SYMPOSIUM/5

DEMOCRATIC DELIBERATION, SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND THE QUEST FOR DEMOCRATIC POLITICS

Donatella della Porta
Scuola Normale Superiore

Andrea Felicetti
Scuola Normale Superiore

Luigi Bobbio has devoted a large part of his research to the study and promotion of democracy. In particular, his thoughtful analysis of the potential for democratic deliberation to improve politics has contributed to a variety of democratic debates in Italy and abroad.

Also in his latest paper, Luigi engaged in an important debate on whether public deliberation makes decision making more or less political (Bobbio 2017). As he argues, deliberative assemblies actually provide a "third way", a grey area, between political and unpolitical engagement. Right because of its hybrid nature, the third, deliberative way actually improves policy-making. In developing his argument, building upon Hay's work, he highlights that even if deliberative assemblies shift the *location* of decision-making, they leave however unaltered the *content* of issues under examination (Hay 2007). The essentially political nature of some issues is not lost, even when decision making and deliberation about it occurs at a distance from governmental locations.

In this short article, aiming at complementing his work, we look at the same question, but from a different perspective. That is, rather than asking whether the introduction of deliberative arenas makes democratic engagement more or less political, we reflect on whether the introduction of deliberative arenas makes political engagement more or less democratic. Specifically, we look at how deliberative assemblies might contribute to (or hinder) the pursuit of deliberative and participatory democratic values as articulated by contemporary social movements (another focus of attention in Luigi's work).

The democratic value of public deliberation lays in its ability to promote democratic engagement at large, not just in its contribution to policy-making. Bridging social movements' and democratic innovators' struggles for democracy is a fundamental challenge for all those interested in advancing democracy in a time when, under the surface of peaceful handing of power and stable democratic institutions, a seismic wave of change unfolds across Western democracies.

Today, reactions to the legitimation crisis of neoliberal are emerging with vigor. On the one hand, a post-democratic turn is singled out where politics and governments lose ground or are conquered by privileged elites, and the welfare state—the product of the mid-century compromise between capital and workers—falls victim to a new, anti-egalitarian conception (Crouch 2004). Here, democracy is reduced to an institutional edifice subservient to the concentration of power in the hands of the dominating few. Inside this empty box, according to the technocratic view, elites-appointed experts rule over increasingly dependent masses. In a populist-authoritarian version, instead, authoritarian figures lead masses amidst daunting changes of contemporary societies (Caramani 2017). On the other hand, and partly in reaction to post-democracy tendencies, we find a global movement for a substantial democratization of society (della Porta 2013). This field, often inspired by a deliberative and participatory vision of democracy, is populated by a raft of actors. These include among others, an ever growing body of democratic innovators collaborating with institutions and a score of social movements, which, especially since the Great Recession, have taken the streets to claim democracy back (Smith 2009; della Porta, Mattoni 2014).

Against this backdrop, considering Luigi's contribution to both fields of study, we reflect in what follows on the extent to which the quest for greater public deliberation resonates with or diverges from social movements' calls for greater democracy. Furthermore, we look into ways to introduce a deliberative assembly in democratic systems so as to support, rather than impinge on, the democratic action of social movements. Social movements are in fact not the obvious beneficiary of deliberative innovations. Rather, quite at odds with the view that underpins much deliberative innovation, social movements legitimately retain partisan views, which they express in a wide range of ways (not

just deliberation), and often engage at a critical distance from institutions (Talpin 2015; della Porta, Felicetti 2017). In this short contribution, we aim at triggering further thinking about possible synergies among actors mobilizing for democracy. Towards this goal, in the next section, we introduce our deliberative participatory vision of democracy and, then, outline some problematic aspects characteristic of traditional approaches to deliberative innovations.

1.   Deliberative Assemblies from a Deliberative Participatory Viewpoint

According to a deliberative participatory vision, democracy is based on the mobilization of different publics in which, under conditions of equality, inclusiveness and transparency, a communicative process based on exchange of reasons is able to shape individual and collective preferences oriented to the public good (della Porta 2013). Even though not all forms of participation need to be deliberative, participation is especially valuable in so far as it promotes societal deliberation as the steering force of political life. According to this approach, far from being circumscribed to participation in institutional politics, the lifeblood of democracy consists in citizen self-organized participation in politics (Barber 1984). Also, focusing on publics' mobilization at a distance from institutional politics does not imply that the institutional context is unimportant. Rather, it means that state institutions are not the ultimate depositary of political life but rather one of the many bodies in which democratic life is articulated (Mansbridge et al. 2012: 9).

The participatory-deliberative view sketched above resonates widely with arguments in democratic theory (Dryzek 1990; Young 2000). Moreover, contemporary social movements provide a most important real world manifestation of this approach to politics. Indeed, a score of empirical research shows how participatory *and* deliberative values have been at the basis of historical as well as contemporary progressive social movements. From civil rights movement to the student movements (Luigi analysed), from workers collectives to environmental justice groups, movements have often employed internal participation and deliberation as a means to promote their democratic struggles (cfr. respectively: Polletta 2002; Rothschild, Whitt 1986). Though traditionally participatory aspects have prevailed over deliberative ones in movements, the turn of the last century has seen an increasing interest in deliberation. This trend, which emerged clearly with the rise of Global Justice Movements, seems even more manifest in the wave of mobilizations ensuing to the Great Recession which aimed at a radical democracy with

direct involvement of the 'normal' citizens (della Porta, Rucht 2013; della Porta 2009, 2015).

When compared to the above perspective, the bulk of literature on democratic deliberation seems exceedingly focused around values and practices relating to policy making and the state (Setälä 2014). Insights that directly engage with the idea of democracy at large, that is, democracy beyond institutions, are rare. Though the systemic turn in deliberative democracy invites us to think about ways in which deliberative assemblies affect political systems at large, democracy, intended as the political space where citizens engage with each other to redress issues that states fail or omit to address, tends to be overlooked (Parkinson, Mansbridge 2012). Instead, an in-depth understanding of democracy lies at the hearth of the deliberative participatory approach we discussed above and that informs the democratic prospect that many contemporary movements seek to promote. In the absence of a proper analysis of how deliberative innovations relate to grassroots politics we have only a limited understanding of the democratic value of deliberative experiments.

To be sure, it is understandable that formal institutions occupy a central stage in the discussions on new democratic bodies. Consequently, as the focus stands on the possibilities of improving the institutional landscape, the broader democratic environment linger somewhat in the background of the discussion on democratic deliberation (Dryzek 2001). Nonetheless, the citizenry should arguably be the ultimate addressee of the potential benefits brought about by democratic deliberation. In this context, the tendency to focus on state institutions and policy-making is not without consequences. In particular, it overlooks the extent to which deliberative assemblies, in order to provide a meaningful and viable improvement on existing democracies, need to be framed as part of a broader effort towards democratization. In this sense, we refrain from seeing citizens as somewhat passive actors whose ability to affect politics largely overlaps with their ability to affect policy-making. Rather, we see citizens as agents whose collective action is important in shaping democracy and, most importantly, in determining the way in which deliberative arenas will benefit democratic politics. As Carole Pateman noted, it is in fact important to have citizens' participation in all arenas in which decisions are made. Movements can contribute to democratic legitimacy in ways that democratic innovations cannot (Pateman 1970). In the next section we briefly discuss the relationship between movements and deliberative arenas when the latter are introduced in the political system.

2. From the ground-up: a democratic convergence between democratic forces

The way in which deliberative assemblies are introduced in a political context is a most important aspect determining their ability to be part of a wider effort to democratize society, rather than a mere improvement on policy making processes. The latter solution would be short sighted because, valuable as they might be, deliberative assemblies might do too little to tackle the legitimacy crisis affecting democracies.

A long standing critique of one-shot deliberative assemblies has revolved around their being cathedrals in the desert. A deliberative assembly that does not conjure up with the other forces opposing post-democratic tendencies and promoting democracy, following a more up to date metaphor, would resemble an amusement park in the countryside, an escape rather than a source of systemic change.[1] It is thus vital that the underpinning logic and the implementation process of deliberative assemblies might as much as possible be configured as a bottom up endeavor, as part of a much more valuable wider struggle for democratization. Being sensitive to the deliberative participatory vision that we propose in this article, and that social movements for democracy give substance to, is a key effort in this sense.

More specifically, the successful introduction of a deliberative assembly should be grounded in an effort to gain support in the public space. Whilst enlightened elites constitute an important partner, a genuine effort to use deliberation as a means to make politics more democratic cannot overlook the need for popular support and input. In introducing democratic deliberation as a technical device for improving decision making it is necessary to be open to the recommendations or even the criticisms from the citizenry. These might come, for instance, from citizens and activists who see more value in alternative approaches to the crisis of representative politics or who value partisanship over randomness or participation over deliberation. Alternative paths to democratization should not be pitted against each other. Rather, as much as possible, they should be explored as potentially synergetic.

In particular, our deliberative participatory view of democracy suggests several instances in which there is room for maneuvering to accommodate the views of different

---

[1] Amusement parks have their own meaning. Yet, they have little or no ability to bring about sustainable change in life-style. Interestingly, the installation of such parks is generally met with waves of contestations as their investments fueled construction wreaks havoc entire natural and social ecosystems.

actors in multiple public spheres. This is the case, for instance, of social movements which, though open to consensual methods, often seem sensitive to the value of ideological distinctions and beware of leaving decisional power to non-elected representative. Deliberative assemblies can here play a more genuinely 'discursive role (Niemeyer 2014).

Secondly, and relatedly, a demand-driven approach to democratic deliberation is certainly preferable to top-down imposition of deliberative processes. Deliberative democratic literature is in fact replete with experiments catered to publics which never even asked for deliberation to begin with. To a certain degree, this is understandable given the innovative nature of deliberative experiments, which citizens may not be familiar with. Nonetheless, failure to acknowledge the extent to which communities might be interested in institutional innovations and to involve them in the construction of these bodies seem might jeopardize the capacity of deliberative assemblies to have a real impact in terms of both decision-making and individual empowerment (Felicetti, Niemeyer, Curato 2015). State sponsored public deliberation and participation create both opportunities and dilemmas for social movement (Polletta 2016).[2] In the absence of a convincing participatory deliberative approach to democratic deliberation—as to other institutional forms of innovations—the support of movements should not be taken for granted (della Porta 2013).

3. Conclusions

Democratic deliberation represents a powerful and promising idea for democratizing politics. In these notes, we have considered this idea in light of a deliberative participatory view of democracy promoted by progressive social movements finding some issues that could be improved in order to enhance the democratic potential of deliberative assemblies. The main overall issue concerns the narrow way in which the proposals of deliberative democratic assemblies are usually framed and analyzed. If democratic deliberation is to provide an ambitious means of democratization, then it has to be introduced as much as possible in a synergy with bottom-up mobilizations for democracy which contemporary movements promote. The work of Luigi Bobbio offers valuable insight on how democratic deliberation can restore a healthy political debate. In this article, we have suggested that being able to link deliberative institutional arenas with social

movements represents a promising way to strengthen the democratic characteristics of political engagement.

References

Barber B.R. (1984), *Strong democracy: participatory politics for a new age*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Bobbio L. (2017), "Neither completely political nor completely unpolitical. The third way of deliberative arenas", *Partecipazione e Conflitto*, 10(2): 613-635.

Caramani D. (2017), "Will vs. reason: The populist and technocratic forms of political representation and their critique to party government.", *American Political Science review*, 11(1):54-67.

Crouch C. (2004), *Post-democracy*, Cambridge: Polity.

della Porta D. (2009), *Democracy in Social Movements*, Houndsmill, UK; New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

della Porta D. (2013), *Can Democracy Be Saved? Participation, Deliberation and Social Movements*, Cambridge: Polity.

della Porta D. (2015), *Social movements in times of austerity: bringing capitalism back into protest analysis*, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.

della Porta D., Felicetti A. (2017), "Democratic Innovations and Social Movements", in *The Governance Report 2017*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

della Porta D., Mattoni A. (2014) (eds.), *Spreading Protest. Social Movements in Times of Crisis*, Colchester: ECPR Press.

della Porta D, Rucht D. (2013), *Meeting Democracy. Power and Deliberation in Global Justice Movements*, Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press.

Dryzek J.S. (1990), *Discursive democracy : politics, policy, and political science*. Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press.

Dryzek J.S. (2001), "Legitimacy and economy in deliberative democracy", *Political Theory*, 29 (5):651-669.

Felicetti A., Niemeyer S., Curato N. (2015), "Improving deliberative participation: connecting mini-publics to deliberative systems", *European Political Science Review*:1-22.

Hay C. (2007), *Why we hate politics*, Cambridge: Polity.

Mansbridge J., Bohman J., Chambers S., Christiano T., Fung A., Parkinson J.R., Thompson D.F., Warren M.E. (2012), "A systemic approach to deliberative democracy", in

Parkinson J., Mansbridge J. (eds.), *Deliberative Systems. Deliberative Democracy at the Large Scale*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Niemeyer S. (2014), "Scaling up deliberation to mass publics: Harnessing mini-publics in a deliberative system", *Deliberative mini-publics: Involving Citizens in the democratic process*: 177-202.

Parkinson J., Mansbridge J. (2012) (eds.), *Deliberative systems: deliberative democracy at the large scale*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Pateman C. (1970), *Participation and democratic theory*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Polletta F. (2002), *Freedom is an endless meeting: Democracy in American social movements*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Polletta F. (2016), "Social Movements in an Age of Participation", *Mobilization: An International Quarterly*, 21 (4):485-497.

Rothschild J., Whitt J.A. (1986), *The cooperative workplace: Potentials and dilemmas of organisational democracy and participation*, New York: Cambridge University Press.

Schlosberg D. (2009), *Defining environmental justice: Theories, movements, and nature*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Setälä M. (2014), *Deliberative mini-publics: Involving citizens in the democratic process*, Colchester: ECPR Press.

Smith G. (2009), *Democratic innovations: designing institutions for citizen participation*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Talpin J. (2015), "Democratic Innovations", in della Porta D., Diani M. (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Social Movements*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Young, I.M. (2000), *Inclusion and democracy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.