

BOOK REVIEW

Jurg Steiner, *The Foundations of Deliberative Democracy*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

Habermas (1996:323) states that “rational discourses have an improbable character, and are like islands in the ocean of everyday praxis”. In his latest book titled “The Foundations of Deliberative Democracy”, Steiner (2012) engages in a humble search for few of those islands. Steiner’s work is both humble and ambitious at the same time. In addition to an extensive review of the empirical literature in a variety of disciplines from political science to psychology and education, Steiner responds to key research questions such as “rationality” and “respect” to “common good”, “public openness” and “force of the better argument”. Each section starts with a literature review on deliberation and then includes the findings of Steiner’s previous study on parliamentary debates to underline the philosophical controversies and support normative conclusions (Steiner 2004). Finally, the book provides new data derived from the case studies in Colombia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Belgium and Finland , and the findings of Europolis project. Different from many other studies on deliberation, the cases provide data on deliberations of ordinary citizens rather than politicians or policy experts.

Deliberation is not just any “talk”, but a “talk” christalized in experience. Democratic deliberation refrains from using coercive power in the process of coming to decision, but paves way for fair terms of cooperation between free and equal citizens through mutual justification and respect. Steiner and his friends previously developed the *Discourse Quality Index* (DQI) to measure the following key aspects of deliberation: participation in the debate; level of justification of arguments; content of justifications of arguments; respect shown toward other groups; respect toward demands of the participants; respect shown to counter arguments of other participants; change of position during debate. In this present book, Steiner employs an expanded understanding of deliberation by taking all forms of communication- rhetoric, emotional discourse and story telling- in the analysis framework.

Hitherto the studies on deliberation concentrated on the developed Western democracies such as Germany, Switzerland and Netherlands. Little work has been done on developing countries where deliberation is most needed and difficult to attain. As a contribution in this sense, this book concentrates on divided countries with internal military strife and asks whether deliberation contributes to a more positive view towards former enemies. In these kinds of

deliberative experiences the most you can expect is the acknowledgement of the legitimate points of the other side without necessarily agreeing with them. Steiner (2012:14) claims “if such acknowledgement is obtained, the other side is humanized which should make it less likely one shoots and kills across the deep divide”. His ultimate expectation is that the deliberative approach could offer peaceful ways of dealing with conflicts in these countries.

Steiner relies on ordinary citizens instead of politicians as he thinks that the latter are generally interested in maintaining the deep divisions to stay in power. Steiner has a critical point here. He does not link the deliberation to decision making processes and direct policy implications. Different from most of the deliberation scholars, emphasizing that ideal deliberation aims to arrive at a rationally motivated consensus, Steiner puts less emphasis on consensual agreement and acknowledges the agonistic quality of public deliberation and reasoned disagreements as a valid outcome. He argues that deliberation is facilitated if the discussion is free-floating and no decision has to be made at the end. Referring to how Habermas formed his deliberative ideals in discussions in the Salons of Paris in the 18th century and literary circles in Königsberg , Steiner (2012:123) claims that “in civil society adversarial debates should be recognized where disagreements are not suppressed but forcefully articulated and discussed. Good deliberation should be respectful but at the same time lively and spirited”.

In fact, public talking is a vibrant and wide-spread process through which citizens engage in civic life. The citizen does not aim to accumulate knowledge to become a policy expert or develop political skills to transform him/her into a canny politician. On the contrary the citizen simply searches for the ways to link isolated personal situations to public ends and to look outside his/her own vicinity for hints that might aid him/her to understand his/her life. In a similar vein, Steiner thinks that one of the main contributions of deliberation is to a fuller life. He (2012: 242) states “to spend a weekend away from the daily routine talking with others about the big issues of the world may be a fulfilling experience. To make such conversations part of our daily routine in circles of family and friends is even better”. There is an immediate linkage between intimate communication and political consciousness. The experiments in Colombia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Belgium included in the present book concentrate on this linkage. They were free-floating deliberations with no special measures to encourage deliberation, except in the Europolis project where participants were provided with extensive documentation before leaving for Brussels and the moderators were trained to create a deliberative atmosphere.

Leaving aside the structured deliberations made in forums such as parliamentary committees where a decision has to be made, Steiner’s current book particularly concentrates on whether narratives of “life stories” can also serve deliberative justifications. Probably as a key contribution, the book, with reference to the case studies in Colombia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, searches for positive effects of “story telling” for deliberation. The key research question is whether elaborate justification of one’s argument lead more or less respect for the arguments of others than when one’s arguments are justified with a personal story (Steiner 2012: 237). The expectation is that particularly thanks to the

interactive nature of such statements, the speaker acknowledges that the other side has certain rationality. Contributing to build trust, this gives the other side a human face. This is crucial in countries emerging from an internal armed conflict. In the case of Colombia, Steiner shows that instead of the speech acts if we take into account the participants as the unit of analysis, the picture brightens in terms of the impact of the story telling on deliberation. He shows that 16 percent of the ex-combatants uttered in at least one of their speech acts that they acknowledged the value of other positions.

Habermas has been the leading figure of deliberative democracy. The logic of communicative action, as Habermas argues, incorporates rational discourse and deliberative intent. The communicative action diverges from the strategic action particularly in its strong procedural component. In Habermasian sense, deliberation is a systematic process in which actors tell truth, justify their positions extensively and are willing to yield to the “force of the better argument”. The ultimate goal is to reach understanding and consensus. “Sincerity” and “truthfulness” are key elements in this context. Deliberation has been criticized because of its utopian side and potential for harm. As Steiner (2012: 234) notes, Sherif (1967) demonstrated that meeting without a common goal may worsen the relations between two groups unknown to each other beforehand. Mouffe (1999) argued that this conception of communicative action is unable to acknowledge the ineradicable dimension of antagonism that the pluralism of values entails.

Over the past two decades we observe a clear shift from an “election-centred” model of democracy to “talk-centred” model of democracy in the democracy literature. However, different from the Habermasian perspective, the “talk” has been regarded much more extensive. In addition to rational exchange of reasons, the “talk” includes many other forms of communication such as argument, rhetoric, emotion testimony, or story telling and gossip in this new understanding of democracy. Currently many scholars of deliberation consider that deliberation has a value *per se*, regardless of the policy impact. Steiner summarizes the possible effects of deliberation over the participants as such: being better informed about political matters and policy outcomes; being more tolerant, open-minded and respectful towards other opinions; learning how to present and justify their opinions; being more oriented towards common good and more engaged in public life. Overall, the expectations of the deliberative scholars is that deliberation makes individuals better citizens and the assumed characteristics of good citizens are actually the characteristics needed for good deliberation (Steiner 2012: 243). Finally, deliberation brings a strong element of rationality to define policy goals and how to reach them. The expected results of deliberation are “preference structuration”, “meta consensus” and “intersubjective rationality”.

Steiner acknowledges the central tension between the Habermasian “ideal type” and empirical cases. He claims that at the heart of the matter lies the tension between a “true consensus” and “good deliberation”. However, he thinks Habermas’ deliberative procedure operates actually like Kant’s “regulative ideal”- benchmark that sets the goal for which we should strive but which we will never quite attain. He (2012: 49) states “we should never fall into

the trap of finding normative theorists “impractical”; they set ideals by which reality can be judged”. Deliberative democracy requires the interplay of theoretical insights and empirical investigation. Empirical and normative aspects of deliberative democracy operate concurrently. Steiner (2012: 236) underlines that “going deep into empirical data, the world looks more complex than deliberative theorists expected.” Contrary to Mouffe, arguing that deliberation hurts the lower classes, Steiner (2012: 242) cautiously claims that deliberation helps to attain social justice. Steiner (2012:246) finds Posner’s view that the ordinary people “has little interest in complex issues as they have aptitude for them”, as too pessimistic. He underlines that deliberation is time-consuming but time spent deliberating at a high level is worthwhile for a good outcome.

Steiner writes with a normative stand as *citoyen engagé*, concerned with “socially just” and rational political decisions. Helping the poor and socially discriminated, he thinks political decisions should be legitimate not in individual outcomes but of a political system at large. Outlining as the key instrument of deliberative impact, Steiner (2012: 242-243) states that “mini publics” of citizens should be made an integral part of decision-making. Steiner underlines that in a globalized world, political issues become more complex and ordinary citizens should be prepared to reflective thinking of them. Searching ways for building a vibrant democracy, Steiner sees that voting in elections without appropriate understanding of the complexities of the world will inevitably leave the citizen to be easily manipulated by the powerful and wealthy. The elections no longer have much to do with real democracy where ordinary citizens have a say (Steiner 2012: 246). Instead, Steiner offers links of group deliberation to public deliberation. Ideally the results of the discussions in the “mini-publics” should be widely reported in the media, stimulating further discussions in the public sphere. The central task of deliberative democrats seems to develop ways of incorporating deliberation into representative government. Noting the increasing importance of deliberation in agenda setting through proposals for lawmakers and incentives for policymakers to respond to the broad public, Steiner (2012: 260) underlines the critical importance of the schools from kindergarten to universities in the formation of deliberative culture. He (2012: 267) states “teachers must be trained and supervised to install deliberative skills in their students and to encourage them to use these skills outside class as well.”

Finally, Steiner proposes a new research agenda for deliberative scholars. Underlining that hitherto the deliberative research mainly focused on the micro level of discussions and left aside the macro level problems such as legitimacy of a political regime, Steiner states that the next big research agenda appears to be country level analysis. The deliberative scholarship has been able to develop criteria of deliberative democracy to assess the countries. A country level analysis could respond to one of the central hypotheses of the deliberative scholars whether deliberation helps legitimacy (Steiner 2012: 242).

References

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