New books in democratic theory all seem to have the following structure: they catalogue the ills of contemporary democracy, provide a novel diagnosis, and suggest a remedy. In her new book, Hélène Landemore deviates from this structure by arguing that democratic theorists, prior to diagnosis and prescription, need to better understand their patient. Theorists assume that modern democracy entails electoral representation. Landemore presents an “open” alternative that makes the meaningful exercise of political power available to ordinary citizens, not just to a tiny subclass of elites. She considers three forms of open democracy—lottocratic mini-publics, self-selected representation, and liquid democracy—arguing that, along a range of metrics, these fare no worse, and, in some cases, may do much better than, the electoral representative systems that are often treated as the only feasible democratic institutions in the modern era. The book, she says, is an exercise in “concept clarification” (p. 19). It shouldn’t be read as offering either a sustained diagnosis or a serious remedy for democracy’s current “crisis,” however defined. Instead, the book provides some conceptual foundations for a new research program, on which theorists of both empirical and a priori inclinations should be inspired to build.

Open democracies are contrasted with both electoral representative democracies and direct democracies. Landemore argues that electoral democracy has a built-in “oligarchic bias” (p. 80). Periodic elections, she writes, “by nature select for extraordinary—however this notion is defined—rather than ordinary individuals for office,” leaving independent representatives “mostly free to do what they want,” despite periodic elections providing some measure of accountability (p. 34). This oligarchic bias makes representative democracies tend to be unresponsive to ordinary citizens’ interests, and, Landemore suggests, is one contributing factor
to today’s “crisis” (p. 26). This is all to motivate a search for a democratic alternative to electoral representation. Direct democracies provide one alternative, eschewing representation in favor of direct face-to-face or electronically mediated assembly rule. But chapter 3 argues, contra Rousseau, that direct democracies are, in fact, “normatively undesirable” (p. 74). And, contra popular, “naïve” conceptions, they are unfeasible to implement even in small city-states like ancient Athens (p. 66).

Open democracies have citizen representation without elections. One way of implementing them is through lottocratic mini-publics, in which a random sample of the population is selected to represent and deliberate on citizens’ behalf. Random selection ensures that representatives are truly representative of the general population, and not composed mainly of corporate lobbyists, the wealthy, or other elites. Self-selected representation encapsulates protest movements like Black Lives Matter or the Yellow Vests in France, citizen-initiated committees, or individual activists like Greta Thurnberg (pp. 80, 110). Liquid democracies receive the least attention of the three. They involve elections of a sort, but citizens can cast their votes to anyone they like and can recall votes at any time (p. 122). Under all three forms, citizens have a many-to-one relation to their representatives in power, where representatives are selected through non-electoral means.

All three institutional forms are on display in the book’s central case study of open democracy: Iceland’s constitutional convention from 2010-2013, to which Landemore devotes all of chapter 7. That process began with a forum of 950 persons, all of whom were randomly selected from the national registry by quota sampling, deliberating about the new constitution’s key themes and principles. Next, there was an election, from which incumbent politicians were excluded from running, for the 25-person council that would produce from the forum’s results a
draft constitution. Council members then crowdsourced their draft online for general feedback, resulting in changes to the document expressing concern for children and transgender rights (p. 170). Finally, the document was approved in a referendum in which 47% of voters participated. Landemore argues that the open nature of the drafting process led to a document that, in comparison with other national constitutions, strongly emphasized citizens’ rights and procedural transparency (pp. 166-169). However, Parliament ended up stalling implementation of the “amateur” drafted constitution, instead enacting an alternative written by a committee of experts, drafted without ordinary citizens’ input. Landemore offers some reasons why the amateur draft was “marginally better” than the expert draft at protecting human rights and enhancing procedural transparency (p. 170). But because it was never implemented, the Icelandic case study provides limited evidence that open democracy can yield improved quality of governance overall, compared to the electoral alternative.

As already noted, the book’s core claim is conceptual—so, too, are its core arguments in favor of open democracy. Throughout the book, but most centrally in chapters 4 and 5, Landemore argues that open democracy fares no worse than alternative regime forms along a range of metrics, and along some metrics it does better. Some of the metrics she considers include the causal efficacy of citizens’ preferences on policy outcomes, inclusiveness, mass scalability, the protection of liberal rights, representative accountability, stability (construed as an anti-oligarchic bias), and vulnerability to capture by special interest. The book mostly scores open democracy against electoral representative democracy, as direct democracy is ruled out of consideration in chapter 3 for failing to scale in even small city-states. These comparative arguments are mainly conceptual as there isn’t sufficient evidence to make any empirical generalizations about how well open democracies work. What evidence there is, though, is not
always encouraging. In her all-too-brief discussion of liberal rights, Landemore mentions some prominent examples of majoritarian open democracies misfiring: the execution of Socrates and the 2009 Swiss referendum banning the construction of minarets (pp. 201-202). She briefly discusses these examples after calling for further “cautious” experimentation with open democratic systems unhindered by counter-majoritarian institutions of constitutions and judicial review (p. 200). Readers with the prior belief that such experiments are a bad idea are not likely to be convinced otherwise.

The book’s most novel argument is that open democracy is more inclusive than electoral representation. For Landemore, inclusiveness is perhaps as central a value to democracy as equality, yet theorists rarely discuss it (pp. 88-89). Inclusiveness is what distinguishes open democracy from its electoral alternative. Both respect the equality of citizens by adhering to the principle of “one person, one vote.” But this formal equality is compatible with positions of power being accessible only to an elite few: the wealthy, the charismatic, etc. Lottocratic mini-publics, and other open institutions, are inclusive because by design they render political power accessible to ordinary citizens, including the poor and the ineloquent. Inclusiveness has a distinct instrumental value, which Landemore has largely explored in other work. In principle, inclusive bodies should perform better on epistemic grounds than electoral representative systems. For inclusive bodies include a more diverse set of inquirers trying to discover the best solution to a problem. Following the work of Lu Hong and Scott Page, Landemore embraces the analytic result that “diversity trumps ability”: a cognitively diverse group of problem solvers can outperform, on problem solving tasks, a like-minded coterie of experts (p. 42). This analytic result suggests, for example, that the diverse cognitive tools a set of amateur citizens brings to the problem of constitutional design, say, will yield a better constitution than would a set of less
cognitively diverse experts. Thus, we should expect better political results, overall, if decision-making processes at every level are made open to a diverse set of citizens. This includes not just ratification, but the initial process of agenda-setting as well (p. 131).

Let me close with some criticisms. The book does little to explore the comparative merits of different forms of open democracy. Self-selected representation, for example, is bound to be less inclusive than lottocratic mini-publics, and need not be more inclusive than electoral representation. On its face, it may seem that self-selected representatives are far more diverse than what constitutes today’s career politician. The latter tend to be extremely rich (either before entering politics or as a result) and to have an elite educational background. In contrast, self-selected representatives can come from any educational or socio-economic background. But that is compatible with self-selection acting as a powerful sorting mechanism, leaving ostensibly diverse members of a social movement all having the same problem-solving heuristics that blind them to aspects of a complex social problem. Biases in media reporting can also lead to certain individual activists becoming elevated in popular consciousness while others, whose views are more likely to secure majority endorsement if fairly presented to the public, are ignored. Then there are the self-selected “representatives” who are simply moral busy-bodies or grandstanders. All this is to say that, absent further work, it is not clear that the three institutional forms of open democracy are truly inclusive in a way that enhances their epistemic properties with respect to electoral representation. Of course, this call for further work hardly seems fair, as the book, I’ve said, aims to provide a conceptual foundation on which others can build. In that respect, it succeeds.

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