Hélène Landemore: Democratic Reason

Reviewed by Madeleine Pitkin

Landemore's new book argues that democracy, the form of rule in Western nations, is valuable based on the idea of collective intelligence. It presents arguments supporting the collective intelligence of the people, which Landemore calls "Democratic Reason". The book aims to convince readers, including those who may not share Western faith in democracy, that democracy epistemically outperforms any form of non-democratic rule. The book has eight chapters, a conclusion, an index and a bibliography.

In the introductory chapter, Landemore introduces the very concept of democracy, which she defines as "an inclusive decision making procedure" (10). The author discusses the originality of her book, which stems from her original argument that explicitly connects the epistemic properties of a libe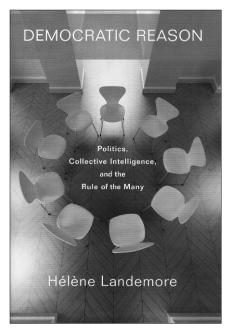ral society and those of democratic decision-making procedures. Landemore states her intention to defend "collective intelligence" in favour of democracy, on the basis that with collective intelligence comes "cognitive diversity" (the existence of different ways of seeing the world (5)), a property which she attributes to good political decisions. She illustrates her epistemic argument for democracy with an applied maze model. Chapter two illustrates the notion of the only-recent acceptance of democracy in the Western world. It considers the deep-seated anti-democratic prejudice shared by many contemporary political philosophers against the rule of the "dumb many", and provides four positive and four epistemic reproaches to such prejudice. The positive reproaches are that citizens are irrational, citizens are apathetic, citizens are ignorant, and democratic decisions are impossible and meaningless. Turning now to the normative approaches, Landemore considers the elitist theories of democracy, the participatory theories of democracy, the deliberative theories of democracy, and finally epistemic theories. Also in chapter two, the author carries out a critical literature survey focusing on work by José Luis Martí (2006) and David Estlund (2008), among other democratic theorists. The author continues to think critically about other work in the third chapter, which is dedicated to a history of ideas about collective intelligence. Landemore distinguishes two mechanisms for the production of collective intelligence: deliberation and aggregation. She separates the historical thinkers into two groups according to these mechanisms: "talkers", who have deduced that democratic reason is a function of individual reason, and "counters", who focus on the epistemic properties of judgement aggregation involving large numbers of people.

However, rather than grouping together historical ideas accordingly, she provides a traditional chronological history of ideas beginning with Protagoras' (arguably) first epistemic argument, and considering thought from several time, spatial and cultural perspectives.

Over the following four chapters, which comprise the empirical part of the book, the author draws upon and exploits Hong and Page's investigations, which establish the claim that cognitive diversity is, in many cases, more important than individual ability. In the fourth chapter, which continues the history of ideas, Landemore presents her original argument for why inclusive deliberation is epistemically greater than less-inclusive deliberation. She clarifies the meanings of, and discusses, the various types of deliberation including individual, collective, classical and inclusive deliberation, and discusses whether voting is a necessary complement of deliberation or a sign of its shortcomings. The theoretical epistemic qualities of deliberation are presented and illustrated with concrete examples. The author also demonstrates her support for the "Diversity Trumps Ability Theorem" developed by Hong and Page; the idea that "a randomly selected collection of problem solvers outperforms a collection of the best individual problem solvers" (102). Finally, she suggests and discusses the respective advantages of three different ways to ensure cognitive diversity: random lotteries, citizen assemblies, and deliberative polls.

Chapter five focuses on the objections to the idea that democratic deliberation has epistemic properties. The chapter is split into two sections. In the first part of the chapter, the author acknowledges problems raised in objections to her argument and proposes solutions to such problems. The second part is dedicated to a theoretical response to the empirical challenge to the epistemic properties of deliberation, which the author developed in collaboration with Hugo Mercier: the new psychological "Argumentative Theory of Reasoning", which theorises that the aim of reasoning is to find and evaluate reasons "so that individuals can convince other people and evaluate their arguments" (124). Chapter six addresses three accounts of the epistemic properties of judgement aggregation through majority rule, each of which suggests a general epistemic inferiority of pure judgement aggregation compared with pure deliberation. Landemore argues that majority rule is task specific and should be

seen both as a way of settling on a collective decision when time is of the essence for deliberation and, thanks to the notion of collective intelligence, as a way of turning imperfect individual predictions into accurate collective ones (146). This, the author argues, makes majority rule a supplement to, and not a rival of, deliberation. There are three appendixes to chapter six. The first involves graphs to illustrate how the probability that a majority is right rises as the number of voters increases. The second illustrates how group predictive competence emerges from negatively correlated judgements with an example adapted from Hong and Page, and the final appendix gives information on information markets, a market-based procedure for aggregating the wisdom of crowds. Landemore defends her decision to include this final appendix on the basis that they are interesting, although they are not an alternative to majority rule. The seventh chapter focuses on the objections to the claimed epistemic properties of majority rule and claimed epistemic judgements. Section one is dedicated to a general objection to the epistemic approach to voting because it fails to take seriously the idea that politics is about the aggregation of ideas. Section two deals with the problem of informational free riding and the voting paradox, and finally section three refutes that citizens suffer from systematic biases which are multiplied at the collective level. Chapter eight is concerned with political cognitivism. Landemore attempts to convince the reader that the idea that there are right or wrong answers to some political questions and that the right answers can be

deduced, or at least approximated, by a political decision mechanism is at least plausible. The chapter distinguishes between weak (a decision is good as long as it avoids major harms) and strong (more substantive) political cognitivism, as well as culturalist and universal political cognitivism, and considers the implications of each of these different types. It presents Philip Tetler's attempt to quantify good political judgement, explaining his experiment and results. However, it also considers the anti-authoritarian objection to political cognitivism.

The author concludes her book by returning to the maze model of the introductory chapter and considering its limits in greater detail. There are, according to Landemore, good theoretical reasons that the rule of many is better than the rule of the few, and there is a lack of evidence to suggest that democracies do systematically worse than other regimes which would be needed to refute the claim that democracy is the smartest form of rule, although it would be good to support the epistemic argument with empirical proof connecting existing democracy and valued outcomes. She iterates the preconditions of democratic reason: cognitive diversity, liberalism, and a liberal and democratic education. Democratic reason must be distributed across time as well as space in order for it to include the ability of people to learn from the past, and democracies must thus have institutions to store knowledge and memory.

The number of concrete examples which Landemore uses to demonstrate almost every abstract term, such as the maze model she uses to illustrate the epistemic argument for democracy, makes for interesting reading and assists understanding. However, the author assumes a certain level of background knowledge from her readers, and her lack of definition or explanation of some complicated concepts could make the book quite inaccessible for a reader without an in-depth knowledge of the subject.

The book is well-organised in many ways, for example in that it has helpful headings and sub-headings, and that each chapter is summarised in its introduction and has a conclusion; however, sometimes the way the author chooses to lay out her ideas detracts from ease of chronological reading. In chapter six, readers are invited to read chapter eight for a defence of "moral facts", which are discussed and applied to quite a significant effect prior to the defence of such application (146). Similarly, on page 152, the

author refers to "incompetent-pace contrived rational choice theory predictions (which I also address in the next chapter)," a fairly abstract principle which could have perhaps been better explained fully at first encounter.

The book strives to be balanced throughout. Landemore considers various counterarguments to each of her assertions or beliefs, which, when rebutted, add to the strength of her own argument. However, she does not always elaborate or counter such counterarguments. For example, on page 39, Landemore argues "in spite of", not counter to,

Sunstein's assertion that all groups will have some kind of exchange of opinion and are thus deliberative. She does, however, admit to the limits of her supporting arguments: for example, on page 66, that Aristotle and Machiavelli do not explain what makes them confident about alleged immunity of groups to passions, compared with single rulers or princes.

In chapter four, the author states that "representative democracy so far remains the only option for our mass societies" (90). However, this assumption is not referenced or supported, and is something that may be

disputed, particularly outside of the Western world and even within it. For example, Claudio López-Guerra's book *Democracy and Disenfranchisement* (2014) is dedicated to convincing readers of the plausibility of an election process not involving universal suffrage and is a response to many works on the topic of universal suffrage taking for granted that voting is a universal and fundamental right.