Sociology has had a long-standing interest in the study of deliberation. In 1835 one of its earliest practitioners, Alexis de Tocqueville, described the essential nature of local community deliberations to American democratic society. Through their collective discourse over politics and through juries, Americans could develop a virtuous civic culture that would help them avoid the dangers of democratic despotism and the tyrannies of majorities. A few decades later Karl Marx argued that deliberation was an important mechanism for bringing about radical social change.\(^1\) And as evidenced by her writing and her practices at Hull-House in Chicago, Jane Addams was convinced that deliberation was a critical element of a robust democracy and social ethics in the late nineteenth century.\(^2\) Across these works (and a host of others), the sociological approach to deliberation had strong empirical foundations and argued for the centrality of deliberation to civic culture, democratic institutions, social emancipation, and social ethics. Across a range of classical texts within the canon of sociology we see deliberation as a “big idea” which might guide the organization of modern social life. In some pockets of the sociological literature it still is; we outline these below. But we also argue that present-day sociological work on deliberation by and large has moved away from big ideas toward a narrow project that is fairly disconnected from the world outside of scholastic inquiry.

In this chapter we highlight what we consider the best sociology has to offer scholars of deliberation. Our presentation includes ideas and practice, that is, how sociology helps us think about deliberation and how we have gone about studying it. We conclude with a discussion of the limitations of our discipline’s approach to deliberation and perhaps, more important, what we might do about it in our work going forward.

While a significant portion of classical texts engaged with the role of what we now think of as “deliberation” within their sociological theory, today we find that the most significant sociological theories are able to advance without a model or even recognition of deliberative processes. Community discourse, once a staple of sociological
inquiry—be that in how it created civic culture, social ethics, or shared understanding—is now a rather specialized realm of sociological inquiry. This divorce of deliberation from sociological theory provides a rather unfortunate opportunity for our chapter. First, it allows us to ask how deliberation might look different if it were to engage more with the recent insights of sociological theory. Second, we turn this around and ask how sociological theory might look different were it to return to a more serious engagement with deliberation.

The most significant turn in sociological thinking, we would argue, is its increasing rejection of substantialism in favor of relationality. This development, best reviewed by the classic paper, “Manifesto for a Relational Sociology” (Emirbayer 1997), suggests that rather than think of actors as discrete things made up of a collection of variables, we should think of them as enmeshed within a web of relations. Social action, then, is understood to be less guided by demographic “attributes” like our race, class, and gender, and more driven by our position within a structure of relations with others and institutions. The focus of sociological thought, thus, turns away from the individual as a unit of analysis and instead thinks more about the system of relations within which individuals are located.

Such a model of social action is both deeply sympathetic to, and in deep conflict with, deliberation theory. On the one hand, it focuses its attention on the social process of what we might think of “between-ness”—a core element of deliberation. On the other, deliberation often focuses on the rationality and decision-making of individual-level actors, relying upon a notion of the individual actor that relational theorizing has largely abandoned. In order to fully understand this shift, we first briefly outline Habermas’s view of communicative action, and juxtapose it with the theoretical framework of Pierre Bourdieu (whom we take as a representative of the relational school). We then outline a range of ideas that such theorizing brings to deliberation, including linkages to public issues, attention to power and modes of domination (including race and gender), sensitivity to context, and conceptualizing social situations as dynamic.

Habermas’s (1984) contribution, through his theory of communicative action, is likely well known to readers of this volume. Still, its sociological dimensions are worth reconsidering, particularly as we think through the divergence of deliberation and sociological thought. Habermas’s interest was to ground reason not in Weberian rationality or Kantian reason but instead to think of it as a social process embedded in language and communication. While the set of Habermas’s linguistic concerns are largely ignored by sociologists, his attention to communication as a social act places his work firmly within a relational context. For Habermas, social action is not individualistic, nor is its meaning subjectively constituted; instead, drawing upon insights from Parsons’ (1937) ideas of the structure of social action, and interactionist theories of G. H. Mead, Habermas sees reason as embedded with a system of relations with other actors—mediated through communication.

While the communicative turn of Habermas has been embraced by deliberation scholars, his more relational approach has been less thoroughly engaged. The radicalism of the theory of communicative action was to suggest that individuals did not possess
reason; instead, reason was an aspect of a social situation, or what might be understood as an intersubjective accomplishment. While this led some within deliberation to think about how people talked to one another, it did not completely divorce those within this tradition from an individualist approach to understanding decision-making.

While Habermas’s theory focuses on the discursive, his French contemporary, Pierre Bourdieu, draws more upon Pascal than Kant, and thereby emphasizes the customary over the rational, and the material and embodied more than the communicative. Bourdieu’s theoretical framework proceeds by outlining relational spaces (in his language, “fields”), which are defined by a set of resources (“capital”). For example, novelists exist in a relational space defined by their economic success and their cultural influence. The positions that novelists occupy within this space determine their dispositions (“habitus”). Novelists highly regarded by critics with outstanding sales are in a dominant position, and likely “disinterested” in their orientation; those with great sales figures but little cultural esteem, by contrast, are dominated by and thereby dismissive of critics. Core to such a model is that we understand the world as a set of relational spaces, bound to a set of resources, which actors deploy to advance their relative positions. In short, the Bourdieuan model makes power central to the analysis. Actors exist in this relational space, are defined by power, and have their dispositions determined by the positions they occupy (and not some other aspect of an individual self). Finally, Bourdieu thinks of fields in relation to one another. But part of their relationship—indeed, part of the project—is to be autonomous. For Bourdieu, the autonomy of different fields of social life (say, art from the economy, or politics from religion) is a central emancipatory project.

If Bourdieu is not interested in the discursive, it may seem strange to associate him with deliberation—a process that does not necessitate discourse, but certainly relies upon it heavily. Not so. As Emirbayer and Schneiderhan (2012) point out, Bourdieu was heavily invested in revitalizing and opening up the public sphere. His efforts to uncover the social mechanisms related to human suffering were nothing if not an engagement with democratic politics and an attempt to visualize new social possibilities. Bourdieuan social thought, with its attention to the embodied, relational fields and to power, can invigorate deliberation in ways that help it reconnect with the “big ideas” of sociological analysis, and address some of the pressing concerns (like power and difference) that deliberation has treated unsatisfactorily.

How we study deliberation is driven by how we know and construct our objects of analysis. The relational turn in sociology has moved sociologists beyond a variable-centered approach of deliberation and toward a consideration of process, dynamics, and context. This has muddied the methodological waters, as it is very difficult to pin these kinds of things down. Whether grounded in the ideas of Habermas or Bourdieu, what does it mean to study deliberation as process (or a set of relations?) and how does one go about it? We try to clarify this in what follows by considering recent emblematic work within sociology. We see four major impacts to relational thinking on the deliberation literature: (1) a core attention to power and domination; (2) linkage to public issues; (3) treating social situations as dynamic; and (4) contextualized, historicized theorization. We take these up in turn below.
Relational thinking has at its core a model of power and domination. To ask about relationships is to think about how such relationships are arranged—which is to say, how power works through the social order to generate outcomes. Deliberation theorists have been comparative quiet on the relationship between rationality and power (cf. Flyvbjerg 1998), and often imagine that deliberation can transcend context, working the same way in all spaces. Yet as Baiocchi and Ganuza (2014) point out, power functions in myriad ways that those working within the deliberation literature often do not recognize. Such attention to power also addresses one of the most important criticisms of deliberation: namely its inattentiveness to race, gender, and class (Elrick, Schneiderhan, and Khan 2014; Young, 1999; Walsh 2007). Where the literature increasingly considers these factors, it does so as modes of difference; but as those who work around race, class, and gender have consistently argued, these are not just variables of difference, they are part of systems of power. The workings of such power cannot simply be moderated by redefining the situation.

Sociology has begun to question what Pellizzoni (2001) calls the Habermasian “myth of the best argument.” At the intersection of rational choice theory and Habermas is the axiomatic notion that deliberation serves as a mechanism that can address or “remedy” whatever perspectival or informational shortcomings participants might bring to the public sphere. Taken to the extreme, deliberation is mainly a mechanism for a coordination game (often with expert assistance) in which we all hope the outcome is Pareto-optimal. Theoretically, deliberation in the public sphere often asks subjects to disembed themselves from all aspects of their social self—including their ethnicity, class, gender, and age (cf. Rawls 1971). Identity and any related interests have no place in this space. Information is relatively benign, contains no standpoint assumptions, and is used to provide reasons as deliberative bodies move toward the universal. Recent sociology is moving toward a rejection of these “naive expectations about the autonomy of reason from political reality or the capacity of reason to defeat naked power” (Cohen and Rogers 2003, 253).

Sociology’s move away from such naive expectations has manifested in part as a reconceptualization of race and ethnicity and how it works in deliberation. The current scholarly consensus rests upon a body of empirical research that either frequently studied deliberation in a homogenous white population or asked participants to bracket their ethnic identity (Dahlberg 2005; Young 1996; Young 1999; Young 2000; Young 2001; though see the exceptions of Ani 2015; Steiner et al. 2017). Even that work that does consider ethnicity and deliberation (cf. Mendelberg and Oleske 2000; Mendelberg 2002; Walsh 2007; Wheatley 2003) tends to take a static view of ethnicity—conceptualizing it as something actors have (and can bracket or not bracket) rather than something they do. As we point out in our own work (Schneiderhan, Khan, and Elrick 2014), such “bracketing” (denying subjects’ ethnic experiences, artificially creating homogeneity, further empowering those who already enjoy considerable privileges, and demanding denials from those already likely to be disadvantaged within political discourse) privileges those in power and enables individuals with unmarked or invisible privilege to speak as if they are promoting the general interest. Young (2001) terms this
the “hegemonic quality of discourse.” Within this “identity dance” some scholars have shown how dominant groups have inadvertently silenced groups on the margin, making them uncomfortable taking positions in deliberation (Mansbridge 1983; Sanders 1997; Young 1996). This is not simply a technical design challenge. It is a matter of taking into account “background contexts, and in particular upon the constellation of social forces” (Cohen and Rogers, 2003, 259).

In his classic overview of how sociologists (should) think, C. Wright Mills (1959) seeks to embed social actors in what he calls “context”—which includes both the broader social relations and the history of those relations. Mills is arguing against “abstract empiricism,” or imagining that we can remove actors from relations and history and empirically study them to generate claims about the world. Instead, we must embed them firmly within their messy worlds, complete with the issues of public concern of their day.

Sociologists like Erik Olin Wright have taken up this publicly oriented approach, drawing upon a more Marxist relational analysis by asking us to consider how our social relations might be constructed and reconstructed to reduce inequality and increase social justice (2011; cf. Fung and Wright 2003). Wright imagines deliberation as a “real utopia”—emphasizing the core idealism of deliberation but combining it with a more pragmatic understanding of participatory governance, attuned to those historical and relational elements around deliberation that make it either productive of emancipation or irrelevant to it. Gianpaolo Baiocchi, one of Wright’s former students, has enthusiastically pursued these ideas with a particular focus on participatory budgeting and its potential to transform society (2001; 2003; Baiocchi and Ganuza 2014).

The question for sociology is how to give voice to these marginalized individuals? A possible answer is perhaps one of sociology’s strongest contributions to the recent deliberation literature. Sociology’s vector of engagement with power and deliberation is to consider institutional arrangements, specifically how they might be reconstructed to create what Abelson et al. (2003, 239) call “two-way interaction between decision makers and the public” or what Baiocchi and Ganuza (2014, 37) call a “direct and exclusive link between forums and decisions.” Along with this is the idea of conceptualizing a multiplicity of publics (Emirbayer and Sheller 1999), including subaltern ones (Fraser 1992), as spaces for these linkages. Fung and Wright’s (2003) “empowered participatory governance” (EPG) model is one of sociology’s strongest statements as to how we might compensate for power imbalance through specific governance regimes and institutional designs that include deliberation but don’t take for granted that it will in and of itself act as a buffer against social forces. In particular, Baiocchi’s work on participatory budgeting demonstrates how deliberation and EPG can lead to different and non-hegemonic outcomes.

Much of the existing literature on deliberation, including our own work, offers up deliberation that doesn’t really matter in the real world. Field experiments and deliberative assemblies, as we have argued elsewhere, have high external validity but do not connect to any outcomes outside the specific research context. The relentless critic might argue that it all is just a lot of empty talk about things that often don’t matter to those
participating. Sociology is increasingly putting a premium on considering its work in light of the idea that one must interrogate any understanding of the world and any actions related to that understanding in terms of their “cash-value” in society. “What difference would it practically make to anyone if this notion rather than that notion were true?” asks the pragmatist William James (1907, 45). We think this is a question deliberation scholars should take seriously.

Sociology’s relational turn is closely tied to the recent revival of American pragmatism, a philosophy that was deeply concerned with the importance of deliberation for social growth and democracy. Pragmatism’s conceptualization of social action is decidedly different from the rational choice paradigm common in the current deliberation literature. Pragmatism understands social action as based in a set of habits that we deploy and then adhere to; these habits help us solve our daily problems and simplify the complexity of navigating the world. When they break down we deploy what Dewey (1916) thought of as “intelligence” or what Joas (1996) has termed “creativity” to fashion new solutions (and new habits). Importantly, rational decision-making is largely absent from the pragmatist model of action, emphasizing instead the decisions and patterns others undertake, and the socially available frameworks of understanding. A pragmatist approach helps to capture the idea that deliberation is the dynamic process of communicative interactions, constrained by available vocabularies, rules, context, and personal interests, which lead to the emergence of particular decisions. Here we are far away from the deliberative ideal of the public sphere seen in the Habermasian bourgeois coffee house. In this spirit, Perrin and McFarland (2008) call for consideration of deliberation as a “creative act”—this is in keeping with the recent pragmatist turn in sociology—and Perrin (2014) points out that the “rules of participation are important” but we should be aware that there are often “unintended consequences.” Here Perrin is focused on the outcome: “public opinion as expressive action itself—the content of deliberation is the opinion to be measured” (p. 98).

The adoption of a non-teleological approach to deliberation allows us to think of multivocality and multiple lines of action. Padgett and Ansell (1993) show the deliberations of Cosimo de Medici as “robust action” wherein an actor is embedded in multiple sets of social relations that generate a plethora of interests and opportunities. What emerges is a “flexible opportunism” as the actor leaves open different options, sometimes in multiple games. This is an important point that draws on Leifer’s (1991) situational chess. Rather than map out moves based on interests and personality, players were found to play and adaptive and flexible game. Beyond the flexibility and lack of a telos in social action, a main sociological insight is that at times actors enmeshed in social relations might not even know what particular game they are playing, something that many scholars would take as given. It is a different conceptualization of the arena of deliberation and social relations, and ties very much to Emirbayer and Sheller’s (1999, 156) conceptualization of publics “as open-ended flows of communication that enable socially distant interlocutors to bridge social-network positions, formulate collective orientations, and generate psychical ‘working alliances,’ in pursuit of influence over issues of common concern.” In this, dynamism links to power. The open-ended,
multi-vocal multiplicity of publics allows power differentials to be bridged. This bridging ties to the idea of “enactment” of identity we have considered in our own work (Schneiderhan, Khan, and Elrick 2014). Multivocality allows room for meaning making and ethnic boundary making (the “doing” of ethnicity, or enactment) in the public sphere. Relationality helps us think about how deliberation might travel and differ across sets of relations (not just geography).

Depending on the specific relations within which we are embedded, how we might “do” deliberation will be very different. The knowing comes out of the particular context. Asking how “members of society themselves define [Justice],” Maynard and Manzo (1993), looking at juries and building on Garfinkel (1967), find that commonsense “indexical” reasoning trumps deliberation’s rules and architecture. In other words, we might look at deliberation as something practical, an activity that takes place in the everyday and that people know how to do. Constructing the object of analysis in such a way would call for on-the-ground collection of data through participant observation, conversation analysis, and in-depth interviewing. It is a different way of interrogating and observing the Habermasian (1984) “lifeworld” of culturally embedded understandings and agreements in a lived-in and relational space that provides a background environment for deliberation. And it builds off Habermas’s understanding of how this lifeworld is created and recreated by members of society but often contains elements that are taken for granted or simply understood, like how to comport oneself in a university seminar or at the counter of a diner.

Even particular talk emerges out of specific histories. Gibson’s (2012) work on the deliberations around the Cuban missile crisis is a case in point. He demonstrates that the decisions to create a blockade and eventually negotiate with Khrushchev to get the Soviet missiles out of Cuba emerged from a messy social context that included particular mechanisms of talk, as well as specific domestic and international contexts. Mechanisms also underpin sociology’s approach to stories. Chen (2013) understands personal stories (a viable alternative to appeals to reason in the Habermasian public sphere), as ways in which participants can express and articulate demands and push for accountability. Edgell et al. (2016) link this idea of voice to marginalized groups, showing that “stories are treated as legitimate justifications” by those less likely to be heard. Polletta finds that such storytelling is not just productive for individual members who tell their stories, or as ways for the marginalized to generate legitimacy. The mere act of listening to personal stories (and not, say, reasons), helps others appreciate competing positions (even those they oppose), and better understand their own positions (Polletta and Lee 2006; see also Polletta et al. 2011).

Such stories emerge out of personal history and are reproduced through relations. Habermas and Bourdieu were nothing if not historical, and spent significant effort historicizing their objects of analysis. The public sphere is the product of a particular history. Imagining that such a sphere can be promoted independently of such a contextual development, or that its effects would be the same across contexts, is naive. Yet scholars who mechanically apply the same kind of deliberative procedures across different contexts do exactly this. As sociologists and anthropologists have consistently shown, when
transported to new places, new times, and new sets of relations, old ideas do not function in the same ways. The situatedness of culture suggests an attention to contexts—both historical and situation—in ways where there may not be “deliberation” so much as “deliberations” ruled by related, but nonetheless particular logics. We often act as if deliberation happens in a cultural and historical vacuum (though see Sass, this volume, Chapter 5). Koller (2010) points this out in his challenge of existing work on deliberation, asking whether or not the public sphere that we observe in our specific moments of observation is all that durable. Does it last?

Democracy is not just a process of decision-making. It is also about how people live their everyday lives embedded within social relations. To fully capture the emancipatory potential of democracy, deliberation must focus less on decision-making as the outcome, and more on social relations. In short, we end by suggesting that deliberation theorists and practitioners take seriously the relational turn of sociology, and more fully engage with those ideas represented within this scholarly movement.

What would this look like? First, scholars would need to be less reliant on individuals as units of analysis and demographics as constituent of individuals and more attentive to the situations and social relations within which individuals are located. This would mean thinking about deliberation not as a “pure” process that can be abstracted from context or history, but instead as a deeply situated one. The implication is also that rather than deliberation being a single thing, it might have multiple instantiations, in workplaces, families, community institutions, and, of course, political life.

This move from the liberal underpinnings of deliberation to relationality means taking power and difference more seriously, embracing them as a core feature of social relations, rather than developing tools to help make them less of a “problem.” The real problem is that by disembedding actors from their relational context we may well generate more pure models of understanding of a process. This is not a good thing, for it is only in being embedded within contexts that we can speak to the real and practical concerns of people. In moving away from context, in becoming more pure, and becoming more sophisticated in its tools for generating such purity, deliberation has laid the groundwork for its own increasing irrelevance.

We call, then, for a relationally situated deliberation. We are underwhelmed by evidence of robust deliberations that have no real impact on anything in the public sphere, or their small, often contrived, context. But this should not be our only measure. “What happens when Mr. Smith goes home?” That is, deliberation’s biggest impact may well be outside of the political process. When we think of democracy as more than just the process of decision-making—as also about how people live their lives with their families, at work, and in their community relations—then we see that our call is not for the abandonment of deliberation, but in many ways its expansion. Yet for it to grow it must transform, and rather than seeing the rich and complicated context of relational life as a problem for analysis should instead suggest that such relations make analysis possible, and relevant.
Notes

1. See Miller (1984, 89–90) for a good discussion of this point.
3. See Dryzek (2000), however, for the discourse tradition in the study of deliberation.
4. See Ryfe (2007) for an effort to provide a comprehensive theory of deliberation grounded in Bourdieu.

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