





RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Deliberative ecologies: a relational critique of deliberative systems

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## Abstract

This paper advocates a move beyond the systemic approach in the field of Deliberative Democracy. It argues that the notion of *deliberative ecology* can deliver the necessary conceptual elements that deliberative democrats seek in deliberative systems without some of the problems they either overlook or embrace. To advocate the advantages of an ecological perspective to deliberation, the article focuses on six axes of comparison: (i) performances of actants (instead of functions of arenas and players); (ii) articulations and translations (instead of transmission); (iii) vulnerabilities (instead of pathologies and dysfunctions); (iv) practice (instead of institutionally-oriented design); (v) diverse temporalities (instead of linear temporality) and; (vi) hologram-based analysis (instead of systemic analysis). In a nutshell, the article claims that the ecological approach to deliberation has the advantage of conceptualizing an ever-changing web of relations of interdependency, which connects diverse entities that are either relevant to a public discussion or that hinder its enactment.

**Keywords:** Democratic theory; deliberative democracy; deliberative systems; deliberative ecologies; theories of complexity; relational sociology

## Introduction

The concept of deliberative systems has become a key element in the theories of deliberative democracy (Mansbridge, 1999; Hendriks, 2006; Dryzek, 2010; Parkinson and Mansbridge, 2012; Chambers, 2017; Neblo, 2015; Steiner et al, 2017; Curato and Böker, 2016; Bächtiger and Parkinson, 2019; Elstub et al, 2019; Hauber and Motta, 2020). It has had an enormous influence, helping deliberative democrats to advance a comprehensive perspective about discursive flows in democratic societies.

In broad terms, ‘Deliberative Democracy is grounded in an ideal in which people come together, on the basis of equal status and mutual respect, to discuss the political issues they face and, on the basis of those discussions, decide on the policies that will then affect their lives’ (Bächtiger et al., 2018: 2). The concept has influenced both investigations about micro discursive interactions and macro processes in the public sphere. The systemic approach sought to connect these trends of research, providing a framework for the comprehension of the connections between different discursive arenas that may nurture public debates (Elstub, 2019). Due to its relevance and undeniable contributions, the concept thrived with scarce friction. Some concerns were raised, and caveats were pointed out (Mansbridge et al., 2012; Papadopoulos, 2012; Owen and Smith, 2015;

Mendonça, 2016; Curato et al, 2019; Zgiep, 2019; Asenbaum, 2022), but the notion was widely accepted and adopted, reshaping research agendas and democratic innovations.

This article aims at advocating a move beyond the systemic approach. We argue that the notion of *deliberative ecology*<sup>1</sup> can deliver the necessary conceptual elements that deliberative democrats seek in deliberative systems without some problems they overlook. One may acknowledge that public discussions can (and should) happen in a variety of arenas spread over space and time without adopting a systemic perspective. An ecological approach can grasp this idea while also avoiding conceptual and practical limitations inherent to the premises of structural functionalism that pervades, in one way or another, the idea of deliberative systems.

Drawing from theories of complexity and from pragmatism, an ecological approach considers social entities according to the webs of interdependence that simultaneously support and constrain them at a given moment in time. Since it understands those relational webs as fluid and complex, it does not think of actors and political arenas through fixed, universal, and aprioristic categories, roles, and functions. Such an approach values the dynamic and unpredictable features of reality, refusing the quest to organize it in ways that would enable an organicist understanding of the world. It also pays attention to the contradictions and tensions pervading a certain ecology, privileging a practice-based understanding of political action. In doing so, this ecological approach recognizes the multiple, recursive, and changing nature of relationships grounding the vivid and non-teleological unfolding of beings, spaces, and temporalities.

To advocate the differences and advantages of this perspective in comparison to the notion of deliberative systems, we organize this article in two parts. In the first one, we briefly reconstruct the notion of deliberative systems and deal with some criticisms raised against it, adding a broader argument regarding the risks inherent to the idea of systems. In the second part of the article, we advance six dimensions of comparison, aimed at showing the different angles enabled by an ecological perspective.

In a nutshell, we claim that even if deliberative democrats often use the notion of *system* quite loosely and do not fully embrace a mechanistic approach, the risks of falling into linear and functionalist comprehensions of political processes run across the broader comprehension of how a system should look and becomes embedded in some of the terms and concepts employed. The way deliberative systems conceive of the relationships between different discursive arenas tends to simplify and linearize complex and recursive interconnections. Deliberative democrats frequently look for transmission processes and for the functions or roles of different arenas, without acknowledging the open-ended dynamic of discursive flows. This has thwarted a proper conceptualization, for instance, of forms or relationships between discursive arenas that obstruct deliberation. An ecological approach to deliberation has the advantage of conceptualizing an ever-changing web of relations of interdependency, which connects diverse entities that are relevant to a public discussion or that hinder its enactment. We are not dealing with fully distinguishable, although interdependent, parts performing diverse functions to promote the goals of the system (Mansbridge et al, 2012: 10). Instead of a cooperation between arenas, one should seek to understand various strands of adaptive movements in a complex whole.

## The notion of deliberative systems

The systemic approach to deliberation discusses the relevance of communicative processes spread over time and space, through diverse and overlapping arenas. The idea was initially proposed by Mansbridge (1999), who reflected on the performance of feminist groups and discourses, to point out the role of everyday conversations in the construction of public demands, as well as the part played by the media and civil society in promoting discursive processes.

<sup>1</sup>We use the term ‘ecology’ as a sociological paradigm and theoretical framework that can help us to conceive deliberative processes in a comprehensive, relational, and complex manner.

The empirical turn in deliberative scholarship in the 2000s, however, privileged the agenda around minipublics, paying scarce attention to macro processes of mass democracy more broadly, as Simone Chambers (2009) warned. The renewed interest in the concept of deliberative systems in the 2010s has amplified the scope of the approach. It has benefited from a return to Habermas' two-track model and from the works of Parkinson (2004), Goodin (2005), Hendriks (2006a), and others. But the actual push happened a decade ago, with the popularization of the concept (Elstub and Escobar, 2019), especially after the publication of the volume edited by Parkinson and Mansbridge in 2012 (*Deliberative Systems: Deliberative democracy at the large scale*).

According to Mansbridge and colleagues:

A system here means a set of distinguishable, differentiated, but to some degree interdependent parts, often with distributed functions and a division of labour, connected in such a way as to form a complex whole (...). A deliberative system is one that encompasses a talk-based approach to political conflict and problem-solving (...). Normatively, a systemic approach means that the system should be judged as a whole in addition to the parts being judged independently (Mansbridge et al., 2012: 05).

Mansbridge and collaborators argue that there are three functions to be performed by deliberative systems, due to the complementarity among the parts that compose them: (i) the epistemic function, which would allow the formation of citizens' preferences based on qualified and diversified information; (ii) the ethical function, related to the promotion of mutual respect among citizens; (iii) and the democratic function, linked to the inclusion and valorization of a plurality of voices, discourses, interests and demands (Mansbridge et al., 2012).

A significant number of studies have made use of the systems approach in the last two decades. These studies have sought to observe the contribution of the press, civil society actors, and the bureaucracy in articulating debates (Mendonça and Maia, 2012; Felicetti, 2016; Maia et al., 2017; Hendriks et al., 2020; Holdo, 2020). They point to the construction of discourses on sensitive issues among ordinary citizens and in the public sphere, noting the role of deliberative catalysts and social networks (Barvosa, 2018). They note the challenges for the circulation of discourses involving civil society, market, and transnational actors in the global sphere (Stevenson and Dryzek, 2014). And, more recently, they mobilized the systemic perspective to comprehend populism (Curato, 2020) and the crises of democracy (Mendonça, 2023). Some researchers suggest the potential of mini-publics and other democratic innovations to scale up deliberative systems (Almeida and Cunha, 2016; Niemeyer, 2014; Niemeyer and Jennstäl, 2018), or in search of an open democracy (Landemore, 2020). Others have pointed to the need to refine the understanding of the issues that contribute to the functioning of deliberative systems, advocating the relevance of everyday conversations, but reinforcing the need to identify mechanisms that structure in-depth public deliberation and connect micro and macro levels of debate (Almeida and Cunha, 2016; Tanasoca, 2020).

The literature has also pointed to some of the challenges deliberative systems face. Mansbridge et al. (2012) argue that the excess of proximity or distance between the arenas and the control of the system by one of its parts are pathologies that hinder a proper systemic work. Warning that the process of connection between different discursive arenas is the result of the agency of actors and/or institutional conformations, Hendriks (2016: 46) indicates the risks of domination of these spaces by elites and the formation of enclaves. Similar risks are pointed out by Mendonça (2016), who critically recognizes how the logic of deliberative systems can be explored to reinforce existing asymmetries and augment the discretionary power of those in positions of decision-making. Boswell (2014) fears that actors with more resources will broadcast self-interested content into systems, undermining them altogether. And Faria (2017: 6) argues that non-democratic practices can predominate in a system. All these works identify pathologies within the systemic approach and possible antidotes and solutions that can lead to healthier systems.

There are a few papers that take a more critical look at the theoretical foundations and practical consequences of the systemic concept of deliberation. Among these, we should highlight the contribution of Owen and Smith (2015), according to whom the systemic notion of deliberation can bring at least two undesirable consequences for deliberative democracy. It may dismiss the comprehension of the conditions of production of discourses and neglect the relevance that specific deliberative institutions, such as mini-publics and citizen assemblies, have to deliberation. This last possibility would contradict a huge body of work that confirms that deliberative institutions can bring specific benefits to democracies. In light of such considerations, Owen and Smith (2015) posit that the development of deliberative theory and practice need not culminate in a systemic-functionalist version of deliberation. An alternative, for example, would be to use the concept of deliberative stance as a tool to map deliberative practices in given social contexts.

Criticisms have led to other conceptual refinements and reformulations. Dryzek (2017), for example, talks about the need to think beyond the idea of forums and systems and focus on deliberative polity, inviting the consideration of culture and intersubjectivity in deliberation rather than the performance of roles and functions. His argument is that *deliberativity* cannot be created and fostered only by building deliberative institutions or by integrating different spaces. Drawing on the idea of deliberative culture (Böker, 2017), he argues that further reflection is needed on how deliberation pervades i) the manifestation of actors' intersubjective stances and interactions; and ii) how this takes place in the public sphere - a concept that deserves to be reclaimed, according to him. Dryzek also views with interest Owen and Smith's (2015) idea of deliberative stances but believes that it is necessary to overcome its individualistic basis.

With a perspective anchored in critical theory, Curato, Hammond and Min (2019), in turn, advocate an approach to deliberation that considers power as a constitutive element of politics. They criticize the approximations with the idea of systemic pathologies that Talcott Parsons' (1939) functionalism engenders and which limits our understanding of power relations. The assessment made by the authors is that the systemic analyses have focused too much on linguistic exchanges and subjective evaluations of the deliberative experiences of those involved, being insufficient to account for the structures that constrain or facilitate the exchange of arguments that perpetuate or control hegemonic forms of power (Curato, Hammond, and Min, 2019: 112).

Criticisms of functionalism, such as the one made by Curato and colleagues (2019) are, nevertheless, still rare. Furthermore, some of the most problematic consequences of the functionalist paradigm are not addressed. The tendency to oversimplify social life and its political problems, as well as to homogenize units of analysis, for instance, has not been systematically challenged. Moreover, there are few works that present concrete and explicit theoretical alternatives to the functionalist-systemic paradigm. Instead, there has been an increasing call to shift the agenda into a broader meta theorization about democracy itself, understanding deliberation as a particular political practice (Warren, 2017; Felicetti, 2021), timbre (Bächtiger and Parkinson, 2019) or space (Asenbaum, 2022). In this article, we claim that an ecological approach could offer fruitful possibilities for developing a theory of deliberative democracy that is sensitive to the complexity, the heterogeneity, and the dynamics of the political world while remaining faithful to its theoretical core.

Acknowledging that the systemic turn opened important research agendas and expanded the horizon of deliberative research, we do believe that it is possible and beneficial to move beyond it, allowing scholars not only to find a more nuanced and complex vocabulary but a set of ontological and epistemic premises more attuned to deliberative democracy. As outlined here, ecology's intersubjective and discursive underpinnings are strongly related to the linguistic turn, which was one of the driving forces for a significant paradigmatic shift in social sciences (e.g., Habermas, 1987). However, it does not reduce the social world and democracies to their linguistic interactions (e.g. Bennet, 2010).

## Beyond the systemic approach

In the following sections, we advance an ecological alternative to the systems' approach. Drawing from pragmatism and theories of complexity, we sustain the importance of discursive processes spread over time and space. However, without the functionalist underpinnings, the ecological approach is an attempt to broaden the capacity to consider the complexity of beings and webs of relationships that condition the emergence of discourses and deliberative transactions in a given context. We develop this argument with the aid of six axes aimed at showing the limitations of the systemic approach and the different angles enabled by an ecological perspective.

### ***Functions of arenas and players in dynamic equilibria vs. performances of actants in continuous metamorphoses***

Mansbridge and colleagues (2012) introduce a set of guidelines necessary to broaden the concept of democratic deliberation and connect it with the ideal of deliberative democracy. Democratic deliberation would require a division of labor, as it should be performed by multiple arenas and diverse social actors engaged in the thematization of a given controversial issue (Mansbridge et al., 2012: 2–3). These diverse arenas would have different roles and their interconnections would be essential for the achievement of key functions normatively prescribed (Mansbridge et al., 2012: 6). The systemic paradigm leads one to seek efficiency in the production of deliberative and systemic functions that derive from this social division of discursive labor so that, for example, deliberative deficits detected in one arena would be compensated in other arenas that are connected to it (Mansbridge et al., 2012: 11–13).

Mansbridge and colleagues (2012: 11–13) speak of three deliberative functions: a) epistemic: substantive and meaningful consideration of reasons with the aim of making informed decisions; b) ethical: promotion of mutual respect among citizens so that they are not treated as passive subjects to be governed, but as autonomous agents who take part in the governance of their societies; c) democratic: fostering inclusiveness and parity of participation among those concerned and involved in a decision. Furthermore, the authors speak of complementary functions such as checks and balances, relational interdependence through feedback, mutual adjustment (homeostasis) and convergence.

As it is typical in functionalist models<sup>2</sup>, such functions simplify and homogenize both the entities and the problems that are proposed as units of analysis. Roles of actors and arenas are thought of, aprioristically and universally, as factors responsible for the adequate and organic structuring of a wider process that would be beneficial to democracy. By homogenizing entities and spheres, such a perspective ultimately disregards the singular characteristics, urgencies, and constraints that differentiate social entities. Moreover, it is common for systemic-functionalist analyses to be carried out in a synchronic way, failing to perceive how social actors and institutions change their characteristics, relations, and motivations over time (Faia, 1986). Finally, it is often assumed that the performance of systemic and deliberative functions is universally salutary and desirable for any set of political actors involved in any political controversies at any time. Attention to the conditions of discursive production and, especially, to political subjects and their collective problems become secondary (Owen and Smith, 2015).

A more complex and ecological perspective, along the lines proposed by Isabelle Stengers (2010) and Jane Bennett (2010), does not equate institutions or sets of political actors to homogeneous spheres or organisms that are healthier and homeostatically balanced only according to the effectiveness of parts in performing previously established functions. To think of the social and the political in a more complex way implies to consider that characteristics of social

<sup>2</sup>Structural-functionalist models frequently establish aprioristic ideal parameters to characterize and judge the performance of political systems, cultures or institutions and even specific sets of social actors that belong to a given social field (e.g., Parsons 1939; Easton, 1965).

entities are not fixed substances, but dynamic consequences of the relations they establish with other entities in each context (Emirbayer, 1997). In this sense, before a researcher proposes whether an ecology of social beings needs to be more deliberative or democratic, it is up to her/him to map lively processes of formation and rupture of webs of interdependence established by heterogeneous entities that have ventured, at a given moment, to coexist (Stengers, 2010: 34–35; 39).

Since instability and provisional adaptation are principles of the ecological perspective, they do not allow one to reduce the complexity of identities and urgencies of social entities to a realization of functions and roles that they ought to perform. This is because, on the one hand, social entities co-participate at the same time in more than one political ecology, which both supports and constrains them. In this sense, their performances vary according to the demands and contexts of each of these overlapping social webs. On the other hand, as proposed by relational theorists, the configuration of these social entities varies over time because they are affected by the very transactions that are established across their webs<sup>3</sup> (Emirbayer, 1997: 289).

An ecological and relational approach to deliberation is built upon a principle of ‘radical indeterminacy’ about social entities and their actions (Callon, 1999). Such a principle has two consequences: a) entities involved in political interactions, such as deliberative ones, should be considered as *actants*<sup>4</sup>; b) deliberative democratic practice should be considered as a *pharmakon*, that is, a political device whose effects and consequences cannot be entirely anticipated because they depend on the dose, the circumstance, or the context.<sup>5</sup>

Regarding the first consequence, an ecological perspective suggests that attributes, roles, or functions that entities perform – whether they are human or extra-human – are relational, being therefore contextual and contingent. The term ‘actant’ is used to draw attention to the fact that the action of a social entity is always dependent on relations that constrain and/or create opportunities to act. In this way, characteristics, capabilities, and asymmetries between actants are consequences of their entanglement with distinct webs of entities, resources, and power relations. In this relational and dynamic sense, we cannot characterize sets of actors and institutions as individuals, atoms, machines, or organisms whose attributes are determined by a substance or ideal capacity to produce something. Faithful to the notion of *flat ontology* (DeLanda, 2002; Bryant, 2011), an ecological approach recognizes how many types of individuals affect each other in the making of both their relations and of themselves.<sup>6</sup>

Also, we must consider that what deliberative institutions or practices themselves perform in relation to democracy cannot be completely foreseen or guaranteed beforehand. This is because those who are judged by deliberative ideals or who engage in deliberative practices are actants whose characteristics and vulnerabilities cannot be fully anticipated. In this ecological sense, democratic deliberation cannot be characterized as a panacea, that is, a remedy of universal

<sup>3</sup>“What is distinct about the transactional approach is that it sees relations between terms or units as preeminently dynamic in nature, as unfolding, ongoing processes rather than as static ties among inert substances” (Emirbayer 1997: 289).

<sup>4</sup>Callon (1999: 181) coined the neologism ‘actant’, in reference to Bruno Latour, both as an alternative to substantialist sociologies and as a way of operationalizing the principle of ‘actor indeterminacy’: ‘(…) something that acts or to which activity is granted by others. It implies no motivation of human individual actors nor of humans in general. An *actant* can literally be anything provided it is granted to be the source of an action’.

<sup>5</sup>In *Cosmopolitics* (Stengers 2010: 29), a *pharmakon* is defined as a ‘political drug’ that can act as a poison or remedy depending on the dosage, circumstances and entities that manipulate it. The concept draws attention to the impossibility of accurately predicting the consequences of adopting a political practice or intervention as a way to solve dilemmas of coexistence, given that what demands or constrains political entities varies with the webs of relationships that they dynamically establish and break.

<sup>6</sup>Bryant (2011: 32) summarizes the notion of *flat ontology* in some theses, including the idea ‘that humans occupy no privileged place within being and that between the human/object relation and any other object/object relation there is only a difference in degree, not kind’. Moreover, in *flat ontology* ‘objects of all sorts and at all scales are on equal ontological footing, such that subjects, groups, fictions, technologies, institutions, etc., are every bit as real as quarks, planets, trees, and tardigrades. [...] [F]lat ontology invites us to think in terms of collectives and entanglements between a variety of different types of actors, at a variety of different temporal and spatial scales, rather than focusing exclusively on the gap between humans and objects’.



efficacy. Deliberation, as well as other democratic practices, would be better understood as *pharmakons*: modes of weaving discursive and political interactions between social entities whose effects vary according to their ability to adapt to the other social entities and practices. There are, hence, no ready-made universal recipes to solve political problems.

This first axis of our argument points to the dual nature of the shift proposed here. On the one hand, when compared to the systemic approach, the ecological lens has descriptive advantages since it is particularly attentive to the dynamic nature of political processes and their contextual nature. On the other hand, such a change has also normative implications, demanding a reconfiguration in the ways democracies may be strengthened. A clear implication is the perception that more deliberation is not necessarily always the solution to weakened democracies. In addition, the flat ontology grounding the ecological approach is an inherently democratic move, which acknowledges the mutual agency of diverse actants in the making of assemblages (Poulsen and Asenbaum, 2023). Such an acknowledgment invites researchers to rethink central concepts of democracy such as inclusion, responsibility, and accountability.

### **Transmission vs. articulations and translations**

The scholarship on deliberative systems has been systematically concerned with the comprehension (and promotion) of connections between different venues of deliberation. In order to be a system, the different arenas that constitute a whole must exist in synergy with each other. For this reason, deliberative democrats have discussed the importance of coupling different sites (Mansbridge et al., 2012; Hendriks, 2016), inducing connectivity across the system (Mendonça, 2016), and linking diverse venues to allow a proper flow of discourses (Dryzek, 2010; Curato and Böker, 2016; Steiner et al., 2017).

Theories of communication, philosophies of language, and theories of complexity have spent decades of research criticizing the linearization implied by the idea of transmission. Communicative processes are much more complex. In the systemic approach, however, the connection between diverse arenas is often thought of in terms of *transmission*. To move across the system, ideas, arguments, and discourses should be able to move from one arena to another, surviving across subsystems responsible for filtering the *muddy elements* of public debate (Habermas, 2006). As recalled by Bohman (2012), Habermas (1996) himself defined the public sphere as a *transmission belt* in a clear reference to Parsons. For Habermas (1996: 448),

From the standpoint of social theory, law [ . . . ] functions as a kind of ‘transmission belt’ that picks up structures of mutual recognition that are familiar from face-to face interactions and transmits these, in an abstract but binding form, to the anonymous, systemically mediated interactions among strangers.

The idea of transmission is persistent. Dryzek (2009) claims *transmission* as a ‘means by which public space can influence empowered space’. Following Dryzek, Parkinson (2012: 162) and Almeida and Cunha (2016: 289) speak of *transmission mechanisms*.<sup>7</sup> Simone Chambers (2012: 55) invites scholars to study *alternative avenues of transmission* for a proper understanding of democratic systems. Mansbridge et al. (2012: 20) advocate that ‘any democracy needs the political media to play the role of transmitter of reliable and useful information’. Investigating civil disobedience, Smith (2016: 164) argues that resistance can ‘establish connections between different elements of the system, by *transmitting* opinion and information from one site to another.’ Avritzer (2016) also points out the centrality of the discussions around *transmission* in his quest to summarize common trends in the literature on deliberative systems.

<sup>7</sup>It should be noted that Parkinson (2012: 164) acknowledges the existence of *filters* that impede the *rosy view of perfect transmission*.

The clearest example of this centrality is probably the article written by Boswell, Hendriks, and Ercan (2016) titled *Message received? Examining transmission in deliberative systems*. Drawing on three different cases, the authors claim that transmission across the system is the main enabler of inclusion, in the extent to which it allows voices and arguments to be represented in different venues. They argue that institutional, innovative, and discursive *mechanisms of transmission* are essential to a deliberative system.

Such a reference to transmission is not only a terminological one. Empirical studies grounded on the systemic approach often operationalize the idea by investigating whether arguments presented in one arena can also be found in other arenas of a given political process. Stevenson and Dryzek's (2014: 190; 194) attempt to measure democratic qualities in the 'global deliberative system' on climate change, for instance, apply discourse analysis on documents and reports from four organized spaces and events that debated climate change to evaluate and compare climate discourses among them. In a more recent paper, Parkinson and collaborators (2022: 4) aim to chart the deliberative system that emerged from the digital debate on the Scottish independence referendum using a big data approach. They sought to evaluate the system based on the identification of topics and perspectives that appeared in formal and informal arenas.

An ecological approach to deliberation looks at the interactions between different discursive processes in a more complex way. First, it does not assume that content produced in one venue should be transmitted to other venues, because arenas are not simply sites where arguments are placed, but contexts with affordances and features that are constitutive of the discourses therein expressed. For this reason, discourses are always translated from one arena into another and not simply transmitted from here to there. Translations are reconstructions that affect the arguments and not mere adaptations of a fixed content. As Nicole Doerr (2018) shows, political translation is a necessary practice in deliberative exchanges playing a key role in the promotion of inclusive and democratic discussions.

Second, an ecological approach understands that there are different types of relationships between discursive processes that may be relevant to democracies. Some discursive arenas may hinder broader discursive processes, suggesting that scholars should seek to bridge micro and macro analyses as they track relational developments between different ecological sites. Mendonça (2016) and Motta and Mendonça (2023) show, for instance, that the multiplication of formal discursive arenas of micro-deliberation is a strategy that may be employed by some actors to fragment a political process and hinder effective inclusion. The discussion of the application of mining companies for environmental licenses in many phases and arenas, for example, makes it very difficult for affected populations and environmentalists to process and understand the full impact of these projects, as well as to follow discussions about them in different participatory venues and moments. A complex approach should be attentive to this continuous unfolding of transactions and not simply to ideas being transmitted.

Recognizing the multiple forms of transactions between entities that make up a given relational web, an ecological perspective seeks to map how transactions are established and what their effective consequences are. Far beyond the idea of transmission, there is a diverse dynamic of adaptations and translations that enable the articulation of extended discursive processes. From a normative standpoint, an ecological perspective does not seek to push discourses through different arenas but to advance forms of connection or friction across arenas in order to promote a more inclusive and democratic debate.

### ***Pathologies and dysfunctions vs. vulnerabilities***

In political science, David Easton's work offers an excellent example of how functionalist-systemic paradigms deal with what they consider to be dysfunctional or pathological. For Easton (1965: 29–30; Miller, 1971: 199), a political system is a set of all activities or interactions that produce and channel social demands (inputs) to arenas and actors who have the resources and authority to



make decisions (outputs). In this model, everything that threatens the reproduction of the political system itself and its ability to perform its functions (process inputs and deliver outputs) are considered pathologies that require treatment.

There are many points of contact between the definition of systemic pathologies established by functionalist models and the systemic approach to deliberation. Mansbridge and colleagues (2012: 22–24) speak, for instance, of some pathologies that undermine deliberative systems: a) decoupling of discursive spheres, which refers to disconnection between different arenas; b) tight coupling of arenas, which refers to a rigidity in the performance and interaction of discursive spheres, can hinder their ability to promote mutual adjustment to compensate for eventual functional deficits; c) institutional and social domination, which refers to situations in which the system is manipulated or controlled by one or several actors to the detriment of the others; d) entrenched partisanship, which causes political actors not to listen or to be unwilling to change their opinion. This can occur due to various socio-political cleavages.

Mansbridge and colleagues do not classify any political arenas, actors, or repertoires, even those explicitly non-deliberative, as sources of systemic pathologies. What they propose is to judge the quality of the system by the aggregate performance of deliberative functions that result from the interaction of its parts. In this sense, no individual part needs to be completely deliberative in itself because a deliberative division of labor among all of them is expected (Mansbridge et al., 2012: 15). However, there are certain types of relationships between parts of the system that are classified as pathologies because they hinder the aggregate performance of deliberative functions and outcomes. Therefore, Mansbridge and colleagues (2012: 23) propose that an ideal deliberative system must monitor and/or have their parts informed by each other's performance so that they can compensate for deficits or problems by mechanisms of mutual influence, mutual adjustment, and convergence. At the sign of flaws or pathologies, parts of a healthy deliberative system are expected to act or react autonomously to make the system perform the deliberative functions expected.

Morin's (2014: 20) complexity theory, nevertheless, helps us consider unrealistic and problematic dimensions of systems designed to operate as autonomous entities that seek to conserve their form and functions over time through internal feedback loops. Morin argues that autonomous and homeostatic systems, designed by an ideal of invulnerability, tend to prevent states of imbalance and degeneration that could lead, in the long run, to promising metamorphoses<sup>8</sup>. An ecological concept of deliberation understands that the vulnerability of a network of political actors to apparent deliberative deviations, dysfunctions, or disorders may be, in certain situations, an opportunity to transform a political ecology into, perhaps, a more inclusive, just, and egalitarian web of political relationships.<sup>9</sup>

Feminist theories challenge individualistic and voluntaristic models of political autonomy and decision-making based on values that disregard the vulnerable condition of humans (e.g., Pateman, 1985; Nussbaum, 2008; Mackenzie et al., 2014). Considering political subjects as asymmetrically vulnerable (Biroli, 2012: 27) is a way to both challenge stigmas that deprive certain subjects of their autonomy (e.g., people in situations of mental suffering) and to be attentive to the structures of inequality that link vulnerabilities to injury, harm, and experiences of

<sup>8</sup>(...) there is also the possibility that the system will be able to produce a meta-system, a system with new properties with the capacity to treat these vital and mortal problems. The problem is to know whether we have the possibility of bringing about that metamorphosis. The concept of metamorphosis is very interesting, because it implies continuity and transformation (...) the Middle Ages society was metamorphosed into the Modern society via wars, transformations, destructions and so on' (Morin, 2014: 20).

<sup>9</sup>According to Fineman (2017: 142), 'As embodied beings, we are universally and individually constantly susceptible to change in our well-being. Change can be positive or negative – we become ill and are injured or decline, but we also grow in abilities and develop new skills and relationships. The term 'vulnerable', used to connote the continuous susceptibility to change in both our bodily and social well-being that all human beings experience, makes it clear that there is no position of invulnerability – no conclusive way to prevent or avoid change.

violence (Butler, 2010). The notion of vulnerability allows one to ask what kind of resources, types of support, or redistributive policies are necessary for a political institution or process to be open to change, thereby risking the status quo to establish new, fairer, and more egalitarian social conditions (Fineman, 2017; Marques and Veloso, 2022). The entrenched partisanship diagnosed by Mansbridge and collaborators (2012), for instance, can indeed be problematic, but it can be an opportunity to push politics toward more egalitarian practices, depending on the support provided and care taken.

This is not to say that vulnerabilities should be simply celebrated as if they necessarily moved ecologies in promising directions. As stated above, vulnerabilities are asymmetrically distributed and often express forms of oppression and violence. There are actors, contexts, interactions, intentions, technologies, and many other elements that can hinder the democratic transactions necessary for the construction of solutions to public problems. Vulnerabilities often challenge the democratic potential of ecologies, by furthering unjust situations that reproduce existing imbalances.

Yet they are not necessarily systemic pathologies, but critical contexts that can promote the openness and exposure that are conditions for empowering intersubjectivity, deliberations, decision-making, and fights against injustice (Veloso, 2023). Our point here is that actants and arenas should not be restricted to definitions exclusively focused on their apparent weaknesses. Even in the face of the deepest expressions of injustice and oppression, emerging assemblages may push ecologies into new directions. Take, for instance, the case of *quilombos*, which are communities built by escaped slaves in Brazil and that have created conditions for the emergence of empowered coalitions to experiment with other possibilities of living together (Guimarães and Cardoso, 2001: 96) and initiate resistance projects (Munanga, 1996). Quilombos dealt with their violently imposed vulnerabilities as tragic opportunities to nurture struggles against racism and existing structural inequalities (de Almeida, 2022).

Such a move from systemic pathologies towards ecological vulnerabilities has both descriptive and normative implications. Descriptively, it allows for mapping a broader array of practices and understanding their ambivalent consequences in diverse contexts. Normatively, it pushes the reflection to a broader analytical level, focusing on an evaluation of the conditions of equality that are central to democracy. Ecological vulnerabilities should be assessed according to their capacity to hinder or promote equality among the actants of a given ecology in the long run.

### ***Design vs. practice***

The concern with the design of deliberative innovations remained at the heart of the deliberative approach through its systemic turn (Fung and Wright, 2003; Fung, 2006; 2007; Smith, 2009; Hendriks, 2016). In a certain way, many deliberative democrats have been engaged in the project of designing adequate arenas of deliberation (Fishkin, 2009; Elstub and Escobar, 2019) for a long time. The very idea of minipublics as a ‘reformist tinkering’ implied that these discrete deliberative fora deployed different design choices to overcome specific problems (Fung, 2007). Design concerns in minipublics are both structural and procedural, relative to normative standards (Gutmann and Thompson, 2004) against which participatory and deliberative quality should be judged and improved (Fung, 2006, 2007).

The systemic turn shifted the focus of design to broader scales, as it proved to be crucial for preventing the main pathologies of tight coupling, decoupling, and domination (Mansbridge *et al.*, 2012). The goal was then to promote the precise degree of coupling between different deliberative sites, coping with their various institutional idiosyncrasies, albeit not without risks and limitations (Hendriks, 2016; Felicetti, 2016). Systemic design is still a major agenda in recent democratic theory (Saward, 2021) and is considered necessary in comprehensive alternatives to deliberative systems (Warren, 2017).

While we do not reject design itself, we do think that it falls short to encompass everyday practices that inspired the systemic turn in the first place (Mansbridge, 1999). In other words,

within the deliberative system's theory, design turned out to be more institutionally oriented, failing to meet the discursive standards on which it was originally conceived. An ecological approach acknowledges that there are types of discursive purposeful action other than high stylized design.

Michel de Certeau (1984) is helpful here for drawing attention to the creativity of the practices of everyday life in the face of society's technocratic control and designing strategies. Creativity emerges, for instance, in acts of consumption, as the ordinary commensal, walker, or spectator appropriates for herself something other than what is objectively imposed on her, revealing a tactical dimension of everyday practices. While strategies are power postulates and aim to project order from a defined standpoint and structure, tactics have no place of their own. They are context-dependent, albeit apt to astutely take advantage of the breaches of the prevalent order caused by specific conjunctures (de Certeau, 1984: 100).

Mendonça, Gelape, and Cruz (2023) draw from de Certeau's insight into the creativity of practices to propose a different approach to democratic innovations. Using the notion of *gambiarra*s (i.e., quick-fixes that deal with whatever resources are available to solve concrete problems), they argue that several innovations were not entirely planned and designed, but emerged from the creative attempts of political actors to deal with real-world situations.

Practice, more than design, becomes a central notion for the understanding of the ways through which deliberative processes actually happen. According to Felicetti (2021), a practice-based understanding of democracy is ecumenical and focuses on agents' practical interests, allowing for a proper assessment of the hybridity inherent to political action. This proposal is also aligned with recent developments in the democratic innovations' literature. Asenbaum and Hanusch (2021) highlight exactly this point when inviting scholars to operate with a broader understanding of innovations.

An ecological approach to deliberation sheds light on the practical nature of deliberative capacity building by looking at concrete experiences and by understanding how these practical experiences lead both to resistance, adaptation and to the creation of new institutions. Ecologically, deliberative innovation is more than formally designed discrete fora. It also emerges from everyday experience and practice. In this sense, an ecological framework invites us to map how deliberative ecologies can be established among actants who risk solving their problems through innovative and not necessarily articulated practices, which may point to new possibilities of deliberative democracy. From a normative standpoint, such a move implies that deliberation depends on – and should remain open to – the often chaotic and unpredictable forces that try to reinvent democracy through their practices, thus welcoming a broader and more diverse set of actants as potential promoters of deliberative configurations.

### **Linear temporality vs. diverse temporalities**

Deliberative systems are often conceived of in terms of space, through multiple and overlapping arenas of discussion. Time is, however, also central to the concept. In the broad division of discursive labor advocated by the model, the realization of deliberation would not occur solely in a single arena/space, but in a series of arenas distributed spatially and temporally. Despite its centrality, time is scarcely discussed by systems' scholarship.

It must be acknowledged, nevertheless, that some important contributions of the field do pay attention to temporality. Goodin (2005), for instance, pointed to the need of sequencing deliberative moments in arenas with different features in Parliaments. Parkinson (2006) draws attention to the fact that interest groups have the resources, time, and expertise to facilitate deliberation at a broad level (Parkinson, 2006: 85), besides emphasizing the different functions of deliberation in diverse moments of the policy cycle. Similarly, Miola (2012: 54–6) focused on phases of deliberative processes: i) agenda setting; ii) the implementation phase; iii) and the evaluation phase with the monitoring of decisions.

Despite their importance, these contributions privilege a durational, linear, and continuous perspective on temporalities (Cohen, 2018). Time is seen as a matter of phases that can be sequenced and linked to foster a full deliberative process. The coexistence of different understandings and experiences of temporality has not been addressed and the theorization around this dimension remains shallow.

Influenced by Nixon and his concept of slow violence (2013), we argue that the intersubjective dimension of time deserves careful observation, insofar as actants may operate in diverse temporalities. A political process may be crossed by networks of entities and rules that operate in distinct time regimes. Fishermen, peasant, and indigenous communities, or even citizens belonging to distinct age groups, may have their daily lives and practices governed by very different temporal logics from those of, for example, business executives, bureaucrats, and public managers of state agencies (Rosa, 2010). Tidal flows, changing seasons, and phases of the moon can be as or more important than calendar dates. And this can have a significant impact on how public debate on issues involving these groups transitions in an inclusive way is sabotaged and undermined.

Political actors not only modulate frames and discourses in their interventions in the public sphere, but they also seek to accelerate, refrain, pause, or restart the most varied discursive processes. Thus, the dispute over the rhythms of public discursive processes is crucial to the understanding of the occurrence or not of deliberation and to the understanding of the inclusion, reciprocity, and epistemic dimension of these processes. The observation of which actants can establish the cadence of discursive processes reveals power asymmetries. The ability to modulate the pace of discursive interactions can contribute to the emergence of prolific public deliberation or undermine a debate, to the extent in which very quick or very slow processes can stifle political actors who are dealing with other temporal regimes or constraints (Motta, 2021; Motta and Mendonça, 2022).

On the one hand, fast-paced processes may be insufficient for concerned citizens and groups to adequately understand the issues necessary to position themselves in a public discursive interaction. On the other hand, processes spread over long periods of time can lead to a loss of engagement with issues of public interest – either by fatigue or by the lack of material or temporal resources necessary to sustain an attentive listening and a capacity to intervene in the face of a process that drags on.

The analysis of environmental conflicts about mining in the state of Minas Gerais (Brazil) made by Motta (2020; 2021), highlights the need to pay attention to these overlapping and conflicting temporalities. The research showed many situations in which: a) civil society actors seek to gain time to understand the interests of mining companies and state actors in opening new mines or changing regulations that would benefit the market; b) these same civil society actors seek to force the state to act – creating formal discussion arenas – and interrupt the actions of market actors; c) mining companies may seek to speed up controversial projects, thus avoiding strong mobilization in the public sphere, but they can also paralyze the analysis of controversial projects so that they are assessed in the future when civil society's attention has faded out; d) bureaucrats and social movements sometimes mediate different temporalities in order to foster the inclusion of public discussions (Motta, 2016, 2020, 2021).

An ecological approach to deliberation must consider these tensions and disputes around temporalities, overcoming the simplified view of linear processes. While the systems approach focuses on the attempt to follow claims and arguments that move from one arena to the following, an ecological approach pays attention to the ways in which time is constitutive of discourses and a resource whose very definition is under dispute. A proper acknowledgment of the multiple temporalities leads to the acknowledgment that the rhythms of political processes are at the heart of the definitions of actors engaged in a process. Being aware of attempts to use temporal control of discursive processes to undermine public deliberation and discussing possibilities of

translations of temporalities among different actors are, in this way, essential for more complex deliberative approaches.

Once again, such a shift has both descriptive and normative implications. It simultaneously allows a more complex understanding of processes, and nurtures critical analyses that are attentive to the power derived from the capacity of defining temporalities. The promotion of democracy depends on the acknowledgment that time is a central resource, around which many conflicts happen. The recognition of these conflicts and of the multiple temporalities necessary to democracy is a very important step for the promotion of equality.

### **Organic analysis vs. hologram-based analysis**

Scaling up and grasping the macro level of deliberation was one of the major advancements made by the systemic perspective. The fundamental insight is that it was necessary to enable judgments of deliberation at the broader level of *the system* (Goodin, 2008; Dryzek, 2010), accounting for everyday talk (Mansbridge, 1999) and other types of communication that could not fit the highly stylized standards of a deliberative model (Warren, 2017). This was accomplished by the idea of functions, *i.e.*, a system is considered deliberative if it ultimately achieves some set of functions (Mansbridge et al., 2012).

The suggestion that one can judge a system by its performed functions invokes the image of an organism that is functionally differentiated in order to survive in a given environment, as we have already observed. Moreover, it implies an observer whose position allows her to reflect on the system as a whole. The researcher may be able to grasp the whole to investigate the mechanisms that bring its parts together and the interactions between them, capturing structures of input, feedback, and outputs. To do so, one should adopt an additive logic that deduces the whole from the addition of the parts. Dryzek's (2017) effort to climb up yet one more scale degree summoning the notion of a deliberative polity is interesting but, in a way, ends up postponing the question of how to judge whether a polity is deliberative or not.

An ecological perspective, on the other hand, assumes no unitary point of view from which one can observe the parts of a larger system and its overall functioning (Stengers, 2010; Bennett, 2010). It hence resists the temptation of providing a macro assessment of deliberative outputs. It neither falls into the mistake of reducing the whole to the addition of parts.<sup>10</sup> In methodological terms, an ecological approach invites researchers to track how deliberation constitutively changes as it presents itself.

Such a view may induce a more hologram-based view of deliberation. A hologram is a principle of complexity theory that assumes that 'not only the parts are in the whole, but the whole is also contained in the parts', as the biological cell carries the genetic information of an organism (Morin, 2005: 74). This ontological proposition has important methodological consequences. That is to say that an ecological approach might look to deliberative practices as they constitute themselves in relation to other practices and how they emerge to produce deliberative milieus that recursively unfold into transactions. The analytical task here is not to judge a system by the sum of its parts. The task of a hologram-based analysis is to find, in the relationship between practices, relevant insights about the process of practice creation that speak to an ecology.

Acknowledging that a researcher does not have a 'God's eye' also puts forward the need for more democratic methods, such as those advocated by Asenbaum and Hanusch (2021). Morin considers that, at best, a researcher can have a 'meta-point of view' on something (2005: 76).

<sup>10</sup>Bächtiger and Parkinson's (2019) attempt to build a summative perspective of systems, which opposes the additive logic, where specific actors and institutions produce and 'inject' deliberation into the system (Bächtiger and Parkinson, 2019, pp. 7–9). They claim, however, that only 'little theoretical work' has delved into such a complex definition, aiding the concept with analogies. Our argument is that while a summative – or emergent – idea may be strange from a systemic standpoint, it is the very cornerstone of ecology.



That kind of perspective must be built by a dialogic exercise that requires the researcher to always put her knowledge in check by contracting it with points of view that other entities form about an actual, virtual, or possible state of a given ecology. This methodological move has clear normative implications since it embraces a democratic standpoint in the way research should be conducted. It is also humble enough to refuse all-encompassing perspectives, seeking possibilities of democratization that are more localized and practical, without losing sight of their connections with broader processes.

### Concluding remarks

This article sought to advance an ecological perspective on deliberation as an alternative to the notion of deliberative systems. Acknowledging the relevance and the developments within the systemic turn, we argued that a more complex approach can avoid some of its key limitations. The functionalist paradigm that grounds the notion of deliberative systems may reproduce a linearized and simplified idea of arenas with different functions in a harmonic process that ought to assure the transmission of ideas from one venue to another.

The ecological approach conceives of relations between different types of entities to understand the very constitution of these entities. It acknowledges the fluid and complex nature of these relationships, investigating their different implications and interrelations. Attributing value to the dynamic nature of reality, it refuses the task of engineering a system with sequenced moments and pays attention to the contradictions and tensions pervading the entities, the struggle over temporalities, and their relationships. Instead of diagnosing pathologies, it tracks the shifting forms of vulnerability that can hinder symbiotic co-operation in democracies. Moreover, an ecological approach understands that democratic deliberation can derive from different forms of adjustment between spheres and actors and that certain forms of deliberation can even be prejudicial to democratic deliberation. Transmission is not on its range of concerns, since the articulations that connect actants in broader discursive processes depend on translations throughout series of connections. In this sense, the ecological approach is concerned with the multiple, recursive, and changing nature of practices and relationships grounding the vivid and non-teleological unfolding of beings, spaces, and temporalities.

We have argued that such an approach has both descriptive and normative potentials. Descriptively, it allows researchers to better capture and comprehend political processes, overcoming some of the limitations of the systemic approach. Normatively, it invites scholars to assess deliberative democracy according to a notion of situated equality, which can pave new avenues to strengthen democracy. The ecological approach does not prescribe more deliberation in many arenas to foster the transmission of ideas against systemic pathologies. Instead, it seeks contextualized forms of promotion of fairer relationships among diverse actants, which requires complex and dynamic patterns of connections, translations, and frictions among multiple arenas. Moreover, it pushes the reflection to a broader analytical level, focusing on an evaluation of the conditions of equality that are central to democracy and considering multiple forms of entities in this process, as suggested by the idea of a flat ontology. The approach also implies a move toward the openness to more chaotic processes and practices that may push the boundaries of democracies. In a nutshell, it values democracy in the making, which requires a strong defense of the *idea of democracy* instead of a defense of its current *machinery* (Dewey, 1954).

While this article advanced some pillars for an ecological approach to deliberative democracy, there is still much work to be done. We understand it as a theoretical invitation for a research agenda that requires both empirical and conceptual developments. While we claimed some benefits of the approach when compared to the systemic lenses, it would be important to conduct case studies to show the actual analytical potential of the ecological perspective. Moreover, empirical studies could shed light on the internal developments of the literature on deliberative



systems, indicating those that are more strongly connected to functionalist assumptions and those that incorporate elements of the ecological approach advanced here. Conceptually, the agenda also requires the unpacking of many points. It would be interesting, for instance, to think more thoroughly about the spatial assumptions of the systemic approach and to develop an ecological alternative to the notion of arenas.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, while we anticipate the normative implications of the ecological approach, this point asks for further development which engages with the paradoxes and risks of undemocratic assemblages and concepts such as flat ontology. If the ecological approach clearly fosters a more complex framework, this complexity may also offer new dilemmas for the advancement of more democratic ecologies. We do hope, however, that the advancement of this research agenda contributes not only to the improvement of our comprehension of political processes but also to the strengthening of democracy.

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