the type of normative and seemingly undemocratic power that tradition and custom hold in liberal democracies, its reliance on procedure and rules for dialogue puts in place the theoretical framework for a new kind of hierarchy, one led implicitly by the architects of deliberative democracy. Deliberative democracy claims that such a "procedural politics" makes possible reasoning among equals, but, paradoxically, the reasoning of deliberative democracy intellectuals is required to makes possible this democratic procedural politics.

Vico, unfortunately, does not elaborate on what is to be the standard for making moral political judgments, other than to clearly illustrate that it is primarily through the imagination that we form such judgments. Others, who share Vico's epistemological convictions about the primacy of imagination, such as Edmund Burke, Benedetto Croce, Irving Babbitt, Max Weber, and Claes G. Ryn, have elaborated explicitly or implicitly upon his insights and offered more thoroughgoing accounts of the moral imagination. Justin Garrison's chapter in this volume, "Projections Upon the Void: Irving Babbitt's Critique of Naturalism" and Lucie Miryekta's chapter, "Morality in a Morally Irrational World: Max Weber's Critique of Rationalism," examine in detail the role of the imagination in forming moral and political judgments. Babbitt's and Weber's respective understandings of the imagination help to complement and, in many ways, complete Vico's rather unsystematic, but no less novel, insights.

Given the seeming inescapability of political and social hierarchy, even in democratic societies, it may be time to consider the value of the historical imagination as the foundation

[59] *NS* §388.
[60] Burke, *Reflections*, 19.

for democratic pluralism, and Vico can serve as an indispensable guide for a much-needed new science of politics. Vico's theory of imagination can act as the philosophical basis for legitimate democratic pluralism based in the customary practices and norms of a particular people. When rightly ordered, the imagination can help to inform our self-understanding as a people and allow us to judge our social norms as salutary or detrimental.