Deliberative Democracy and Complex Diversity

From Discourse Ethics to the Theory of Argumentation

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Abstract

Can democracy accommodate contemporary diverse and complex societies? Is deliberation an appropriate means for these ends? Even in the face of violent conflict? What is the role of citizens? The central objective of this thesis is to critically analyse the relationship between complex diversity (Tully 2008, Kraus 2012) and deliberative democracy (Habermas 1996) from a systemic perspective (Mansbridge and Parkinson 2012). Thinking identity as complex diversity detaches identity from dichotomous categorisations either as public or private, civic or ethnic and, moral or political. Deliberation entails a particular mode of communication based on mutual respect and aimed at social integration. The systemic view provides context(s) to the analysis of deliberation and focuses, for example, on agency or connectedness instead of rationality or justification.

The central case-study is The Konpondu Initiative (CICR 2007, 2009). Konpondu was promoted by the Basque Government and several civil society associations between 2007 and 2009. It mobilised more than a hundred municipalities and almost 1500 citizens in 117 different forums to respond a simple question: which ways could contribute to peace and political normalisation in the Basque Country? The exercise took place just after peace-talks (2004-2006) dramatically ended and surrounded by a period of escalation (Whitfield 2015). Therefore, the initiative provides an exceptional standpoint to analyse how citizens deliberation operates in violent conflict in the context of a modern European constitutional democracy.

The central thesis is that coping with profound divide even when identity is the primary driver of conflict requires more rather than less democratic participation. Results suggest, indeed, that complex diversity enhances rather than precludes the potentials of deliberation for social integration. Moreover, the more diverse participation, the better results of deliberative communication. Although, the appropriate mode of communication depends on the particular setting, and success can only be assessed in the wider context of the system where each communicative event intends to advance a purpose shared by participants, organisers and promoters.

This hypothesis entails deliberation is considered a communicative practice of argumentation instead of a set of ideal conditions. Deliberative democratic theory and empirical analysis have focused on the study of conditions for communicative action. Meaning, following Habermas (1990, 1996) lead, the focus is placed on a particular set of discourse ethical principles of argumentation. If ideal conditions are met, discourses provide the justified basis for legitimate decisions. On the contrary, I suggest deliberation, instead of taking discourse ethics as its baseline should step back to the theory of argumentation underneath (Fairclough and Fairclough 2013, Lewiński and Mohammed 2015, van Eemeren 2013). Indeed, argumentation theory provides robust analytic tools for the study of deliberation in non-ideal conditions.