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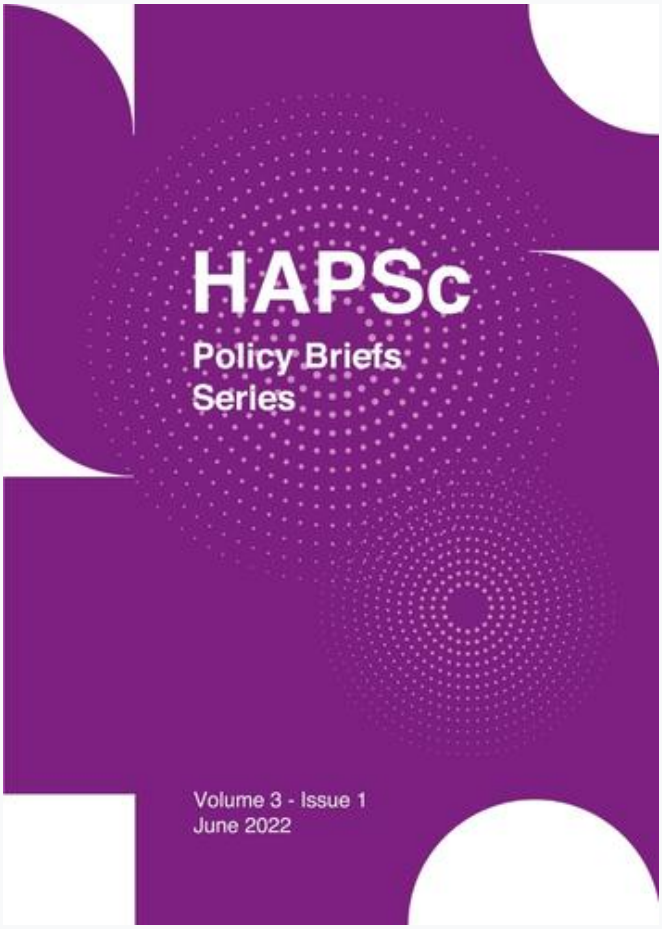

Deliberation as a Collective Decision-Making Mechanism in Multicultural Communities

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Deliberation as a Collective Decision-Making Mechanism in Multicultural Communities[1]

Nemanja Anđelković[2]

Abstract

In this policy brief, the potential that deliberative democracy as a decision-making process has for enhancing the inter-cultural dialogue and dealing with the issues present in multicultural communities is examined. Besides analyzing the advantages of deliberation and its operationalization in reality, in the final part of the policy brief, I offer some possible paths for improving the deliberative process in fostering intercultural communication and problem-solving.

Keywords: deliberative democracy, deliberation, multiculturalism, decision-making, citizen participation, public policy.

Introduction

In this paper, the contribution and possibilities that deliberative mechanisms can offer to intercultural dialogue, the positive effects they can bring to the establishment of a new basic consensus, but also decision-making and solving of everyday problems shared by all members of a political community will be examined. First, the current situation and the main currents in theories dealing with the issue of identity pluralism will be discussed, and then the possibility of application and the effects that the application of deliberation at the local level can offer will be investigated.

Multiculturalism today

The notion of multiculturalism as a phenomenon has gained importance in the second half of the 20th century and escaped from the marginality of social theory, but also political issues. Will Kymlicka is correct when he claims that ethnicity was on the margins of political theory until the 1970s, but since then there has been a lively debate about the phenomenon of ethnicity, and thus the problem of multiculturalist coexistence in modern societies (Kymlicka, 2009:363). A real example is the liberal theory before the theory of multiculturalism came into the mainstream of political debate. Namely, the liberal theory has long been of the opinion that the only thing that matters is the association of free individuals without paying attention to their identity (religious, ethnic or any other), but that

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individuals are governed by universal liberal principles in a political community based on the already mentioned principles (Beljinac, 2011:3). The balance of power between supporters of multiculturalism and those who oppose the concept has changed. Thus, there has been the rise and setting of the theory of multiculturalism as a positively valued axiom of the 90s of the XX century in the Western academic community, which is best reflected in the sentence of Nathan Glazer: "Multiculturalism has won! Now we are all multiculturalists!" (Glazer, 1997:14). There is something fukuyamian in that statement that was premature and perhaps too uncritical. However, today, two decades later, the picture is quite different, we have a thorough critique of the very concept of multicultural coexistence, and the political elites of Western countries themselves are having doubt about the possibility of implementing such type of coexistence (Vuksanović-Ćalasan, 2014:25). This coincided with the waves of xenophobia, which raised the ratings of right-wing extremists and led to the mainstream observation of immigrants through a new movement of security threats.

In the beginning, the very concept of multicultural coexistence needs to be defined and for that occasion, the definition given by Gordy will serve the purpose: "Multiculturalism and diversity are basic living conditions where different cultures meet, but do not drown in each other" (Denić, 2015:21). Although the second part of the definition may be more normative than descriptive, it shows the right path toward a functional multicultural society that does not strive for assimilation or the creation of a new inclusive identity, but for the coexistence of multiple identities, of any kind, without endangering the minority. It is normal, however, to expect the influence of some kind of communication of identity in a certain territory, which can lead to the enrichment of the very lives of citizens, but also to conflicts. The problem in such a society is the harmonization of majority and domicile identity, which strives for uniformity, homogeneity and continuity and, in contrast, the demands of minority immigrant communities that seek some institutional and discourse adjustment to their identity, acceptance and respect for their identities and cultures (Denić, 2015:21).

What is very worrying today is the discourse that can be heard in the public sphere, which is full of prejudice, xenophobia and racism. Such a discourse is only one part of the manifestation of cultural violence that has had a distinct instrumental political use for a longer period than just the emergence of the discussion on the problem of multiculturalism. Johan Galtung defines cultural violence as: “a means of legitimizing structural and direct violence” (Galtung, 2009:15). Structural violence, in the case of identity relations, is always directed towards the “Other”, ie the second identity group, whose “Otherness” may vary in relation to the perceived closeness of the two groups and their common characteristics (Hansen, 2006). Often the reason for such an antagonistic relationship is precisely the construction and maintenance of the identity of one group, which implies, directly or indirectly, the

construction of the identity of the "Other" with different (often inferior) characteristics compared to the first group (Campbell, 1992).

As a potential tool to be seriously considered, the establishment of deliberative democracy, at least at the local level is offered. This, I believe, will not only contribute to solving many problems, primarily local and everyday ones but will also get citizens better acquainted with each other and create a kind of cross-cultural empathy.

Deliberation and deliberative democracy

First, the theory of deliberation will be discussed and on a theoretical level, the value of deliberative democracy for the phenomenon of multiculturalism will be examined. Here, "decision-makers exchange reasonable arguments in the spirit of equality, critical reflection and refinement of their esteemed position with the intention of monitoring and deepening the notion of the public good ", he continues:" they seek a decision based on the widest possible inclusion and overlapping consensus different opinions and which will therefore be reasonable and accepted by all reasonable participants in deliberation" (Walters, 2018:169). So, it is obvious that deliberation includes at least a minimum of respect for the interlocutors, which must be achieved during deliberation. This is possible because the deliberative process by discussion puts people of different backgrounds in contact and creates a humanizing image of the "Other" among them. The deliberation process insists on the most rational argumentation, but also on leaving particular interests for the common good and consensus and accepting better arguments and proposals (Janković, 2012:34). Identity combined with a bad economic situation leaves little room for reasonable debate. However, the discussion itself and intergroup contact during deliberation lead to a better understanding of the interests and experiences of other identity groups, and to the potential for creating a certain level of empathy for others (Elster, 1986:112).

What is even more important to emphasize is the question of the final outcome of the deliberation process. Does it have to be a clear consensus that all parties are satisfied with, or can it be something less than that? The aforementioned Walters distinguishes between the two outcomes of deliberation:

1. A weak form of deliberation that requires only dialogue on all sides with respect, without consensus, but with the intention of deepening the common good.

2. A strong form of deliberation which, with all the demands of a weak form, adds a final solution that is in favor of the common good of all parties and which is accepted by them (Walters, 2018:169).

The weak form of deliberation can be extremely useful for our problem. The implications of a weak form of deliberation can go in the direction of restructuring the problem itself and this is a great direction to move in solving the issues. One of the leading theorists of deliberative democracy, Jon Elster, insists on information and insight towards the "Other" brought by the deliberative process, we listen to the arguments of others, and build relationships and trust from session to session, thus becoming more open critics and begin to appreciate more argument for the sake of the arguments themselves, and we become more informed (Elster, 1986:112). With this information and the solidarity built within the group, we are able to restructure the problem and set it in the right way, because it is the first, most important, but also one of the most difficult steps in making the right public policy in this area (Djordjevic, 2009:58). Bringing even the best-considered solution to a poorly structured problem does not lead to improvement, but can only heal superficially for a while, but the pain remains and it is only a matter of time before it causes new conflicts. That is why deliberation has a great advantage over traditional ways of solving these types of problems.

The traditional way of making decisions involves the political elite making decisions with no or little discussion with the constituency, therefore without any kind of input. But, if we look at what deliberation offers us in this regard, we see the insistence on fluidity in terms of preferences. Why is this important and how does it solve our problem? Before entering the deliberative process, each of us has a clearly defined preference regarding the issue to be resolved by deliberation, these are pre-liberative preferences that are often supported by ill-informed prejudices, but during the deliberation, citizens can learn and there is a chance of them changing their perspectives on certain issues. Several theorists insist on the neutrality of deliberation regarding the goal needed to be achieved (Jackson, 2014), although this may not always be the case because deliberation can give more space to marginalized groups if deemed necessary in order to empower them and make a fairer public policy.

Implementing deliberative mechanism

When talking about the implementation of deliberative democracy, the focus is mostly on the bodies through which deliberation takes place, they can be called by different names, but here they will be labeled as mini-publics (Stephen Elstub & Gianfranco Pomatto, 2018). In their opinion, the mini-publics are: "bodies made up of randomly selected citizens (from the national register, author's note) who are of a representative sample of the entire population (ethnic, religious, status, author's note) and who are gather in them, get informed and then discuss specific topics" (Elstub & Pomatto, 2018:297). It is difficult to imagine that everyone can participate in such discussion bodies, it is not possible for practical reasons, not everyone could be accommodated, and we could only dream of a

quality and meaningful debate. Therefore, the ideal number of participants is 50-100, although, in Iceland, deliberative bodies numbered up to 1500 participants (Elster, 1998). It is of great importance for the mini-publics to have those who manage the deliberation processes, moderators, they must be trained people who will direct the discussion in the most efficient and objective way, in the most useful direction toward the set goals of reaching consensus. Our situation is complicated by the very topic that is being discussed here because deliberation here is also intercultural dialogue. This implies intercultural communication that "involves the interaction of people whose cultural perceptions and symbolic systems are different enough to change the act of communication." (Samovar et al. 2013, 57). Thus, in this case the duty of moderators is even greater because they have to harmonize different culturally conditioned ways of communication, they have to merge horizons, and their training is extremely important for the success of the process. Experts play an important role too by providing accurate and clear data from an objective point of view, but also as witnesses that deliberation participants can examine in order to better understand the problem they are discussing. The application of this theory proved to be satisfactory, but not perfect. There were still problems of insufficient information of the participants, insufficient interest (although the monetary compensation solved the problem quite well), as well as the subsequent obligations and the issue of mandatory characteristic of the decision made through this process. However, a process with similar characteristics managed to bring quite good results in building a new society of equals in a deeply divided society such as the Republic of South Africa in the 1990s (Sorial, 2018:332).

Finally, various authors point out that the main advantages of including deliberation in policymaking are that citizens better understand the values of the community; increased responsibility of decision-makers towards citizens; administration benefits from citizens' input during deliberation; legitimizes final decisions; but also facilitates information flow between participants in deliberation (Abdullah & Rahman, 2015).

Conclusion: New possibilities

After all that has been written before, it can be concluded that deliberative democracy has the potential for application to solve the problems present in multicultural societies. Deliberation has the power to change the preferences of participants through relatively rational discussion and arguments, as well as personal contacts and connections that are created among the participants, during its process. However, contact itself and discussion might not lead always to desired results and division across the ethnic lines can impose a heavy burden on deliberation sometimes. It is up to those who lead this process (moderators) to prevent it. It should be noted that this way of making collective decisions is

not cheap, however, that is why see this decision-making process in places such as Italy, Iceland and British Columbia.

There are two ways to go forward with deliberation:

1. Adding corporate elements to the process itself through the participation of professional civil society organizations in public deliberation (Jelena Lončar, 2011:102). NGOs dealing with relevant topics could provide valuable input and proposals as they have expertise and pieces of information.

2. The use of local infrastructure owned by municipalities, municipalities, cities, local communities, etc.

the second point concerning the use of local government infrastructure should be further elaborated. The critique of this model is that the process is shaped by randomly (though representatively) selected citizens, and only one part, not the entire population. This problem could be reduced through, what can be called, the process of smallpox, which would mean simultaneous or short-term deliberation in a large number of local government institutions to solve the problems of multicultural communities on a regular basis. With more deliberations in different places, we would achieve greater involvement, although still far from the entire population. If we marked all those mini deliberation sites with a red dot on the map, we would get a map full of small red dots, hence the name. The role of bureaucracy here is crucial as they are the ones facilitating and organizing the deliberative forums (which, while active, are part of administration). That is why it is important to put focus on deliberative training of the administration in order to make deliberation as efficient as possible and also develop any further deliberative event.

This way of deliberation after the initial costs would be cheaper to implement because the institutions of local authorities would be used to it and the reduction of intergroup conflict costs could make up for the facilitation costs. In time, there would be a routine and more skillful implementation of these mini deliberations by those who lead it. What is interesting about this theory of collective decision-making is that it is relatively new in political theory and leaves a lot of room for creativity and innovation in solving and improving problem-solving.

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