

Comment on Anna Carola Freschi and Vittorio Mete/2

Deliberative Democracy Stage Four

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In a dense, insightful article Anna Carola Freschi and Vittorio Mete address some of the most relevant questions related to deliberative democracy. The two experiences which they focus on are significant in many respects: they are among the first Italian examples of application of the electronic town meeting method; they have been performed in a region, Tuscany, that is probably going to represent a major locus of application of deliberative democracy in this country, because of its (to date) unique regulations on participation; they offer, as a consequence, interesting examples of the ongoing process of institutionalization of deliberative democracy.

The meaning and relevance of Freschi and Mete's findings can be fully understood only if we place them in the context of theoretical reflections and empirical analyses, institutional designs and concrete applications of deliberative democracy. Their work – to my knowledge, the first of this type in Italy – points to a direction of research that is likely to grow in the next years together with, and as a consequence of, the spread of deliberative processes in advanced democracies: let's call it a fourth stage of studies in deliberative democracy, a wave that raises issues which do not cast away but reframe those addressed in the past.

I talk of a fourth stage because if we look at the development of deliberative democracy scholarship we can distinguish till now three major fields of inquiry. The first, also in chronological terms, seeks to answer the question of what deliberation is, how it may be distinguished from other forms of democratic institutions and practices. For many authors writing from the dawn of the 1980s till the end of the 1990s

[e.g. Barber 1984; Dryzek 1990; Habermas 1992; Bohman 1996], the point is basically to reassess or renew the fundamentals of democratic theory. Their starting point is partly empirical and partly theoretical. On one side they are confronted with the legitimacy crisis of advanced democracies, as testified by the decline of political parties, electoral participation, civic engagement and welfare services, and by a generalized inability of representative institutions and neo-corporatist arrangements to channel new types of demands stemming from cultural, economic and techno-scientific change. On the other side they face the growing success of the neo-liberal reforms inaugurated by the Thatcher and Reagan administrations and of their theoretical underpinnings – public choice theory, new public management and other frameworks supporting what has been called the “post-democratic” drift [Mastropaolo 2001; Crouch 2004]. Deliberative theorists agree with neo-liberals as regards the diagnosis – a generalized crisis of the democratic arrangements established after WW2 – yet they disagree as regards the causes and the therapy. For neo-liberals the problem is too much state, centralized bureaucracy and public services and the answer lies in promoting market-oriented organizational approaches and customized solutions for citizens-clients. For deliberative democrats the problem is again too much state, but in the sense of too much technocracy, corporatism and party politics and the answer lies in a revitalization of civic engagement and public dialogue on the common good. Behind the two theoretical perspectives lie not only different views of democracy but opposed anthropological visions of the political agent, the underpinnings of which are on one side the self-interested private individual and on the other the Aristotelian or Republican community member.

A second field of inquiry develops between the 1990s and 2000s as a consequence of – and overlapping with – growing attempts to transform the deliberative democratic ideals into operational models. The question here is how deliberative settings actually work and how they may be led to get as close as possible to the deliberative principles. The goal is to understand the functioning of real discussions and to single out rules aimed at specific purposes, defined by taking a normative view of deliberation as a reference point – albeit not necessarily the same for everyone. A divide actually appears between those approaches which understand deliberative processes as a means to build and express in a “better” way the public opinion, and those which understand them as a means to perform public inquiries into collective problems [Pellizzoni 2007]. Political philosophers retreat to some extent and the forefront is taken by political scientists, sociologists and practitioners, or at least by political theorists with an interest in the operational, empirical aspects of democracy [e.g. Renn *et al.* 1995; Fishkin and Laslett 2003; Holzinger 2004; Steiner *et al.* 2004; Stromer-Galley 2007; Rosenberg 2007]. A number of deliberative models are

developed and tested, followed by attempts to systematize the expanding array of approaches and experiences [e.g. Rowe and Frewer 2000; Gastil and Levine 2005]. In this field of inquiry deliberative democratic theory meets rational choice theory and mainstream political science, with consequent discussions on the conceptual and empirical limits of the idea of public reason vis-à-vis preference change, group dynamics, will manipulation, collective choice [e.g. Elster 1995; Heath 2001; Dryzek and List 2003; Sunstein 2003; Regonini 2005]. Theoretical discussions and, to a growing extent, empirical explorations seek to clarify what actually happens in public deliberations and the practical implications of design choices as regards participant identification and selection, expert recruitment and advice, issue definition and agenda setting, task specification and discursive interaction.

Overlapping to a remarkable extent with, but conceptually distinct from, this area of interest is another field of research, focused on the policy outcomes of deliberative processes. The question here is not so much how deliberation works, the constitution and internal functioning of deliberative settings, but how deliberative democracy fits into, and the effects it produces onto, the broader policy process. The scholars engaged in this endeavour are often political scientists or sociologists working in the expanding field of discursive and cognitive policy analysis or, more broadly, dealing with the transformation of governance and public administration instruments and procedures [e.g. Callon *et al.* 2001; de Jong and Mentzel 2001; Hajer and Wagenaar 2003; Pellizzoni 2003; Papadopoulos and Warin 2007]. Research shows on one side a growing recourse to multipurpose forms of public deliberation (information gathering, consensus building, stakeholder bargaining, problem solving etc.) in an increasingly messy policy environment where command-and-control regulation and financial instruments lose grip; on the other, an intrinsic tension between new deliberative devices and traditional representative and administrative institutions, with a generally weak tie between public deliberation and actual decision-making.

Deliberative democracy scholarship has therefore addressed till now three major issues: what deliberation is and to what extent it is distinguishable from other types of participation and discursive interaction; how deliberation actually works or may work; how it links up with the policy process. If the first field of inquiry plays as a mostly implicit background in the Freschi and Mete article, the second and third ones are directly addressed. As regards the second, there are many remarks that confirm and expand on the evidence gathered by previous research. To mention but some: the problem of inclusion; the problem of resource asymmetries; the problem of manipulation. As for the former, the study shows the relevance of self-selection and the limits of both a “reasoned” and a statistical selection procedure. As for the second, it shows that both designs of town meeting reproduce and strengthen the exist-

ing asymmetries in the resources available to the participants, with special reference to the discursive, interactional and substantive expertise which one may appeal to when addressing the topics under discussion. As for the latter, manipulative elements emerge in many respects: the issues to be discussed and the agenda of the meetings are defined in such a way as to avoid any major trouble to the political sponsors of the initiatives, while the tasks assigned to the participants and the very use of technical devices – which in theory should offer powerful tools for unconstrained deliberation – shrink dramatically the actual possibility to discuss. As regards the relationship between these deliberative experiences and the broader policy processes, Freschi and Mete show that the effects of deliberation have little to do with the internal working of discursive arenas, considered as such, and much more with how social groups and organized interests affect their inputs (topics, agendas, participants, engagements) and outputs (in terms of use of the latter in the ongoing political struggle).

These findings are interesting not only in themselves, but also and perhaps above all because they show the ambivalence, or ambiguity, of the operationalization of the very principles of deliberation. The two case studies actually show not so much that these principles, as interpreted by the rules of the model adopted, have been neglected, but that distorted results stem from their very application. This concerns all those procedural rules and technical tools which are in principle aimed at providing everyone with a same opportunity to count in the process. It is not in spite but by means of such rules and tools that the possibility of an actual discussion is hampered. This applies above all to the principle of inclusion of “the citizens.” It is not in spite but by means of this major principle of deliberation (at least in its “public opinion” declension) – a principle aimed at giving an opportunity to those usually speechless and at promoting a constructive dialogue on the common good, rather than a negotiation between contrasting interests – that it becomes possible to exclude those who have something specific to say, those provided with the most clear views and solid arguments, and to transfer to the deliberative settings “real word” asymmetries related to technical, administrative and political expertises. These are by no means isolated results. For example, critical commentators of one of the largest deliberative experiments in Europe, the GM Nation? debate held in 2003 in the UK on the commercial growing of genetically modified crops, have pointed out as its core features the engagement of “innocent” citizens (rather than “activists,” that is people provided with their own views), a focus on consensus and trust building (rather than on the reasons for dissent and mistrust) and a sharp distinction between expert and lay opinions [Irwin 2006].

The possibility of betrayal of the deliberative aims by means of the application of its very principles leads to address what perhaps represents the most original in-

sight offered by Freschi and Mete. Here we enter the fourth stage of deliberative studies. Such stage has to do with a properly political, rather than policy, use of deliberative arenas. This field of research, as Freschi and Mete stress, is just in its beginning. As for their own study, they show that the realization of deliberative settings and, beyond them, the regulation of participation have direct and strong political implications: the local left-wing political elite tries in this way to control and channel the discontent of its own constituency, meeting the latter's demand for participation while avoiding that their choices and their very existence as a political class be put in discussion and that the actual processes of political negotiation be really opened to the public. Participants are mostly gathered from the left-wing electorate while topics, agendas, rules and tasks are used as a means to play down major political questions and discords, the town meetings being portrayed as novel, fair opportunities of participation to a problem-solving activity on unproblematically defined issues. The left-wing regional government, in other words, finds in deliberative democracy not a way to overcome but to reproduce and strengthen the post-democratic drift of a political elite committed first of all to reproduce itself and to negotiate directly with organized interests.

The risks of an increasing technicization of politics and of a growing fragmentation of the political arena that stem from this use of deliberation are briefly discussed in the last section of the article, as part of a "securitarian landscape distinctive of Western post-democracies since September 11, [where] all forms of dissent tend to be marginalized and criminalized while the conditions for communication in the public sphere constantly deteriorate." This conclusion, I think, can be expanded further in the direction of some broader implications – broader in the sense that the findings of the study are to be regarded as not limited to a contingent historical moment or a local political context, but point to far reaching questions as regards the transformation of politics in the last decades and the role played therein by deliberative democracy.

I have said earlier that the raise of deliberative democracy has been usually interpreted as a reply to the spread of neo-liberal ideology and reforms, in favour of a renewal of citizen engagement in public affairs capable to react to the post-democratic drift of liberal institutions. Yet the political use of deliberation by left-wing political parties and more in general the latter's convergence with right-wing forces on endorsing some core elements of the post-democratic transformation of governance suggest that the picture may be more troubled. Indeed one can find a number of overlapping points between deliberative democracy and neo-liberalism. In my view, beside the fragmentation of the public sphere and the depoliticization of issues, the most relevant one is the focus on one side on the responsible individual agent

and on the other on the growing information needs of decision makers and service providers. Self-motivation, self-responsibility, self-reliance and the view of the citizen as an important source of the operational data needed for administrative purposes are major requirements of the neo-liberal governmentality [Bellamy and Taylor 1998; Miller and Rose 2008] which deliberative forums seem easily led to align with. The politicization of personal knowledge and individual engagement has been justified partly in different ways by right and left-wing governments – reducing the burden of the state vs. defending the public sphere from the growing encroachment of the market [Marinetto 2003]. Yet the overarching rhetoric of economic and techno-scientific imperatives acts as a connecting point between the two positions, with powerful disciplinary effects. Apart from increasingly marginalized radical components, the political left has become increasingly aphasic in elaborating an alternative to the neo-liberal rule. Then the question becomes whether the raise and spread of deliberative democracy is to be read in a totally different way from mainstream interpretations: not as a reaction to neo-liberalism but as a functional – albeit often unintentional – counterpoint to the latter’s more obvious strategies of privatization, depoliticization, individualization; as a further, subtler means of erosion of the intermediate social bodies between the atomized, responsible citizen-consumer and the political, bureaucratic and corporate elites. The question is whether deliberative democracy really purports an alternative logic to post-democracy or ultimately belongs to the latter, as a specification that does not contradict but confirms its basic tenets. Such question, of course, is not limited to the role played by deliberative arenas, but applies to other emerging forms of participation, for example political consumerism.

In the end, the basic question, as an interviewee of the Freschi and Mete study remarks, is whether participation may really work, perform its role, once it is “suitably” organized, or whether its structuration – even the most technical, professional and “independent” – inevitably consigns it to the existing relations of domination. Whether institutionalized deliberative arenas are inexorably led to strengthen, rather than counter, the neo-liberalization of society – a process still going on if it is true that, despite the challenges coming from new social movements, cultural nationalisms, security policies, financial crises, “a wide variety of neo-liberal policies and projects, at both the national, regional and global level, remain on the political agenda” [Plehwe *et al.* 2006: 1]. This is, in my view, the most relevant question for the fourth stage of studies in deliberative democracy.

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Abstract: Based on evidence from empirical analysis of an emblematic case within the Italian context, this article proposes an interpretation of the political meanings implied in the institutionalization of deliberative practice. Through the adoption of a mix of quantitative and qualitative techniques, we conducted contextualized analysis of two experiments of public deliberation which have recently been promoted by the Regional Government of Tuscany. The research findings show that the general effect of the two processes was more the domestication of bottom-up participation, rather than the opening of new inclusive and participative spaces. Relevant political functions have emerged with reference to the internal needs of party elites and to the competition/negotiation between consolidated and new political actors.

Thus, we suggest that institutionalization of deliberative democracy can be better understood when put in relation to the current process of functional adaptation undertaken by some institutional political actors. Through ‘outsourcing’ and individualizing participative processes away from the party arena, ruling elite would maintain the control over their own selection and political agenda. In other words, in some contexts the institutionalization of public deliberation operates more like a complementary instrument than a real remedy challenging post-democratic governance.

Keywords: deliberative democracy, governance, participation, politicization and depoliticization, neo-liberalism.

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