

# Book Reviews

Baber, Walter F., and Robert V. Bartlett. 2005. *Deliberative Environmental Politics: Democracy and Ecological Rationality*, Cambridge, MA, and London: MIT Press.

*Reviewed by Kerri Woods*  
*University of Glasgow*

While some early green theorists resolved the potential for conflict between democracy and ecological rationality by dispensing with democracy, the tendency prevalent in contemporary green thought has been to regard democracy as a necessary condition for sustainability. But the potential for conflict has not gone away—democracy, after all, gives people the freedom to be anti-ecological if they choose. In view of this, and inspired by “the deliberative turn” that has dominated environmental theorizing on democracy in recent years, Baber and Bartlett’s study seeks to explore and analyze the interrelationships between deliberative democracy and ecological rationality.

Baber and Bartlett characterize deliberative democracy as a product of the Enlightenment, being, as it is, an attempt to apply *reason*, rather than religious doctrine or superstition, to the task of organizing our societies and finding harmonious patterns of co-existence. But rationality is complex and multifaceted. Thus Baber and Bartlett devote a chapter to specifying different types of rationality—functional, substantive, procedural, technical, social, legal, political and ecological—in order to advance the argument that what is missing from contemporary politics, and indeed what has enabled us to reach our current ecological impasse, is “the estrangement of rationality and reasonableness” (p. 20). Rejecting the instrumental rationality of self-interest politics in favor of a resurrection of the idea of the public interest, Baber and Bartlett affirm the central importance of (public) “reasoning about ends as well as means” (p. 27). This concept, they find, is the project of environmental politics.

The book is thereafter divisible into two. The first half, chapters 3 through 7, give an overview and then a detailed treatment of three alternative models of deliberative democracy: Rawlsian, Habermasian, and the “full liberalism” of such thinkers as James Bohman or Amy Gutmann. The second half of the book then explores particular problems in relation to these three theories, addressing rhetoric (chapter 8), environmental citizenship (chapter 9), and the role of experts and social movements (chapter 10). The authors then take a closer look at the legacy of the Enlightenment and close with thoughts on a future “postmeta-physical” politics.

*Global Environmental Politics* 7:1, February 2007  
© 2007 by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology

The detailed treatment of the three models of deliberative democracy is both instructive and impressive, and establishes a solid basis on which to examine the particular issues considered in the remaining chapters. There is, however, a degree of repetition concerning the core ideas of Rawls, Habermas, and Bohman (the representative of full liberalism) in the latter chapters. No doubt this repetition enhances the accessibility of a text that will be challenging for some students despite the claim on the back cover that the book “will become essential reading for scholars and students.” The theoretical focus of the book is a welcome departure from other texts in the field that treat the (potential) problems of deliberative environmental democracy as technical matters about such things as equality of access to information or the reliability of focus groups as representative of a broader community. Some of these technical concerns, such as the place of experts and the power of rhetoric, are addressed in this book. But its primary focus is on deeper questions concerning the justice and legitimacy of deliberative outcomes.

The authors wisely refrain from pushing one particular agenda and instead highlight real world examples of the three models of deliberative reasoning they address. Although some international examples are discussed and the logic of extending deliberative democracy beyond the confines of the nation state is mentioned (p. 136), the majority of examples used are from the American domestic political context. Also, despite devoting a chapter to environmental citizenship, the authors do not engage with recent proposals to rethink citizenship to include all those affected by an environmental decision. No one volume can address every relevant question, but the issue of who can participate in deliberative forums would have been an interesting topic through which to pursue questions of legitimacy and justice.

Perhaps the most interesting proposal in the book is the idea that the deficiencies in our current, post-Enlightenment thought are not the result of imbibing Enlightenment ideas about the dominance of reason and the potential through reason to dominate nature. Our mistake has rather been not to accept sufficiently the lessons of the Enlightenment. Baber and Bartlett devote the penultimate chapter of their book to exploring what we can learn from Francis Bacon, typically regarded with hostility by environmentalists. A discussion of Bacon’s work on the “Idols of the Mind” reveals that some responses to the environmental crisis, such as ecofeminism, deep ecology, and the Gaia hypothesis, are “every bit as metaphysical as the traditions against which they rise” (p. 223). In plural societies, metaphysical pre-commitments make for poor public reasons. As Baber and Bartlett emphasize, they can also engender complacency in political philosophy, and thereby inhibit a willingness to submit one’s own ideas to critical scrutiny, an endeavour the authors convincingly argue is vital.