

# ‘Hard Times, Hard Choices’: marketing retrenchment as civic empowerment in an era of neoliberal crisis

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This article uses the moralized markets and markets as politics literatures in economic sociology to explore the emerging industry of private consultants who produce ‘democratic’ dialogues for organizational clients from all sectors. In multi-method field research, we (a) trace moralized processes by which market activity and political process are distinguished in an era of financial crisis, and (b) argue that the ability to produce authentic civic-ness is valuable specifically because distinctions between business, government and civil society have become less meaningful in contemporary neoliberal governance. Engagement consultants construct social and economic profits as interdependent and mutually reinforcing, while claiming protection from both business as usual and ordinary politics—a ‘positive’ outcome useful for budget-slashing and benefit-cutting at a moment when authorities face a loss of public faith. Such findings contribute to a better understanding of the historical resiliency of neoliberalism and reveal the meaning-centered dynamics of politicization in moralized markets.

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**JEL classification:** L84 Personal, Professional, and Business services, L33 comparison of public and private enterprises and nonprofit institutions, privatization, contracting out, M14 corporate culture, social responsibility, Z13 economic sociology, economic anthropology, social and economic stratification, D70 analysis of collective decision-making

## 1. Introduction

In November 2009, 300 residents from all walks of life converged on Lansing, Michigan for 3 days of small group dialogues regarding what should be done with their state’s beleaguered economy. In an atmosphere of brewing discontent

about the nation's direction, most clearly defined by August's 'health care town halls,' where citizens shouted down their representatives, lit dollar bills on fire, and posted those videos to Youtube, there were no protest tactics or partisan politicking here. This was a sober, state-of-the-art affair paid for by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, in which technocratic expertise, philanthropic might, and political capital were brought together to facilitate citizens from across the political spectrum talking calmly to each other. Governor Jennifer Granholm and Mary Sue Coleman, the president of the University of Michigan, gave keynote addresses. Business leaders and community groups presented information to the participants over the course of the process, with Kwame Holman of the *NewsHour with Jim Lehrer* moderating. Public television stations broadcast coverage of the deliberations throughout Michigan. Not pulling any punches about the state of the state, the event was called 'Hard Times, Hard Choices.'

The intrepid group had been randomly selected by Stanford professor James Fishkin's Center for Deliberative Democracy, in order to best gather a representative slice of the state's residents for his 'Deliberative Polling' method of assessing public opinion following rounds of information gathering and vigorous discussion among those with different views. Such processes are intended to ensure that the considered voice of the people is not drowned out by the wealthiest interest groups or the most inflammatory soundbytes. After participants were polled a final time on a number of policy options for facing the state's fiscal crisis, the Center's report declared that 'Hard Times, Hard Choices' proved the civic value of deliberation, inasmuch as many of the 300 deliberators were won over to public-spirited rather than self-interested solutions:

Support for increasing the sales tax went up by fourteen points from 37 to 51%. Similarly, support for increasing the income tax went up by 18 points from 27 to 45% . . . People were willing to shoulder new burdens they could feel. By contrast, support for cutting the business tax rose by a gigantic 27 points from 40 to 67% . . . After deliberation participants were interested in certain tax cuts that might stimulate jobs but they were willing to accept the pain of tax increases that might help the state's difficult finances. (*Center for Deliberative Democracy, 2010, p. 6*)

In Michigan, the poster child for capital flight and a bellwether of the crumbling national economy, ordinary citizens were paid to engage in far deeper discussions on their civic responsibilities than even the most faithful voters may do in their lifetimes. The result of such intensive participation was a demonstrated willingness to assume greater burdens in their day-to-day lives and more stress on their pocketbooks in order to entice employers to remain in their state. All over the USA, in a financialized economy where business health is increasingly dependent on Wall Street investments and states and localities struggle to balance their

budgets and meet their pension obligations, similar deliberations with names like ‘Tight Times, Tough Choices’ have revealed a populace willing to engage deeply in questions of fiscal policy—and also to pitch in to help their governments make payroll and their private employers make a profit.

Empirical research on professionally run deliberative events has largely been the province of political sociologists and political scientists, who study deliberative dialogues as ‘deep democracy’: a ‘real utopian’ remedy for an increasingly privatized public sphere (Fung and Wright, 2003). But as the example of ‘Hard Times, Hard Choices’ shows, discourse within and about such initiatives is permeated with moral claims about how top-down economics should relate to bottom-up politics. Arguments about the better angels of ‘rational’ small group decision-making are circulated by expert consultants like Fishkin and directly relevant to the economic changes of the last few decades. For too long, scholars have neglected the field of professionals who sell engagement solutions and the socio-economic contexts of the participatory renaissance Martin terms ‘the Great Consultation’ (2010). These actors and settings are ripe for analysis by economic sociologists.

By studying professionals who promote this new species of event to public, private and third-sector organizations, we argue that what makes democratic deliberation uniquely marketable as an organizational strategy is its ability to invoke a particular brand of ‘civic-ness’—a spirit of neighborly civility, patriotic duty and voluntary sacrifice for the greater good—as both a product of progressive business wisdom and a tonic for market failures. Deliberation experts describe their work as a spiritual mission to turn demanding consumers into proactive citizens eager to solve public problems at their own expense. Practitioners’ moral discourses of anti-commercialism and devolved accountability both have their roots in the contemporary ‘cultural circuit of capital’ defined by Boltanski and Chiapello (2007), Thrift (2005) and others. As such, deliberation as practiced today is less the grassroots antidote to political apathy that political scholars envision than it is the latest adaptation of neoliberal governance at a time of increasing unrest about the painful effects of retrenchment. As the unearned wealth of the ‘1%’ appears to suffer new scrutiny, the liturgy of penurious sacrifice and do-it-yourself good works promoted by progressive scholars and engagement industry consultants alike—of citizens’ redemption through ritualized discussion of hard choices in hard times—has also ennobled the expert decisionmaking and lay quiescence that may advance economic inequality further.

For this reason, research on moralized markets and the culture of neoliberalism is ideal for investigating the ways in which the deliberation market has been ‘civic-ized’, or moralized as civic. In this context, moralization refers to the practical strategies by which markets are produced and reproduced through meaning-centered normative discourses deployed by particular actors. We contribute to these literatures by revealing the unheralded role of experts and academics in

blending cultural discourses about the proper relationship between markets and politics just as neoliberal ideologies and institutions show signs of strain in the wake of the ongoing financial crisis. Contrary to those scholars who see increasingly blurred and less meaningful distinctions between political and economic action in the current era, we find that expertise in producing civic authenticity is a sought-after commodity for those who seek to maintain the social order.

The article proceeds as follows: first, we describe the emerging field of professional public deliberation consulting. Then we review the existing literature on our case and suggest the value of economic sociology literatures in understanding the complex dimensions of this activity, which is typically studied as a political reform. Next, we describe our research methods and use data from the first author's fieldwork in order to support our claims in two analysis sections. The first studies how deliberation is 'protected' from the market; the second studies the ways in which market logics are nevertheless used to provide moral justifications for the 'civic authenticity' produced in deliberation. We conclude by historicizing deliberation as one of a number of professionalized forms of participation that advance the disarticulation of political equality from economic equality under neoliberalism.

## **2. What is public deliberation and who organizes it?**

Public dialogue and deliberation processes (hereafter shortened to deliberation) can range from open-ended dialogues on contentious issues to more properly deliberative events, which give lay participants an opportunity to listen to others' perspectives and change their preferences on agenda items regarding employee benefits, urban redevelopment or childhood obesity, for example. Despite their differences, what all of the various techniques described as dialogic or deliberative have in common is an emphasis on turn-taking and mutual learning according to the ideal of political equality: each voice is heard by peers and valued in its own right as a contribution to the collective good. For practical purposes, the emphasis in deliberation on attentive listening to personal narratives means that most discussions take place in small groups sitting in the round, which evoke comparison with the participatory democracy methods of the 1960s and seem a modest throwback to a less commercial civic life—literally 'free spaces' (Evans and Boyte, 1992). Despite these perceptions, public deliberation as currently practiced in projects like 'Hard Times, Hard Choices' is very much a product of its particular historical moment.

A chief difference from 1960s-era participatory democracy is that deliberation is organized by professional consultants. The field of professional deliberation facilitation developed in the USA in the 1990 and 2000s, and is supported by associations, national and community-based foundations, specialized training,

certificate and degree programs and many smaller methods organizations and academic institutes. The International Association of Public Participation, founded in 1990, and the US-based National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation, or NCDD, founded in 2002, are the primary professional associations, with over 1000 US members. Deliberation practitioners, typically well-educated progressives in their fifties, have come to the field from a variety of related fields, including academia, organizational psychology, management consulting, communications and conflict mediation. Like scholars, they often link their interest in deliberation to participatory movements in the 1960 and 1970s (Lee, 2011).

The responsibilities of deliberation professionals involve the full range of services required in process design and implementation, including production of informational materials, stakeholder outreach and process marketing, selection of process methods, design of topical scope and coverage, recruitment of participants and small group facilitators, overall facilitation and ‘master of ceremonies’ duties, event logistics, continued communications with participants, and evaluation of process efficacy. As consultants, deliberation practitioners move among multiple institutional contexts, communities, regions and even countries. While this study focuses primarily on deliberation practice in the USA, the virtual nature of the community and the global scope of many clients mean that discourses in the field circulate readily among English-speaking practitioners in the developed world, particularly in the UK, EU and Australia, where deliberation has become a routine part of administrative governance.

Non-profit and private consulting firms produce deliberation events for a growing clientele of public, private and non-profit organizations that seek to engage their citizens, employees and customers in productive discussion (Lee and Romano, 2010). The ‘organizational infrastructure for public deliberation’ (Jacobs *et al.*, 2009, p. 136) offers these clients a diverse selection of trademarked processes, including ‘21st Century Town Meetings<sup>®</sup>’, ‘ChoiceDialogues<sup>™</sup>’, ‘Fast Forum Opinonnaires<sup>®</sup>’, ‘Citizen Choicework’, ‘Deliberative Polling<sup>®</sup>’, ‘Consensus Conferences’ and ‘Issues Forums.’ Sample client lists offered by public deliberation consultants reveal a wide variety of household names, including Fortune 500 companies, industry trade groups, federal agencies and transnational organizations: 3M, Allstate, Altria Group, American Express, American Red Cross, AstraZeneca, AT&T, Coca-Cola, Cisco, the Clinton Global Initiative, the Consumer Electronics Association, the Environmental Protection Agency, Exxon, FedEx, the Food and Drug Administration, FEMA, GAO, Georgia Pacific, Girl Scouts of America, GlaxoSmith Klein, the IMF, Kraft, Macy’s, SAP America, Shell Chemical, Sierra Club, State Farm, Sun Microsystems, the UN, United Way, the USPS, World Bank and the World Economic Forum (Database files).

The political equality and grassroots empowerment deliberation experts promise seem to be an odd match for traditional progressive movement enemies such as oil and tobacco companies. The expanding market for deliberative process management in contemporary organizations has led some researchers to fear deliberation's dilution by self-interested professionals and cooptation by powerful interests seeking legitimacy. Swyngedouw argues that democratic governance reforms actually produce a 'substantial democratic deficit' because 'the democratic character of the political sphere is increasingly eroded by the encroaching imposition of market forces that set the "rules of the game"' (2005, p. 1991). Hendriks and Carson suggest that competition among deliberation industry actors could result in 'non-deliberative and undemocratic outcomes' (2008, p. 305).

We argue that researchers who fear market contamination of deliberation critique market logics without realizing that similar moral claims are deployed by industry actors themselves to promote their services. Public deliberation consultants have been extremely attentive to managing the commercial dimensions of their work. The economic aspects of deliberative events are pervasive topics of field discourse and negotiation, and understanding their potential influence on the 'social profits' of deliberation in fact requires investigating how economic and civic outcomes are produced alongside each other in the deliberation market.

### 3. Beyond markets as politics

Recent research has focused on the use of deliberation in the last two decades for reasons other than political empowerment of publics (Hajer, 2005; Segall, 2005; Head, 2007; Maginn, 2007; Hendriks, 2009; Martin, 2010). Using time-series regression models, Martin finds strapped governments resorting to 'new deliberative assemblies' because of budget woes and increasingly restive publics: 'democratic states are likely to grant citizens rights of binding consultation at times of fiscal stress, when intensive state extraction of resources provokes citizen resistance that results in procedural concessions' (2010, p. 1). Lee and Romano (2010) similarly find that the scope conditions under which organizations of all types seek out deliberation are generally related to management challenges following retrenchment. Deliberation topics focus on behavioral and cultural adjustments required by layoffs, cuts and service reductions: 'Deliberation is typically used in cases where social unrest is likely or has already occurred, and where alternative management remedies are impractical or have already failed... Deliberation is particularly useful... when organizations have to manage widespread dissatisfaction from various constituencies over decisions related to fiscal austerity' (p. 26). The report for 'Hard Times, Hard Choices' is

typical in this respect, noting ‘a time of widespread disaffection from government,’ in which only a quarter of participants ‘trust in the State Government of Michigan to do what is right’ (Center for Deliberative Democracy, 2010, p. 11). But the fact that deliberation has become a preferred solution for handling public resistance to retrenchment over the last two decades does not explain why it may be a useful strategy in these contentious settings.

Beliefs that economic interests may contaminate deliberation’s potential as a political reform assume that the public sphere and the market are hostile worlds, a claim extensively critiqued by economic sociologists (Zelizer, 2005). Economic sociologists argue that markets are explicitly ‘moralized’—an approach that allows researchers to investigate how this is accomplished through collective action, and how such processes are entangled with the creation and ongoing development of markets themselves (Fourcade and Healy, 2007; Peifer, 2011). The moralized markets literature is well suited to understanding how normative claims shape the deliberation market, and two elements of the moralized markets literature are particularly relevant to this study.

First, the moralized markets literature emphasizes the extent to which seemingly rationalized markets are actually permeated with moral struggles, in which market actors often compete to construct identities as good citizens (Cetina and Preda, 2004). In a study of the Chicago Board Options Exchange (CBOE), MacKenzie and Millo argue for the ongoing relevance of ‘views of markets as cultures, moral communities, and places of political action’ (2003, p. 109) based on their description of how founders framed their collective action to advance the CBOE as the result of self-sacrificing obligation to community. Velthuis finds similar communication of statesmanlike identities in pricing among art dealers (2005). Markets are sites of collective action and provide cultural resources for professional and organizational entrepreneurs to make normative claims about community stewardship. Public deliberation practitioners leverage identities as selfless civic evangelists in order to promote the market value of expert guidance in lay empowerment.

Second, the moralized markets literature emphasizes the consequences attendant with the construction of certain markets or of market activity itself as virtuous, constructions whose meanings can change in dramatic fashion over time and across different contexts (Zelizer, 1979; Healy, 2006; Quinn, 2008). We expand the scope of this research by looking at moral ambivalence about the relationship between markets and the ‘political’ realm of civic engagement itself. Few moralized markets studies have investigated markets *for* politics, but market activity has been framed as civic in various forms throughout US history, from the business citizenship of nineteenth-century employers to shareholder democracy to boycotting (Haveman and Rao, 1997; Postel, 2007; Haydu, 2008; Ott, 2011). We argue that the civic-ization of the deliberation market constructs civil

dialogue as virtuous because of its relationship to business values, particularly useful for a historical moment distinguished by top-down ‘empowerment projects’ (Eliasoph, 2011).

Nevertheless, our case of a moralized market for a specific kind of politics provides an intriguing counterpoint to research that envisions markets simply ‘as politics,’ as in Fligstein’s ‘political-cultural approach to market institutions’ (1996). Institutional scholarship on markets and research on movements has increasingly conceived of markets as thoroughly political arenas in which all different kinds of actors are consistently engaged in similar modes of collective action to advance strategic goals (Fligstein and McAdam, 2011). This synthetic perspective reflects the findings of much contemporary scholarship on the extent to which the identities and tactics of organizational elites and insurgents are increasingly difficult to distinguish analytically (Davis and McAdam, 2000; Kadanoff and Haydu, 2010). Current trends in grassroots lobbying and ‘non-political’ contention, for example (Earl and Kimport, 2009; Walker, 2009), would seem to indicate that, while market action is necessarily political inasmuch as it relates to struggles over different forms of power, there has also been an emptying out of explicitly political content in contemporary social action. Distinctions between practices in business, government and civil society seem to have become less meaningful.

Against these claims, this study investigates the importance of political content in market action, which is not simply an inherent or assumed quality of struggles over power, but constructed *as political* according to cultural regimes of value and the strategic interests of different sets of actors (Eliasoph and Lichtermann, 2010). In part because of historical changes that have blurred the moral landscape of ‘political’ action described above, the distinguishing of market activity from politics is very much relevant in contemporary social action and is accomplished through moralizing processes—in this case, by a particular category of professional actor. As such, we respond to Zald and Lounsbury’s call for research on ‘how the dynamics of economy and society are fundamentally shaped by various elites, new forms of expertise, and their command posts—centers of societal power that regulate, oversee, and aim to maintain social order’ (2010, p. 963). Experts in this particular market for politics import cultural narratives about the proper relationship between civic and economic action across many different contexts. While most studies of moralized markets have focused on particular industries that reveal interesting dimensions of moralization, the deliberation industry and the brand of top-down empowerment it sells has historic implications for civic-ization across the settings of neoliberal governance because of the expansive scope of clients and publics it serves.



#### 4. Methods

This project has employed techniques appropriate for a ‘deterritorialized ethnography’ (Merry, 2000, p. 130) of an emergent industry characterized by the extensive use of online communities and networks. The first author conducted participant observation between 2006 and 2010 at field sites in major cities across the USA and Canada, in a wide variety of fora for peer-to-peer discussions regarding public engagement practice. To complement this research, informal interviews, analysis of archival documents and images and a non-random online survey of deliberation practitioners were also conducted (see Appendix for more information on data collection and coding). Research was performed under a human subjects protocol approved by the authors’ home institution. As a multi-method field study, analysis involved cross-referencing the many different forms of data collected in different sites and organizational settings in order to confirm that inductive findings from one site or source were also surfacing in other sites and among different kinds of actors. Ethnographic research of this kind is ideal for identifying ‘the logics of particular contexts’ and ‘the strategies through which governance is attempted, experienced, resisted and revised, taken in historical depth and cultural context’ (Scheppelle, 2004, pp. 390–391).

The intent of this methodology is to explore practitioner discourse with each other and with clients and stakeholders regarding the business of deliberation facilitation and the economic and political interests pursued within. As such, it resembles the research focus of Healy (2006) and Zelizer (1979) in their own analyses of moral rhetoric as articulated by organizations and actors in different industries. The time frame of the study covers these discourses both before and after the financial crisis, and the analysis below pays particular attention to practitioner discussion of opportunities afforded by the crisis. Deliberation professionals’ strategies of justification and marketing of virtue, produced for a variety of audiences and observed across many contexts, provide an ideal vantage point for evaluating the ongoing and adaptive moralization of a market for the production of civic space at a particularly anxious and uncertain historical moment.

#### 5. A community, not an industry

Deliberation practitioners are consistently preoccupied with managing the relationship between their civic passions and their and their clients’ business interests, and with describing their successful negotiation of this relationship to each other. The following analysis describes the two main forms this dialogue takes, revealing distinctive ways in which a market for political process can be moralized as civic, or ‘civic-ized.’ The first section of the analysis investigates

how practitioners distinguish public deliberation consulting from business as usual—and especially from crass commercialization or profit-seeking that might threaten access to their services.

### 5.1 *Policing the marketplace*

The principles of economics and of participation do not sit easily together. Involve (2005)

Scholar-practitioners Hendriks and Carson assert that the deliberative consulting field represents a ‘community of practice’ ‘richer than just a “marketplace”’ (2008, p. 304). As a concept adapted from management consulting (Cox, 2005; Thrift, 2005), ‘community of practice’ (Wenger, 1998) is an ideal entry point for considering the ways in which management discourses provide resources for deliberation practitioners to make sense of their practice and to integrate the explicitly moral sensibilities of ‘soft capitalism’ (Thrift, 2005, p. 10) into their work. Practitioners themselves indeed feel comfortable adopting this terminology for their own expert field; US survey respondents resisted the terminology of ‘profession’ (10%) and especially ‘industry’ (1%), with respondents overwhelmingly preferring to call the people and organizations leading dialogue and deliberation efforts a ‘community of practice’ (57%;  $n = 324$ ).

A central norm for the deliberative ‘community of practice’ is that promoting individual methods or products should take a backseat to the larger mission of convincing others of the social value of public deliberation. An overemphasis on marketing of individual processes is criticized by field leaders and practitioners. Sandy Heierbacher, the founder of NCDD, notes that, while her organization provides a forum for people to share techniques, it is important not to let those excited about one method dominate the conversation: ‘You don’t want to give them a soapbox to just talk about their method all the time. They have to have the NCDD philosophy, what’s going on in the whole stream of practice’ (Interview transcript). At conferences, field leaders derided the ‘peddling’ of methods that could occur among those more attuned to their own commercial success than to promoting the larger benefits of dialogue and deliberation (Field notes).

This resistance to marketing of methods and organizations sometimes takes the shape of policing those perceived as too commercial or flashy. In one vigorous debate on a deliberation listserv, a facilitator claims: ‘[Organization] seems to miss the heart of real democracy, settling for selling the appearance of democracy . . . They have certainly been expert at attracting funding for expensive projects, promoting their organization and publishing slick (and by appearances, expensive) publications and reports’ (Database files). Another facilitator speaks

more generally about the whole field: ‘Too often I see the D&D community, conflict resolution community etc wanting to take conceptual material out into the world and market solutions like products...’ (Database files). These anti-commercial approaches to the deliberation marketplace largely reflect a moralized conception of the deliberation market similar to that in Healy (2006)—in which industry actors are fearful of the commodification produced by commercial practices, thought to be destructive of deliberative social relations and their humble, grassroots ethic.

Resistance to commensuration is noted in reports on the challenges of pricing deliberative outcomes, where ‘there are those involved in participation who resist economic evaluations of participation on the grounds that cost-benefit analysis and other related techniques would tend to ignore the intangible benefits of participation . . . by concentrating effort on those activities that can easily be measured’ (Involve, 2005). Practitioners take pains to advance democratic values in ways that protect deliberation from market contamination.

## 5.2 *Spreading the gospel of deliberation*

Given facilitators’ outspoken beliefs in public deliberation as a route to ‘more than profit’ outcomes, such as democratic empowerment and community capacity-building, practitioners use anti-commercial, often religious language to describe their compulsion to share their knowledge, products and services with the world at large, and critique those perceived as violating this code. In direct opposition to rational logics of commercial or professional interests, these descriptions emphasize the irrationality of consultants’ missionary zeal, intellectual property-sharing and extensive voluntarism. Those who have pioneered particular methods are especially evangelistic about their anti-commercial intent, constantly advocating their uniquely transformative power while handing out self-published guides, free software and how-to cards.

While some conference participants quantify the price of their products for for-profit clients or set up exhibitor booths, they also avow that, for non-profits and local communities, they are willing to give away their products and software for free or reduced cost—as their intent is not in making money but spreading the word about the transformative potential of deliberation. One website that sells facilitation services showcases ‘a voluntary world-wide Network offering public, non-profit and NGO [method] processes and training for whatever people can afford’ (Database files). In the introduction of *Open Space Technology: A User’s Guide* (and at its website online), the developer of Open Space, Harrison Owen, foregrounds the extent to which his enterprise subverts contemporary business logics: ‘One thing must be clear from the outset. Open Space Technology is not the proprietary product of H.H. Owen and Company . . . a number

of people, in a number of places, are already using Open Space Technology without my say-so or sanction — a situation in which I profoundly rejoice... Please join me in what has been, and will continue to be, a marvelous co-creative adventure... Please share what you discover and we will all be the richer' (1997). In a similar vein, the author of a manual on 21 participatory workshops welcomes sharing the intellectual property in his text: 'In the spirit of participatory sharing, anything in this collection can be photocopied or translated... if you want to translate the whole book, whether or not for commercial use I shall be delighted... Anyway, whoever you are, if you can, enjoy. Do better than I have. Make up your own 21s. And please, share them around' (Chambers, 2002, p. xvi).

This spirit of giving extends to voluntarism in the field. In the practitioner survey, 55% of US professionals doing paid work ( $n = 245$ ) also report volunteer deliberation work; 13% of self-identified US practitioners ( $n = 342$ ) do volunteer work only. National deliberation organizations with seven-figure budgets often solicit the volunteer time of professional facilitators and paid consultants, providing no support for travel or accommodations for those who want to have a role in democratizing public discourse. Calls for volunteer facilitation go out regularly on facilitation and deliberation listservs. This service orientation is revealed in an essay in a facilitation newsletter: 'Recently, I did two informal facilitation "gigs" with volunteer groups where I am a member. I was not "hired" to do the work—I did it because I just cannot not facilitate when the need is there... These experiences really do make me feel "at home" with facilitation—it has become something I am, more than something I do' (Database files). While voluntarism is expected in professionalizing fields, the self-actualizing discourses of deliberative practitioners nest comfortably within the 'caring, sharing ethos' that Thrift identifies as a key adaptive characteristic of soft capitalism (2005, p. 11).

Seeing deliberative facilitation as a calling or mission resonated in conference conversations and in stories told about the transformations that occurred as former litigants or disengaged members of the public were won over to the 'gospel' of deliberation. The transformative power of processes is an article of faith in the practitioner community; 91% of US practitioners surveyed believed that 'many people who do not currently support D&D efforts would change their minds if they could experience a single great D&D process' ( $n = 341$ ). One facilitator on a listserv describes himself as 'always on the lookout for words and phrases that make these simple (and obscure) facts understandable, inviting and attractive to the 6.5 billion people out there who don't know they can help each other to everyday delight' (Database files). Another facilitator notes: 'Every person I know who works with process comments on the spiritual aspect of the experience of good group process' (Database files). The rhetoric of

spiritual conversion and enlightenment is so omnipresent that those working with religious organizations specifically emphasize the seamless fit of deliberative methods with faith communities, as a practitioner describes on a listserv:

[The Appreciative Inquiry method] is so transformational and life-giving that it is extremely well suited, in fact ideal, for use in a church setting. I know that full well from my personal experiences . . . There is no doubt in my mind that AI has powerful potential to revitalize churches with a positive and life-giving spirit. (Database files)

In their own sharing of intellectual property, their voluntarism and their work to convert the larger society to an appreciation of the deliberation ‘gospel,’ the deliberation practitioner community emphasizes a principled rejection of greed in favor of a spontaneous spirit of self-abnegating missionary work for the collective good. As described below, the way in which that collective good is framed has more to do with the concerns of contemporary neoliberal managers than with the grassroots democracy of the 1960s that practitioners and academics find so inspirational.

## 6. From cynical consumers to active citizens

Deliberative practitioners envision their mission as the transformation of civic spaces that are currently polluted by a ‘consumer’ orientation on the part of demanding and disengaged publics. While critiquing business values in terms of the failings of a passive, consumption-oriented model of politics as usual, practitioners nevertheless invoke neoliberal models of fiscal accountability and devolved responsibility as providing resources on which to reframe citizen expectations and produce ‘authentic’ attitudinal and behavioral change. These civic transformations are not seen as distinct from economic considerations, but are constructed as interdependent outcomes.

### 6.1 *Bringing private sector values to deliberation*

Some people say, ‘Talk is cheap.’ We say, ‘Conversation is cost-effective.’  
Practitioner, dialogue and deliberation listserv

Despite the ways in which they invoke community values and police marketing and commercialization within the deliberation consulting industry, practitioners do not reject the private sector itself. Their positive orientation to business is revealed in the fact that practically all US practitioners surveyed believe ‘the expanded use of deliberative methods in the corporate sector (with employees or customers)’ is ‘good for the field’ (97%,  $n = 329$ ). In promoting the positive

benefits of public deliberation methods in all kinds of sponsored settings, sectoral context is not salient for practitioners. One listserv member articulates this widely shared sentiment: ‘of course, while facilitators are not exclusively involved in public engagement (most of my work is corporate) I think the same principles apply . . . it’s about engagement . . . the venue is irrelevant’ (Database files).

If commercialization of practices and products is anathema to practitioners, those promoting their products also emphasize that their interests are far broader than simply facilitating non-profit- or government-sponsored processes involving citizens. Harrison Owen states that his role in promoting Open Space is to advocate for its wholesale adoption across all sectors in the interest of process improvement: ‘If I have a vision for Open Space Technology, it is that it become rather like accounting; something we all must do because it works, and because it is useful’ (1997). This belief is consonant with scholar practitioners Hendriks and Carson’s vision of the ‘prolific spread of deliberative democracy through market forces’ in which “‘deliberative experiments’ become status quo’ (2008, p. 305). Leading practitioners like Owen hold a steadfast belief regarding the applicability of participatory techniques not just in public settings, but in business settings of all types.

In the practitioner survey, the top selection out of five ‘most important challenges facing the D&D community’ (developed collaboratively by NCDD conference attendees) was ‘making D&D integral to our public and private systems,’ at 35% of US respondents ( $n = 339$ ). As that phrasing indicates, rarely, if ever, are business, civic organizations or government invoked in different breaths as promising recipients for deliberative interventions. This reflects the frequency of business sponsorship and the variety of sectors represented in typical client portfolios; 45% of professional US practitioners in the survey ranked businesses, industry associations and chambers of commerce as one of their top three most common sponsors of processes conducted over the last 2 years ( $n = 246$ ); by comparison, state and federal government was ranked as a top three sponsor by 35% of professional US respondents.

Going beyond the celebration of the benefits deliberative democracy can bring to the private sector, many deliberation consultants argue that the private sector itself can contribute social profits and civic benefits to the rest of the world. An announcement on a dialogue and deliberation listserv promotes a free online course in Appreciative Inquiry Summits by the developer of the method, David Cooperrider, who has helped ‘companies and communities around the world’: ‘David’s most recent passion is an inquiry into “Business as an Agent of World Benefit” . . . where *every social and global issue of our day can be viewed as a business opportunity* to ignite industry leading eco-innovation, social entrepreneurship, and new sources of value’ (Database files, emphasis ours). Practitioners bring communities and economic growth together in a positive context of

mutual benefit in deliberative processes. One consulting firm describes its mission as to ‘support our clients in creating organizations and communities in which people, profits, and the planet thrive’ (Database files). Such claims are not limited to public deliberation consultancies that work primarily in the private sector. Even national deliberation organizations focused on government reform advertise their interest in working with global companies and private organizations to solve pressing problems: AmericaSpeaks, whose mission is to ‘re-invigorate American Democracy,’ promotes its ‘21st Century Summits’ to businesses and trade associations.

Regarding whether deliberation facilitated by practitioners for private clients can produce substantive ‘social profits’ as promised by deliberative proponents, evidence collected in this project certainly supports the idea that civic discourse is possible in non-public spaces. Privately sponsored deliberation processes routinely call into question the virtue of profit-seeking and the sustainability of growth, asserting ‘the end of economics as we know it’ and questioning the ‘dogma of materialism,’ for example (Database files). Samples of graphic facilitation displayed at deliberation conferences reveal similar celebrations of community values in contrast to ‘old’ ways of doing business and ‘fossil values,’ as in descriptions of ‘a learning organization’ with ‘shared ownership’ for a Kodak visioning process, and a partnership between an oil company and a deliberation organization that emphasized civic-minded outcomes of deliberation such as ‘courageous conversations,’ ‘doing whatever it takes together’ and ‘creating shared meaning’ (Database files). Discourses of learning and sharing in private deliberations are virtually indistinguishable from public ones like those in ‘Hard Times, Hard Choices,’ where participants agreed that they ‘learned a lot about people very different from me—about what they and their lives are like’ (Center for Deliberative Democracy, 2010, p. 14).

Thrift (2005) provides an extensive analysis of ‘learning’ as a new managerialist discourse, but the extent to which these ‘alternative’ values draw on soft capitalist logics from the private sector is often explicit, as when a contributor on a listserv argues that deliberation practitioners should learn from corporations’ approaches to accountability: ‘I believe that our field of community engagement is at a very, very basic stage when it comes to measuring, evaluating and reporting on performance . . . we should look at the lessons from the CSR industry’s experience’ (Database files). Such evaluations of performance are typically referred to as ‘the business case’ for deliberation. One training webinar is called ‘Building a Business Case for P2’. The session is described as follows: ‘In this class, participants will learn: (1) a basic understanding of “return on investment” for participation processes, (2) a five-step process for developing a business case for P2, and (3) how to anchor a business case to organizational performance standards or measurements’ (Database files).

Deliberation's salutary effect on the bottom line is linked to its civic benefits. In selling its services, AmericaSpeaks claims that it is 'the leader in managing large public events that ensure effective citizen engagement *and wise use of resources*' (Database files, emphasis ours). A report from the UK entitled 'Democracy Pays: How Democratic Engagement Can Cut the Cost of Government' defines the contrast between fiscal responsibility as a legal imperative for administrators and good governance as a 'moral' imperative for societies:

Usually, the case for stronger local democracy is framed in moral terms, and this is entirely appropriate. Citizenship is a moral as well as a legal construct, and widening and deepening democratic engagement is a worthwhile cause. However, given the fiscal crisis and the demands of front-line services for public funding, *making the moral case for work on this area is not sufficient*. This is why it is also important to make the case that better democracy produces better governance and reduces costs. (Zacharzewski, 2010, emphasis ours)

Notably, business principles such as return on investment (ROI) are framed as wholly compatible outcomes with the social profits unleashed in deliberation. For example, a consultancy advertises that 'participants are not only highly productive, they also generate a common language and have a shared experience working together in deep collaboration' (Database files). In facilitated deliberation, participation is civically rejuvenating and profitable, and the moral value of democratic governance cannot and does not stand alone. Both civic and fiscal outcomes are predictable and measurable. The same consultancy points out that they are 'able to systematically and repeatedly bring out the highest levels of thought, performance and collaboration within the organizations we serve' (Database files). As Healy (2006), Peifer (2011) and Eilbaum (2010) have noted, such 'mixed incentives' are increasingly typical in moral appeals. How, exactly, are civic qualities of authentic engagement like deep collaboration, shared experience and improved civic capacity linked to profitability? The next section demonstrates that the quantification of 'authentic' engagement entails tracking the transformation of stakeholders from demanding consumers to active citizen partners.

## 6.2 *Co-creating civic virtue and fiscal discipline*

Intensive information-based democratic engagement could enable councils to, in Richelieu's metaphor, pluck more feathers with less squawking. Zacharzewski (2010)



As discussed in Section 5.2, deliberation practitioners believe that the power of deliberation to enact transformational conversions is key to promoting deliberative democracy as an anti-commercial, quasi-spiritual practice. Converting stakeholders from demanding consumers of services to active civic partners is indeed an explicit goal of deliberative sponsors across sectors, but we argue that these transformations are framed as morally worthwhile not only because of their empowerment potential but because of their financial benefits. In practitioner discourse in a wide variety of settings, stakeholder preference change is linked to improved surveillance, greater worker and taxpayer discipline and enhanced organizational legitimacy. The cost savings reaped through these results are generally framed as contributions to the collective good, inasmuch as they reduce conflict and render publics more tractable in efficient ways. As such, we argue that the forms of action empowered by deliberation may provide authentic engagement opportunities at the same time that they produce disciplinary outcomes, which explains why deliberation has become a popular organizational strategy for reducing contention related to retrenchment. Citizen action is not repressed outright, but is channeled in structured venues where collective mobilization is framed as un-civic behavior and individual action disconnected from organizations is constructed as virtuous (Lee, 2007; Polletta, 2010).

Measurable effectiveness is typically defined through cost-savings, as described in Section 5.1; how these savings are articulated is generally in terms of, as one listserv member puts it, ‘pay now, or pay later’ (Database files). This was elaborated in the same discussion thread as ‘time to effectiveness’ or ‘the time spent undoing, redoing and selling - nobody really measures that... upfront investment has long term payoffs’ (Database files). Deliberation is constituted as a more manageable form of citizen empowerment than not empowering citizens and hoping that they do not get mobilized by activists, increasing litigation and erecting costly obstacles to policy implementation. In the ‘Democracy Pays’ report, Zacharzewski argues that ‘there is a good deal of evidence that greater democratic involvement in decision making leads to lower costs’ (2010, p. 7). Civic benefits are explicitly and actively linked by practitioners to cost-savings and fiscal discipline. One consultancy advertises, ‘We look for concurrent results in not just performance and economic prosperity, but also in individual well being and societal contribution’ (Database files).

The extent to which economic outcomes can be achieved is usually articulated as the result of authentic, deep engagement. One consultancy’s website asserts that ‘staff involvement, *not just superficial consultation*, is key to tapping into what they know and winning their enthusiastic support’ (Database files, emphasis ours). This more genuine form of engagement may require ‘new techniques for reinforcing group commitments, and shifts in organizational culture and norms’ (Database files). Zacharzewski argues that ‘the more involved people

are in democratic discussions of financial matters, the more they can be relied upon to support targeted cuts,' and the greater their 'tax morale,' or 'willingness to pay tax' (2010, pp. 2–3).

The empathetic listening that occurs in sponsored deliberation reliably causes participants to adopt less demanding positions, and this outcome is routinely highlighted by both deliberation practitioners and scholars in process evaluations and on deliberation listservs, as in the example that begins this article. Zacharzewski reports that such processes can help administrators distinguish entitlements that are truly 'off-limits' from less sacred cows, engendering greater administrative flexibility: at the end of one process, 'participants had expressed a willingness to cut several high-cost areas of expenditure, such as highways maintenance, libraries, museums, and residential services for older people . . . It is worth noting that the directions in which opinions shifted did not follow a pattern of self-interest or prejudice' (2010, p. 5). The results of deliberative 'choicework' may reflect a shared willingness to sacrifice, an outcome which is moralized as civic because citizens are seen as abandoning their consumer mentality for the public interest. Such results also have value for administrators to the extent that they provide efficient feedback on which administrative goals are likely to be accomplished with the least amount of resistance from stakeholders and advocacy groups. In this sense, deliberation can help administrators anticipate or counter organized resistance, and large-scale deliberations typically go through a number of pilot iterations with focus groups to diminish the potential of topic framings to provoke contention.

But decreased resistance (minimization of grievance construction and organized opposition) is simultaneously paired with an increased proclivity to 'positive' forms of civic mobilization. Advertising copy on one consultancy's website claims that 'Cynicism and resistance are replaced with a renewed sense of discovery, possibility, commitment, joy and positive action' (Database files). Similarly, Appreciative Inquiry is promoted as 'a collaborative strengths-based approach that is proving to be highly effective in thousands of organizations, colleges and communities in more than a hundred countries around the world. The AI approach heightens energy, sharpens vision and *inspires action for change without resistance*' (Database files, emphasis ours). Genuine processes will yield not only genuine enthusiasm for administrative goals but activate citizen stakeholders to help achieve them by, for instance, pledging to exercise with their children, to clean up their highways or to contact their legislator.

In contrasting their work to that of politics as usual, deliberation organizations emphasize the authenticity of their interventions and their ability to mobilize civic action on an individual level, in contrast to hollow exercises controlled by interest groups and bureaucrats. In describing 'Authentic Public Engagement

vs. Business as Usual', one leading organization lays out the connection between inauthentic forms of politics and business:

To the extent that citizens are considered at all, it is usually as consumers or clients of government . . . At worst, cynical, empty public relations gestures prevail, as in the rigged 'town meetings' that are so common these days. With participants screened and questions carefully controlled, such counterfeit engagement contributes mightily to the cynicism that is so prevalent among citizens today. (Database files)

Here, the civic spaces of ordinary politics are framed as contaminated by virtue of being mass-produced for passive consumption, with 'cynical, empty' PR on government's side mirrored by 'cynicism' on the part of citizen-consumers. Deliberation organizations in the USA promote the ability to solicit the engagement not of 'the usual suspects', but of those not yet mobilized: AmericaSpeaks advertises their 'unique strategies for engaging a demographically diverse group of *unaffiliated* citizens to participate in your public forums' (Database files, emphasis ours).

The extent to which deliberation can prompt citizen accountability such that citizens actually are willing to assume ownership of functions previously performed by administrators reflects neoliberal governance principles of devolved and privatized responsibility (Amable, 2011; Somers, 2005). Such outcomes are suggested by questions like those asked of participants during 'Hard Times, Hard Choices', regarding whether 'the efforts of volunteers working outside government' could 'help a great deal' in healthcare, education and providing 'services to those in need'—measures on which post-deliberation surveys typically showed significant increases in support (Center for Deliberative Democracy, 2010, p. 11).

These civic benefits are extensively highlighted in deliberation marketing, and discussed on listservs as motivation for strapped administrators to resort to deliberative solutions. Zacharzewski argues that 'deeper democratic engagement can increase productivity, both in pure economic terms, and in terms of "civic productivity" – where neighbourhood and social civic action replaces higher-cost state intervention' (2010, p. 8). In a listserv discussion on quantifying the benefits of deliberation, one practitioner reports from the front lines:

We are finding agencies becoming interested in our work because their budgets are being cut so much that they need to find truly different and more effective ways to get their work done . . . They are having to make huge cuts in staff, which means depending more on community collaborations. Paying for process to get community engaged is cheaper than paying for staff. (Database files)

Another listserv member responds: ‘Now \*that\* is fabulous. Just in from the Department of Unexpectedly Cheery Unintended Consequences of the Economic Downturn!’ (Database files). The social profits of deliberation entail attitudinal and behavioral transformations predicted by deliberation scholars, and these outcomes are enthusiastically promoted to publics and sponsors as both fiscally and socially responsible remedies for a challenging economic landscape.

As the concluding section of this analysis has argued, the citizen transformations reaped in genuinely engaging deliberative processes may be no less real or civic-spirited for being in the direction of support for administrators’ economic goals, but the extent to which such projects redefine the collective good in terms of how civic discourse and citizen actions reflect management priorities and economic efficiency deserves further scrutiny by scholars. Simply determining which processes are ‘real’ or ‘good’ deliberation versus which are ‘fake’ or ‘bad’ will not suffice (Snider, 2010), inasmuch as the value of processes for clients stems from the substantive authenticity, civic productivity and demonstrable accountability they can claim.

## 7. Conclusion: the enduring value of political authenticity

There is soul to neoliberalism, and a refusal to accord it respectful attention not only makes caricatures of its many sincere adherents but also leaves no terrain for engaging them. Moreton (2007, p. 117)

By writing contemporary deliberation off as a tool of consent, without understanding how actively its practitioners protect it, we risk losing the opportunity to understand paradoxes in neoliberal governance, including how deliberation offers spaces that may be simultaneously empowering and demobilizing. Critics of the apparent irony of a deliberation industry may cede the moral discourses of heart, idealism and spirit to those supposedly ruthless cost-cutters heedless of the little guy’s pain; as Moreton argues:

Ironically, the left too often fails to appreciate this gulf between the official logic of the free-market globophiles and the actual experience of its grassroots constituency — the gap between the say-so and the do-so. Through this failure, it is sometimes the champions of a communitarian social vision who wind up arguing in the flat, cold language of the imaginary rational individual. (2007, p. 119)

This study describes how an overlooked group of progressive professionals has contributed to the ‘moral project’ of neoliberalism (Mudge, 2008, p. 706) by selling their ability to produce authentically civic spaces in which contention can be productively channeled to serve administrative goals. We contribute to

the literature on the culture of neoliberalism by demonstrating the role of meaning-making about political action in moralized markets; deliberation has economic value because of its ability to invoke a republic of average Joes and Janes, suffering their lumps together.

Deliberation consultants construct their practice as morally meaningful with reference to anti-commercial and new managerialist discourses, revealing a historically specific form of civic-ization. Precisely because distinctions between politics and markets have been blurred in an era of corporate-sponsored mobilization and professionalized movements, deliberation's association with a 'pure' form of politics matters. Civic-ization is uniquely useful for contemporary challenges to neoliberal governance, because it constructs social and economic profits as interdependent and mutually reinforcing, while claiming protection from both business as usual and ordinary politics. Deliberators are congratulated for being caring and responsible, homespun virtues already honored in the cultural circuit of capital. At the same time, deliberation practitioners promise clients citizen actions oriented toward personal self-control and appreciative, dutiful sacrifice to induce the collective benefits the market can bestow. These definitions of civic life reconceptualize the common good in terms of individual preference change and marginalize collective action as self-interested, routine politics. When communities accept such framings, political empowerment is effectively divorced from organized challenges to structural inequalities. In this sense, deliberation may be engaging more citizens in more discussion than ever before, but the results of that engagement may be discursively limited and unlikely to produce collective action beyond behavioral accommodations to the harsh realities of retrenchment. As such, this case provides an example of how progressives have contributed not just to the development of neoliberal policy, as [Mudge \(2008\)](#) argues, but to later adaptations of that policy to progressive critiques.

Celebrations of individualized participation and personalized responsibility are key characteristics of neoliberal empowerment projects in admittedly 'hard' times ([Eliasoph, 2011](#)). If, as some scholars claim, deliberation is the second coming of the 1960s' participatory democracy, its real utopian bona fides are also the latest management trend. By contextualizing the burgeoning market for civilized talk about retrenchment, we can link the reframing of political action promised in deliberation to earlier trends in the civic-ization of business activity and concurrent ones in today's subsidized participation, voter mobilization, corporate social responsibility and civic partnerships ([Boyle and Silver, 2005](#); [Kreiss, 2009](#); [Soule, 2009](#); [Walker, 2009](#)). We can also broaden our analysis to civic-ization in non-Western contexts, such as Eastern Europe ([Eyal, 2000](#)) and China ([Leib and He, 2010](#)). This task is even more urgent because scholars have yet to connect contemporary democratizing practices to regressive outcomes in a systematic way, despite the fact that deliberation complements related

organizational strategies like grassroots lobbying and digital campaigning (Lee *et al.* 2010). Not least, if participatory methods have already been integrated into the ‘heart’ of organizational life, this suggests new challenges for movements like the Occupy movements, which aim to contest economic inequality through participatory decision-making. Both economic and political scholars would profit from seeing deliberation as a powerful mode of tapping the souls, and not just the wallets, of neoliberal subjects in the new millennium.

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## Appendix

The first author conducted participant observation between 2006 and 2010 at field sites in major cities across the USA and Canada, in a wide variety of fora regarding best practices and common challenges of public engagement practice. These included: online seminars, teleconferences and member focus groups for professional and organizational development; a 5-day public participation facilitation certification course and three specialized intensive training sessions for public deliberation facilitators; four conferences of public deliberation

professional associations and two smaller conferences for public deliberation practitioners. Field notes were compiled in an electronic database and inductively coded using standard practices for ethnographic research. In addition, informal interviews with over 50 individuals were conducted by the first author over the phone and in-person, and typically lasted from a half hour to a few hours. Interviewees were selected for their diversity and their ability to reflect on discussions and activities observed. The sample represented public deliberation practitioners from diverse organizations, in addition to relevant field actors such as funders and software developers. Data from field observations and informal interviews are cited parenthetically as 'field notes,' and from recorded interviews as 'interview transcript.' Analysis of organizational documents, handbooks, brochures, blogs, digests from professional listservs and organization websites complements the information gathered through participant observation and interviews. Archival data are cited within the analysis as 'database files,' rather than cited in the bibliography, to protect the confidentiality of informants. However, concerns about confidentiality are balanced with identification of historically important organizations, methods and public figures wherever publicity is requested or expected.

As a supplement to the fieldwork, a non-random online survey of deliberation practitioners, distributed through over 20 online listservs and networks in the field, was conducted in fall 2009 in collaboration with Francesca Polletta of the University of California, Irvine, in order to solicit a broader perspective on the dominant tensions and shared beliefs surfacing in the qualitative research. The survey, whose target population was dialogue and deliberation practitioners in the USA, yielded 345 completed responses from respondents based in the USA. While the survey sample has limited generalizability, the data collected is a valuable source of triangulation with the extensive field research described above, and confirmed the trends already identified. Most relevant to this project, based on comparison with existing data, the survey sample may slightly overrepresent practitioners serving public clients, indicating that the business discourses described here are pervasive across client sectors. These data are described in the text as survey results; the *N* given reflects the total number of valid responses. See the public survey website (<http://sites.lafayette.edu/ddps/>) for full results and for an extended discussion of design, sampling and limitations.