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SYMPOSIUM/2

FRAMING (DE)POLITICIZATION IN DELIBERATIVE ARENAS

Luigi Pellizzoni

University of Pisa

Luigi Bobbio was one of the most talented scholars of his generation. I had the privilege to discuss with him several times and to work with him in some projects. The intellectual and moral commitment I learned to find in Luigi any time I met him transpires also from what, as far as I know, could be his last contribution to a most loved among his scientific interests: deliberative democracy.

It is indeed a welcome and important contribution. Bobbio addresses one of the most debated issues, namely the alleged depoliticizing implications of deliberative arenas. These, as Bobbio also does, are usually understood as purposefully organized settings, provided with consultative or (far less frequently) decisional powers, in which "ordinary" citizens reflect for a certain amount of time on issues of public relevance, following rules aimed at ensuring fair, equitable and informed discussion. Deliberation, in this context, means something more than mutual adjustment of contrasting preferences, and of course something very different to voting. The difference is mainly due to a setting that allows and encourages tackling the merit of the issue at stake. Participants have the possibility of a considered examination of facts and options, beyond own interests and concerns.

This, many scholars claim, corresponds to a depoliticized way of addressing public issues. Yet, as Bobbio acutely notes, depoliticization is regarded by some, like Philip Pettit (2004), as a benefit or virtue of deliberative arenas; something which strengthens

democracy precisely because, and to the extent that, it subtracts decision-making from the irrationality of partisan politics and politicians' search of an immediate consensus. Deliberative arenas, from this viewpoint, are especially useful when the ordinary political process fails to handle conflict. Other scholars, such as Nadia Urbinati (2010), consider the depoliticizing effect of deliberative arenas, with their focus on the epistemic quality of discussion, as a threat to democracy exactly for the same reason: because, and to the extent that, they isolate the debate from its social and political context, turning political judgment into a sort of judicial assessment. The difference, she claims, is crucial: while the former aims at defining the general interest, which means that some viewpoints prevail over others, albeit in a publicly justified manner, the latter aims at impartially defining the interest of all.

Bobbio's point is not to defend one or the other position, but to question the underlying sharp dichotomy between politicization and depoliticization. Rather than making a purely theoretical case, he finds support in two different empirical cases: the British Columbia citizens' assembly on the electoral system and the Genoa deliberation over an urban highway. His conclusions can be summarized as follows.

On one side the depoliticizing effects of the deliberative arenas taken into consideration are unquestionable, as depending on the fact that discussion over the merit of the issues took precedence over other decision-making criteria. On the other side, however, what happened was more than a "dispassionate" analysis, a purely technical assessment. In both cases, an "unpolitical" venue accomplished a political task" (Bobbio 2017, p. 626). The citizens' assembly on the electoral system managed to disentangle the debate from the factional interests of professional politicians, yet participants developed their own criteria of assessment of options – which by itself corresponds to a political performance – and brought into the discussion their own preferences, concerning the relation between representation and demographic composition of the electoral districts. In the Genoa case the debate was able to connect technical options with the elicitation of previously unexpressed viewpoints and concerns; in its turn this led to paying attention to unconsidered problems, working out novel solutions. In other words, a (re)politicization of the issues at stake occurred not in spite but by means of, or at least within, the epistemic framework of deliberation. Scholars' failure to detect this capacity of deliberative arenas is due, according to Bobbio, to their failure in distinguishing two different dimensions: "location" and "content". Deliberative arenas can be depoliticized venues to the extent that they host issues for which policy-makers are unable or unwilling to take full responsibility, yet this does not necessarily imply a depoliticized character of the debate. Indeed, as the Canadian and Italian cases show, a depoliticized location may even help politicize the content of the discussion, thanks to

its (relative and temporary) isolation from partisan politics. Hence, “practices inspired by the principles of deliberative democracy [...] form a third way between politics and expertise, consensus and truth, politicization and depoliticization” (Bobbio 2017, p. 631).

As said, this contribution is significant, in both the analysis and the conclusions. Bobbio shows that the question of (de)politicization is more complex than it appears from many accounts, confirming that theoretical reflection needs to be fertilized by empirical inquiry. In a sense, that a discussion over the merits of an issue may include and elicit political arguments, which in their turn may lead to an improvement in the epistemic quality of policy-making, can be enlisted in the category of “surprise” so relevant in politics (as elsewhere). Any time a process is set in motion one cannot anticipate what its outcome will be. This, by any evidence, applies not only to contentious politics but also to “disciplined” forms of participation as those enabled by deliberative arenas.

Once taken stock of this conclusion, however, we may ask whether the scope of surprise, hence the political significance of deliberative arenas, can be limited from the outset, with reference to both the problem-setting and the role of participants. From this viewpoint, Bobbio’s article addresses only part of the critiques raised by Urbinati and other scholarship, mostly working from a “radical democracy” vantage point. Said differently, depoliticization may occur at a different level compared with those considered by Bobbio. This level appears if the dimension of “location” is not analysed according to the synchronic perspective of institutional architecture, but according to the diachronic perspective of the deployment of political praxis. A perspective, as we shall see, that surfaces also, if possibly inadvertently, from Bobbio’s own discussion.

In a work written a few years ago (Pellizzoni 2013), which Bobbio actually mentions, I compared two strands of literature which frame deliberative democracy in quite different ways. One is the mainstream scholarship that adopts what can be termed a “technical” view on deliberative arenas. Technical in the sense that it assumes that deliberative democracy can in principle offer viable replies to the crisis of representative democracy and political participation, hence academics’ and practitioners’ task is to tackle issues and problems connected with its implementation. Many efforts have been devoted to this purpose. The initial focus on how to design and handle deliberative processes has been gradually broadened to a consideration of the policy context in which they take place and the deliberative quality of whole political systems – that is, the extent to which institutional arrangements and political cultures give room to “arguing, demonstrating, expressing, and persuading” (Mansbridge et al. 2012, p. 5).

The second strand of literature has developed more recently than the former – roughly in the last ten or fifteen years. This scholarship adopts a “genealogical” out-

look, whereby the spread of deliberative arenas is read from the vantage point of the profound transformation of democracies occurred in the last decades, as a result of some interconnected processes: capitalist globalization, the shift from hierarchically organized “government” to horizontally distributed “governance” and the deregulation of public administration imposed by neoliberal reforms. Of particular relevance is what various authors call “politics of scaling” – the regulatory, financial and institutional restructuring carried out at local (most often urban) level to capture the flows of global capital. It is in this context, they claim, that the recourse to, and the actual performance of, deliberative arenas have to be gauged (see e.g. Matusitz 2010; Silver et al. 2010). According to this approach, focusing on how deliberative processes can be improved in order to reduce risks of manipulation, failure or ineffectiveness, or on the deliberativeness of whole institutional arrangements, without considering the historical juncture in which deliberative democracy has spread, the transformation of power relations in which it is embedded and the goals to which, as a consequence, it is often made subservient, means missing questions that affect its whole interpretation – not as a theoretical ideal but as political praxis. Depoliticization, on this view, does not depend so much on the epistemic focus of deliberative arenas and their ability to rule out the political turbulence surrounding the issues they address, nor is (re)politicization just a matter of the re-entry of such turbulence as “handled” enrichment of the confrontation over the merit of the matter at stake. Depoliticization pertains also, and first of all, on how positions, demands and concerns are framed before and beyond the deliberative setting; how the mandate and agenda of deliberation is circumscribed from the outset, independently of the novelty and surprise it is capable of introducing; how the identity and legitimacy of participants is defined or narratively constructed within the arena.

This, as hinted, emerges to some extent from Bobbio’s own analysis. In the Genoa case he notes that the mandate of the deliberative process was to discuss only on project alternatives. The one eventually chosen included significant variations, as produced by citizens’ discussion. No doubt, this is a remarkable achievement. Such achievement, however, should be gauged against the fact that during the debate “the necessity of the new motorway was often contested. The debate then led to a reflection on the mobility flows in the metropolitan area and prompted the search for alternative ways (ordinary roads, railway) to cope with congestion” (Bobbio 2017, p. 621). Nothing of this entered the final decision. The zero option (giving up the project altogether and turning to alternative forms of mobility) or a thorough revision of the project, for example to combine different transport modalities, were not contemplated.

The basic decision had been taken before starting the participatory process, the political scope of which was therefore marginal, or crucially restricted, from the outset.

This is a major, and possibly the most important, depoliticizing effect deliberative arenas often produce, or suffer from, also because the limited agency with which the participants are provided is coupled with the impression these processes convey of giving “ordinary” citizens a substantial political say. Such depoliticizing effect extends to whole deliberative systems together with the expansion of the political role of non-political venues and actors (think, for example, of how corporate social responsibility, ethical codes of conduct and other types of self-regulation impinge not only on immediate stakeholders but on public policies at large). And if in the Genoa case the principle of the “open door” allowed a self-selection of participants, arguably over-representing the more motivated minorities and ensuring in this way a certain politicization of the setting in spite of its restricted political capacity, it is still the “individual citizen” that was elicited by the process. One could claim to speak in the name of others but the format of the arena, which could not assess and acknowledge any proper “representation”, meant that one could formally speak only for oneself. This fragmentation of the public is all the more relevant in case of random selection of participants, as applied to the Canadian citizens’ assembly, since this procedure assumes that socio-demographic variability, rather than collective belongings, lived experiences and social positions vis-à-vis the issues at stake, is able to capture and reproduce the variability of views and opinions. From this perspective one might argue that the main overall performance, intended or unintended, of deliberative arenas has been to support the neoliberal idea of a socially and politically atomized citizenry, contributing – in a sort of heterogenesis of ends – not to the strengthening or revitalization of democracy but to the advent of post-democracy.

Yet also post-democracy, the hollowing out of democracy in the persistence of its institutions and formal procedures (Crouch 2005), is undergoing a transformation. There are growing indicators of a return of authoritarianism, in the more or less disguised shape of economic imperatives or appeals to technical competence and political professionalism as barriers against “populism”, by which political and economic elites seek to defend themselves from the burgeoning discontent with the failed promise of globalization. In this context, the democratic potential of deliberative arenas, already questioned by their more or less formalized “harmonization” with existing political and administrative arrangements and by the growing disillusionment of citizens ever more aware of their political irrelevance, is faced with the question of their uncertain survival, as limited but – as Bobbio’s case studies show, among the others – non-negligible opportunities of participation.

In conclusion, the problem of (de)politicization is complex, and there are aspects that the mainstream perspective on deliberative democracy, to which Bobbio's article is basically faithful, fails to recognise and address. Yet, we have to be grateful to the tireless commitment and talent of this scholar. This late work adds another important piece to the understanding of the opportunities and limits of deliberative democracy in the changing landscape of political modernity.

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