This is Not a Debate: Applying Recognition Theory to Deliberative Democratic Designs

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This essay is an attempt to bring recognition theory, as presented primarily in the work of Axel Honneth, into conversation with the recent efforts to design deliberative democratic spaces for citizen engagement. In short, I argue that thinking about recognition and not only deliberation (as typically understood), might gain us a clearer insight into what is valuable in getting citizens to meet, speak, and cooperate with one another in spaces designed to facilitate greater citizen input into policy making.

The first part of this paper is dedicated to understanding the gap I see between deliberative theory and deliberative institutional design, which I think recognition theory can help clarify. Deliberative democracy has long since entered what Stephen Elstub called its “3rd generation” focus on practical applications and institutional designs.[[1]](#footnote-1) Deliberation is now a central concept of nearly any attempt at increasing citizen participation in policy making. These practical efforts to realize greater deliberative input from citizens have developed some promising results. Still, as the application of deliberative institutional designs have multiplied, the theoretical justification for the value of these deliberative designs has received less critical attention in these practical projects. This has created some difficulty in sorting through when a deliberative institutional design has accomplished “good” outcomes (When everyone agrees? When policy preferences have shifted? When citizens feel more connected to one another?), and how we should measure the quality of citizen participation (When people make good, consistent, rational arguments? When they change their minds? When they feel a sense of community and solidarity with their fellow participants?). In other words, a lot of these institutional designs that increase citizens’ interactions with each other seem worthwhile to both researchers and the public, but I think there continues to be a lot of confusion over “how and why” they are worthwhile. And the unfortunate tendency when trying to answer the “how and why” question has been to continue to evaluate deliberative designs according to some default concepts in deliberative theory that I think do a disservice to the potential inherent in these spaces.

The next section, then, will turn to recognition. Axel Honneth’s recognition theory has developed an account of what opinion-and-will formation requires, which I believe can be used to refocus how we see these deliberative designs. For Honneth, opinion-and-will formation itself must emerge from within the framework of positive social relations – that is, positive experiences of mutual recognition in social relations give individuals personal resources with which they can participate meaningfully in opinion-and-will formation. Taking Honneth’s lead, then, might help shed some light on what makes citizen deliberation in well-designed forums so valuable. Good deliberation is not only about some immediate improvement of the quality of debate, or more rational policy outcomes. Instead, it is that within these institutional designs that citizens can find themselves situated with others, recognized as a legitimate participant alongside others, and develop a sense of connection to a larger community. This recognition experience, and less the act of entering into quality deliberation, might be doing a great deal of the normative work in deliberative designs. To put it simply, deliberative institutional designs might be effective to the extent that they bring people together in a mutually supportive environment, where both personal reflection (about oneself and one’s place in the social order) and cooperative action are encouraged, whether or not anything resembling ideal deliberation even happens.

I will argue that focusing on recognition in this way has some important consequences for how we institutionalize citizen participation, and how we attempt to identify its success or failure. Instead of remaining overly committed to notions of proper rational deliberation, or of quality outcomes (say, measurable shifts in citizen preference), we might be able to appreciate the value in the very interpersonal relations themselves that unfold within these spaces, and construct these spaces accordingly.

Finally, in this last section of the essay, I will also attempt to turn the observations about deliberative institutional designs back on recognition theory itself. If recognition theory can tell us something important about citizens’ interactions in deliberative institutional designs, that is not necessarily because Honneth has given us a practical, applicable working theory of the “practices” that might secure healthy forms of recognition within the public sphere itself. Instead, Honneth has tended to talk about democratic activity – opinion-and-will formation – in very abstract terms. Thus it is useful to reflect on what these practical deliberative designs can tell us about Honneth’s project. In other words, there may be valuable lessons about how to “act” on the promise that recognition theory holds for democracy, which may already have been developed (perhaps unwittingly) in the deliberative democratic literature.

**The Poor Fit Between Deliberative Theory and Deliberative Practice – A Preoccupation With Speech and Debate**

A sizeable literature has developed to evaluate deliberative democratic institutions and practices. Typically these studies will focus on how citizen participation either does or does not conform to a set of “deliberative norms.” Were citizens deliberating properly? Was the institution set up to facilitate meaningful debate? The effect here is to reinforce concepts from deliberative theory in defining what value (if any) can be found in instances where citizens meet and work together. And, generally, the focus is on the quality of argumentation by participants.[[2]](#footnote-2) This tendency stems from a preoccupation with language and speech in deliberative theory that forecloses the possibility that elements beyond rational-critical debate might matter as much, or more, than the quality of citizen argumentation. And this is true even as researchers attempt to move beyond rational debate and consider the value in other communicative forms like emotional speech or narrative. I will offer a very brief account of where I believe this preoccupation with language and argument comes from, and then show in a bit more detail how it is reproduced in recent attempts to understand citizen deliberation in practice.

*Habermas, His Heirs, and Ideal Communication as the Foundation of Democratic Deliberation*

I do not think an overly long treatment of the development of the deliberative literature is necessary here, but I do think it’s worth briefly going back to Habermas, since his foundational concepts still motivate the vast majority of the work on deliberation. Further, recapping some basic ideas from Habermas will help make my later use of Honneth as an alternative clearer.

Habermas’ immense contributions to democratic theory begin with his theory of communicative action[[3]](#footnote-3) - the idea that language itself works such that humans can coordinate their activities and come to mutual understanding with one another. Through language we can offer propositions, question propositions, and respond with reasons that might convince others, in order to come to consensus about the world around us. This kind of exchange represents the very core of language use itself. Because this is language’s fundamental use (its telos) our ability to deceive and manipulate (to act strategically) is parasitic on this primary orientation towards cooperation and understanding. That is, we can only deceive others because the preconception we all operate under is that our mutual exchange is oriented towards mutual understanding. Habermas acknowledges that everyday language use is often fraught with confusion, misunderstanding, and difficulty, but he nonetheless sees a rational core to its function that we necessarily rely on.

Without any additional development a key premise for deliberative theory is already here – that language used in the right way (rationally, toward mutual understanding) is possible in the interactions between citizens. Carefully considering what barriers prevent this natural functioning of language, then, opens up the possibility of unleashing the democratic potential of language itself.

From here, Habermas developed his discourse ethics – the idea that even the most difficult moral or ethical questions might have intersubjectively (as opposed to objectively, or purely subjectively) valid answers that could be obtained through an ideal process of communication.[[4]](#footnote-4) Since moral claims (like any other propositions) can be defended with better or worse reasons, they admit a certain testable, refineable claim to truth. However, since moral claims carry weight beyond any given set of arguers in any given communicative interaction (they apply beyond you and me and our effort to understand one another), one has to imagine the process of proposing, questioning, and defending moral norms on a much grander scale. If moral norms can be valid for everyone, then literally everyone affected must be able to participate in a process of argumentation about these norms. Of course, nothing like this is practically possible, but the procedural ideal itself can do something valuable for our own (and our collaborative) efforts at moral reasoning. Such a process would require a few key rules to make the argumentative procedure itself valid. One is “the principle of universalization:” “*All* affected can accept the consequences and the side effects [of a norm’s] *general* observance can be anticipated to have for the satisfaction of *everyone’s* interests (and these consequences are preferred to those of known alternative possibilities for regulation).”[[5]](#footnote-5) And, two, the “discourse principle:” “Only those norms can claim to be valid that meet (or could meet) with the approval of all affected in their capacity *as participants in a practical discourse.”[[6]](#footnote-6)*

As abstract as this discourse ethics ideal is, the impact for deliberative theory was quite practical. The better we can approximate this ideal discursive exchange, including the two rules for an ideal discourse (that all affected can accept an idea, and that we have to engage in a practical argumentative process to find out if such acceptance is possible) the better we can arrive at consensual (and, to a degree, “correct”) democratic outcomes through citizen engagement. Since universally binding moral norms are analogous to universally binding laws and policies within a given democratic community, the right procedures for testing their validity should look about the same. If the right kinds of conversations could be had, then rightness and justness of democratic outcomes could be counted on.

And as these works circulated in the English speaking world (along with a translation of Habermas’s much earlier *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*) these ideas drove the emergence of deliberative theory. The foundational thinkers participating in what John Dryzek called the “deliberative turn” all reproduced these Habermasian concepts to a large degree.[[7]](#footnote-7) Deliberative theory was based on the possibility that communication among citizens in the public sphere (broadly, or perhaps in smaller-scale publics or in smartly designed institutional spaces) could produce a more or less rational public will, which could then be translated into real institutional power in the democratic state.

By way of example, consider the well-read and cited work *Democracy and Disagreement* by Gutmann and Thompson. They write, “Through the give-and-take of argument, citizens and their accountable representatives can learn from one another, come to recognize their individual and collective mistakes, and develop new views and policies that are more widely justifiable.”[[8]](#footnote-8) This process of reasoning would be based ideally on a concept of reciprocity, which requires that “a citizen offers reasons that can be accepted by others who are similarly motivated to find reasons that can be accepted by others.”[[9]](#footnote-9) So, in other words, by unleashing the right kinds of argumentation, constrained through the right sorts of procedural considerations, deliberation could benefit the democratic process in very real, practical ways. It was simply a matter, then, of figuring out how to produce these particular argumentative conversations (as opposed to their less appropriate counterparts) in public forums and institutions that had connections to real political power.[[10]](#footnote-10)

The efforts to translate deliberative theory into practical, working institutional designs have retained many of these same abstractions about language, reason, and deliberation as a kind of ideal debate. Nowhere is this more evident than in John Dryzek’s development of the concept of “discursive designs,” which was an early entrant into the practical turn of deliberative theory. For Dryzek, three (very Habermasian) rules should govern institutional designs aiming at good deliberation: 1) only the force of better arguments should be granted authority, 2) no barriers to the participation of interested parties should exist, and 3) no formal rules or constitutions should be created that cannot be altered by the participants themselves. Institutions embodying these norms can unleash the potential of communicative reason itself, and thereby (hopefully) produce more rational outcomes (be they policy recommendations or some other defined outcome).[[11]](#footnote-11)

Many later writers seeking to explain, construct, or analyze deliberative designs like those Dryzek encourages return to these same notions of proper communicative practices and procedures. Consider Archon Fung’s description of what characterizes deliberation across a variety of institutional designs:

In a simple formulation consistent with many of those in recent democratic theory, deliberation is a process of public discussion in which participants offer proposals and justifications to support collective decisions. These proposals are backed by justifications that appeal to other participants and by reasons that others can accept. These reasons, for example, may appeal to some common good (e.g., ‘This is the best way to improve our school because ...’) or common norms of fairness (e.g., ‘You do for me this time, and I do for you next time around’). When each participant decides what the social choice should be, she should choose the proposal backed by the most compelling reasons. When it generates social choices, deliberation is distinctive because, as Habermas put it, there is no force ‘except the force of the better argument.’ Other decision methods, by contrast, rely on authority, status, numbers, money, or muscle. Decisions resulting from deliberation may be more *fair* and *legitimate* because they result from reasons rather than arbitrary advantages. They may be *wiser* because they allow a broad range of perspectives and information to be pooled together. Discussion may *help individual participants* to clarify their own views.[[12]](#footnote-12)

The question, then, is how various institutional designs can make better or worse use of this ideal of deliberation. The closer to this norm, the more properly deliberative the institutional process.

*Grappling with What Should Count as Deliberation – Signs of an Incomplete Theory*

If deliberation, understood as a certain kind of rational argumentative process, can capture one element of citizens’ participation, it certainly doesn’t capture everything. Some institutional designs and the practices escape this tidy fit with Habermasian concepts. Consider Gutmann and Thompson’s attempt to discuss the value of Truth Commissions (like those held in South Africa after the end of Apartheid) on the same deliberative terms. They see this kind of institution as a sort of “trial-run” for more robust deliberative engagement in the future. Thus, they suggest that Truth Commissions can be related to the same principle of democratic reciprocity used in their earlier work (that citizens reciprocally offer reasons to one another that the other might be able to accept):

A commission that accepts reciprocity as a justification also practices what it preaches about the democratic society it is trying to help create … Reciprocity serves as a guide not only for a future democracy, calling on citizens to justify their political views to each other, but also for the commission itself, calling on commissioners and testifiers to practice some of the skills and virtues of the democratic society they are striving to create … More generally, sincere efforts on the part of citizens to offer an account of their political past closely resemble the most basic activities in the kind of democratic politics to which a healthy democracy aspires: sharing one’s political point of view with one’s fellow citizens in an effort to persuade them at least of its reasonableness, and potentially of its rightness. The very activity of providing an account that other citizens can be expected to understand as reasonable (even if not right) indicates the willingness of citizens to acknowledge one another’s membership in a common democratic enterprise.[[13]](#footnote-13)

I think this drastically misstates what the Truth Commissions are all about. The idea of analyzing these as a first step towards deliberative democracy and akin to an embryonic effort at actual reciprocal argumentation is to entirely mistake a process where truth, mercy, and forgiveness – and even the simple act of these particular people being in the same room and speaking and listening to one another in the first place - are key. There is clearly political value in what these commissions can accomplish, but it’s hard to imagine deliberation has any meaningful connection to that value.

A lot of the recent deliberative literature seems fraught with similar awkward attempts to either fit non-deliberative activity into a deliberative framework; or, conversely, to pull and stretch that framework to allow it to encapsulate all sorts of interactions that do not seem particularly deliberative. There has been a series of efforts to argue that emotional speech ought to be considered right alongside rational argumentation as a valuable component of deliberative activity. And that storytelling and narrative should count as well. I think these efforts are correct, in a sense. Certainly, emotion and narrative comprise a good deal of what citizens actually do together when they meet and speak. However, finding that emotion or narrative is used in deliberative settings does not really escape the deliberative framework in most analyses. Emotional speech is described as allowing more authentic expression, as revealing the motivations of speakers, and helping sustain their commitments as participants in deliberation.[[14]](#footnote-14) In other words, it’s more honest communication, conforming better to our “honest, everyday” language use. But, one has to remain aware that in institutionalized deliberative settings such emotional speech can restrict participation of uncomfortable others, and may create (or force) artificial consensus that is difficult to reflect on and challenge.[[15]](#footnote-15) Narrative runs up against a similar tension. Storytelling conveys one’s personal identity, and bonds participants together in ways that minimize open conflict. Again, it can create conditions in which the social position and background of a speaker is made clear to others. But if it cannot be properly channeled into useful exchanges, narrative may lead to the failure to illuminate real disagreements.[[16]](#footnote-16) In a sense, then, studies like these reproduce a similar mistake as Gutmann and Thompson. Even as they seek to include various kinds of interactions and modes of communications as appropriate to a deliberative process, they never fully escape the reference to deliberation itself as the goal of citizen interaction. There is still an implicit admission that participants should be engaged in a process of debate through which better arguments might be produced. It is still their communicative interaction itself (however we end up defining what properly counts as deliberative communication) that is the focus. Perhaps the definition of deliberation should encompass narrative and emotion; or, perhaps not. On the deliberativist account, if these forms of communication succeed in building a sense of trust, or community, or of inviting others to speak, these are not ends in themselves so much as necessary steps towards better (more inclusive and fair) argumentative exchanges. It’s much more rare to see someone ask whether deliberation (as one kind of activity a group can engage in) is useful for the group’s sense of community, or the levels of interpersonal trust, or the feelings of personal empowerment, even though these might be politically valuable ends in themselves.

I am not saying there is no value in focusing on reason and argument as an important way to evaluate deliberative democracy. There is such a thing as deliberation, and there are ways of evaluating better or worse processes of reasoning toward the end of more legitimate democratic outcomes. Connecting up good reasoning processes to institutions with political power is indeed a valuable goal. But the overwhelming focus on these Habermasian linguistic frames may obscure something else that is critical in bringing citizens together to meet and speak about issues of common concern. Citizens’ actual interaction in a number of institutional designs might move back and forth between deliberation, testimonial, shared, comfortable silence, unspoken acceptance or rejection, or any other meaningful interaction. They may arrive at consensus about a policy alternative. Or, depending on the design, they may simply share stories about different experiences, through which they gain a useful sense of the larger community they inhabit. But the deliberative lens will miss or mischaracterize many of these interactions, or be redefined so broadly as to suggest that all interaction falls within the communicative paradigm of deliberation. To begin to develop an alternative view of how to think about citizens’ co-participation in democratic institutions, I will now turn to recognition theory.

**What We Do When We Meet and Speak About Problems of Common Concern – Using Recognition Theory to Get a More Robust Picture of Interpersonal Engagement Within “Deliberative” Designs**

Part of the problem with the deliberative literature, then, is the preoccupation with a kind of rational debate oriented towards problem-solving, all unfolding in the communicative exchange of citizens – a preoccupation I think is best attributed to its Habermasian foundations. Efforts to broaden the understanding of cooperative citizen interaction often continue to run up against this prefigured understanding, restricting how we design and evaluate these spaces. This was evident, for instance, in Gutmann and Thompson’s struggle to see the value in Truth Commissions. In the remainder of this essay I want to suggest that recognition theory might open up our understanding about what we envision for small scale “deliberative” institutions: what kinds of things we can hope unfold in these designs, how we envision “good” participation, and what kinds of outcomes might be appropriate. Deliberative theory accounts for some of the possibilities, but not nearly all, while often obscuring other valuable outcomes. And it may also be that even the deliberative project itself is based on some interpersonal elements that it cannot offer a good account of how to create and secure (like trust and solidarity). Thus, to get a sense of what else we might focus on when thinking about designing institutions that bring citizens into direct contact with one another, I turn to the work of Axel Honneth.

*Honneth and the Experience of Mutual Recognition – Seeing Social Relations as Prior to Collaborative Reasoning*

I want to begin here with Honneth’s critique of Habermas before moving into a brief explanation of his larger project since I think it makes clear the difference in their orientation towards democracy and opinion-and-will formation.

Honneth describes Habermas’s critical theory project in the following way:

a certain ambivalence is still inherent in his [Habermas’s] efforts, since it is not entirely clear whether the transcending potential is to reside in the normative presuppositions of human language or in social interaction. Even if this distinction appears artificial – since all complex actions among people are linguistically mediated – in the end it makes a considerable difference whether social interactions themselves bear normative expectations or whether it is only through language that a normative element comes into communication.[[17]](#footnote-17)

In other words, Habermas seems to rely both on language itself (the idealized debate), and social engagement (where language “unfolds”) to find normative possibilities for making society and institutions more just (this is the “transcending potential”). If it is only “out there” in language – as I think it largely is for deliberative theorists – then this happens, as Honneth says, outside of any individual’s awareness. It is in the structure of properly utilized communication in language, not in the actual social experiences shared between citizens. Language use itself guides us, whether we know or experience the impact of a kind of universal pragmatics or not. Further, anything unspoken becomes impossible to account for according to this orientation. This is despite the fact that we all have a sense of the meaningfulness of how one comports themselves bodily, or of the many meaningful nonverbal cues that are exchanged in a social interaction. Thus Honneth suggests choosing the alternative account and locating the normative “transcending potential” in the social relations themselves where one can make better sense of our fullest experiences of social interaction.

Accordingly, Honneth’s recognition theory looks to social relations and the experiences of mutual recognition that unfold (or are withheld) in those relations.[[18]](#footnote-18) In general, to be recognized by others is to receive the kind of support, respect, or acceptance that human beings require to develop a strong sense of self, self-respect, and self-esteem. Experiences of mutual recognition come in different forms depending on the social relations one is considering: in the close personal relations experienced with friends and family (forms of recognition in relations of love), in the respect accorded to individuals who have a secured right to participate equally in the networks of opinion-and-will formation (forms of recognition based on equal rights), and in those networks of social relations in which they feel they offer valuable contributions to shared projects (forms of recognition based on esteem within communities of solidarity). This last form of recognition is worth expanding on. Honneth describes it as a “form of social esteem that allows [one] to relate positively [one’s own] concrete traits and abilities.”[[19]](#footnote-19) In other words, through a sense that others respect your contributions to some shared community or shared effort, a person develops a kind of self-esteem through a sense of justified pride in one’s acknowledged accomplishments.

The granting and receiving of mutual recognition within each of these spheres of social interaction is, of course, only an ideal picture. We often experience the opposite of this kind of affirmation and due respect. Honneth categorizes this experience as disrespect, which may take many specific forms, but signifies a gap between one’s justifiable expectations of recognition that are then not obtained in one’s social relations with others. This sense of disrespect can then at times motivate a kind of struggle to assert one’s claim to be recognized by others.

All of these individual experiences (even those in our closest personal relationships) happen within broader social structures that legitimate some ways of being and deny recognition to other ways of being. That is, all of these very interpersonal and immediate relations unfold against a broader “recognition order” that is a product of larger social and historical processes. This recognition order itself can be contested via larger scale social struggles aimed at securing more just and affirming orders of recognition. These struggles can take the form of social movements, or other political struggles, but continue to be based in – unleashed through, is perhaps the right way of speaking – those same immediate experiences of recognition (or, in the case of these struggles, of disrespect).

Further, in his most recent work Honneth suggests that the very act of reflexive cooperation with others in democratic society requires a kind of drawing on and simultaneous critical addressing of the experiences of mutual recognition and resulting sense of personal freedom secured in our more immediate, private, interpersonal relations. So it is for deliberative democratic participation, which is in the difficult situation of both requiring the resources made available through healthy, recognition-granting interactions in private life (in, say, the family, or economic life), and securing the possibility of healthy interactions within these spheres in the first place.[[20]](#footnote-20) Honneth further clarifies the relationship between social relations and the larger project of reflexive cooperation in an essay on Dewey’s democratic theory. He suggests that Dewey’s democratic theory sits in between a demanding neo-republican ideal, and a Habermasian proceduralism because it can articulate the value of a democratic ethical life “anchored … in the consciousness of social cooperation”[[21]](#footnote-21) itself, where associational life provides the resources for the development of the public’s self awareness and self-governance. Thus, it’s not only our private interactions (and the mutual recognition that we receive there) that matter to our ability to be good democratic citizens, but also (and maybe especially) these quasi-public associational activities, which both grant meaningful forms of recognition to us (in terms of esteem), and set us up for a fuller appreciation of our place in a larger democratic community.

All of this rather abstract account of recognition and democracy points to deep interaction between an individual’s social experiences and how effectively they are able to participate in anything resembling deliberation. Their very ability to see themselves as part of a community, or feel the self-confidence to participate meaningfully in deliberation, require a kind of interpersonal mutual recognition that itself must be obtained in social interactions, seemingly tied up in both our private life and our more public, associational life. Of course, nothing in deliberative democratic theory (nor in the deliberative institutional designs that have developed out of it) is particularly well suited to appreciate this. In the deliberative framework, one’s communicative competency is assumed (as a user of language), or is thought to be able to be secured through the procedural design of the conversation itself (simply by inviting all to participate on equal grounds in a debate, or, perhaps, opening up communicative style to invite confident participation).

I do not want to suggest (as Honneth sometimes seems to) that all “recognition work” must be done prior to citizen’s participation in the forums and mini-publics that deliberative theorists envision. In fact, this is where deliberative democratic work can help fill in Honneth’s abstract project. Honneth rightly suggests that deliberative participation shares a complex relationship with social relations in private life. But he never follows up with a clear discussion of the practical ways in which these spheres overlap for most individuals, especially in the modern democratic state. He instead prefers to talk about the entirety of the public sphere and constitutional state as the framework for opinion-and-will formation. But deliberatively designed institutions within the public sphere actively create spaces that blur the line between the interpersonal relationships in private life and the larger project of democratic opinion-and-will formation. That is, they can open up the possibility that forms of mutual recognition between individuals can be encouraged – at least to some degree - through the very act of engaging with one another in spaces designed to facilitate opinion-and-will formation. Honneth seems to have something like this in mind when he offers the associational democracy idea found in work of Joshua Cohen and Joel Rogers in the final footnote to his essay on John Dewey.[[22]](#footnote-22) Still, he does not develop this account with any specific institutional designs in mind. It is possible, then, that in their attention to institutional designs, many deliberative thinkers have already pointed the way to how one can create spaces for citizens to meet and speak under conditions that enhance their self-esteem and sense of place in a democratic community. But this will only be true if we begin to imagine these institutions with the insights of recognition theory in clear focus.

*Politics in Person – Achieving Mutual Recognition In Cooperative, Deliberative Engagement, and Better Deliberation Through Mutual Recognition*

If we begin by seeing institutions and spaces created for the purpose of citizen deliberation as also (and maybe primarily) creating spaces for experiences of mutual recognition, I think it is possible to recognize the value of these deliberative designs more clearly. Instead of being preoccupied with the type and quality of communication that unfolds in these spaces, we can instead (also) focus on the opportunities for positive experiences of recognition. Now, worries about whether narrative or emotion should “count” for deliberative purposes can give way to the broader consideration about interpersonal dynamics that facilitate bonds of solidarity and the opportunities for the exchange of mutual recognition between members. In this case, participants’ expressions of their feelings (about the group itself, or some problem the group is focused on) are undeniably valuable in and of themselves – not valuable only on the basis that they point to some propositional content that can advance the debate.

More than this, we can also begin to see the real political value in groups and institutional designs that do not obviously orient themselves towards something like proper deliberation. Again consider the Truth Commissions referred to above. Rather than try to make this institution fit a deliberative model of reciprocity, it becomes much easier to see asymmetrical position of speakers and hearers, who are nonetheless struggling for mutual recognition in one another’s presence. Speaking and listening – not questioning and debating – seem to be the most appropriate exchange here. And this struggle itself has immense normative importance. Trying to work toward the possibility of being able to live together and recognize one another is absolutely necessary political work that does not result from great arguments, but more from a mutual struggle to recognize and value the other. Spaces to facilitate this work are thus every bit as crucial as spaces to facilitate good political debate.

Further, the interpersonal work of recognition done in the small spaces of citizen forums, assemblies, town halls and other related institutions, can then contribute to the larger forms of opinion-and-will formation in exactly the way Honneth suggests. Since any deliberation (in these small groups or beyond in the larger public sphere) needs to rely on the resources made available in healthy social relations where forms of mutual recognition provide the foundation for meaningful participation itself, many institutionalized spaces can work in the service of deliberative democracy without actually doing deliberation in a specific sense. We can become less concerned about whether deliberation, properly speaking, happens in each forum, much less whether some tangible results followed (consensus, or the changing of views). Instead, we can be more concerned about whether a robust set of institutions for citizen engagement are available and encouraged, which may serve a variety of politically valuable purposes – sometimes deliberation about a political problem, sometimes a civic event for bringing unfamiliar parts of a community together, sometimes a series of testimonials to make feelings of disrespect public.[[23]](#footnote-23) In other words, we can begin to see deliberation as one part of a democratic project of “reflexive cooperation,” but not the only part. And we can begin to see that the spaces and institutional designs that bring citizens together to cooperate might simply be about establishing greater networks of affinity where recognition and trust might be improved. After all, democratic politics does not always unfold in the form of a debate.

1. Stephen Elstub, “The Third Generation of Deliberative Democracy,” *Political Studies Review* (2010), 291-307. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. I’ll give an example below, but see also: Brian E. Adams, “Working Through Disagreement in Deliberative Forums,” *The Social Science Journal, (2014)* http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.soscij.2014.10.008; Leah Sprain and John Gastil, “What Does It Mean to Deliberate? An Interpretive Account of Jurors’ Expressed Deliberative Rules and Premises,” *Communication Quarterly,* 61:2, (2013) 151-171. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Jurgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action, vol I,* (Boston, Beacon Press, 1984) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Jürgen Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action,* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Ibid.* p. 65. Emphasis in the original. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Ibid.* p. 66. Emphasis in the original. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. I think the list of these thinkers is relatively well known, but I have in mind thinkers like John Dryzek, Joshua Cohen, Seyla Benhabib, and James Bohman, certainly among others. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson, *Democracy and Disagreement,* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), p. 43 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *Ibid.* p. 53. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. I should mention here that some friendly critics of the deliberative model tried to open up the communicative processes to include less “rational” forms of speech, and thus get away from Habermas’s particular model. I’ll address emotion and narrative later, but perhaps Iris Young’s attempt to include greeting, rhetoric and storytelling is worth mentioning here as an attempt to pluralize the kinds of communicative interactions that can count as deliberative. But even her work remains, I think, largely about processes of communication between citizens, rather than fully appreciating the work done in the personal relations themselves. See: Iris Marion Young. *Inclusion and Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. John Dryzek, *Discursive Democracy: Politics, Policy and Political Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990) 41-3. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Archon Fung, “Minipublics: Deliberative Designs and Their Consequences,” In: *Deliberation, Participation, and Democracy: Can the People Govern?,* Shawn W. Rosenberg, ed. (New York: Palgrave, 2007) 183. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson, *Why Deliberative Democracy?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 180-1. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. See Marion Barnes, “Passionate Participation: Emotional Experiences and Expressions in Deliberative Forums,” *Critical Social Policy,* 28(4) (2008), 461-81. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Graham Martin, “Public Deliberation in Action: Emotion, Inclusion, and Exclusion in Participatory Decision Making,” *Critical Social Policy,* 32(2) (2011) 163-83. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. David Ryfe, “Narrative and Deliberation in Small Group Forums,” *Journal of Applied Communication Research* 34:1 (2006) 72-93. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition? A Political-Philosophical Exchange* (London: Verso, 2003) 247. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. The following discussion draws primarily from: Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts,* Joel Anderson, trans., (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. *Ibid.* p. 121. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Axel Honneth, *Freedom’s Right: The Social Foundations of Democratic Life, (*New York: Columbia University Press, 2014) 254. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Axel Honneth, *Disrespect: The Normative Foundations of Critical Theory,* (Malden: Polity Press, 2007) p. 232 [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. *Ibid.* p. 239 [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. All of these happen, for instance, in the city of Portland where a focused effort by local government (though something called the Office of Neighborhood Development) has been responsible for facilitating a variety of public meetings, including a public hearing with local police, a series of city sponsored block parties, and an interesting project known as the Restorative Listening Project, which attempted to bring gentrification issues to light to different racial groups in the city. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)