

Deliberation and its Theories across the Landscape of Political Practices. Key Evolutions of this Concept in the EUARENAS Project

Leszek Koczanowicz and Wojciech Ufel

Introduction

While deliberation or deliberative democracy might seem as an already established concept, internal theoretical, methodological and ethical discussions and disagreements in the field are profound, and with more and more empirical observation and practical experimentation, they reinvigorate anew. This points to the constant necessity of revising and rethinking theoretical and philosophical foundations of political practices that we observe and design as participatory or deliberative. Engaging with the EUARENAS project and its interdisciplinary community comprising of academicians and practitioners from different sectors (public, private, local governments) brings an excellent opportunity to spot the most current trends in deliberative democratic theories and conceptualizations.

We write this paper from the perspective of researchers dedicated primarily to the Work Package 1 of the project, which is responsible for its conceptual development. We point to several key problems that we identified in a broad theoretical literature reviewed for the project, and depict how they informed the conceptualization phase of the project. Based on this we further focus on understanding how the challenges are related to the methodological and scientific objectives of the project, and how certain concepts should be employed as tools to connect these objectives with our questions. Finally, given our first intuitions based on partial results gathered within the first half of the duration of the project, we speculate on how its most current ethical challenges shall be resolved. These shall not be treated as indicators of the final project results, but rather as an invitation – even if at times overly critical or provocative – to a further discussion.

Changing themes and perspectives of deliberative democracy

The discussions and controversies surrounding deliberation clearly indicate that it is an extremely complicated process that requires consideration of many cultural, psychological and social factors. This radically changes the picture of deliberative processes, which were initially viewed mainly from the perspective of the rationality of communication. Models of collective conversation drawn primarily from the ideas of Jurgen Habermas and John Rawls primarily considered the control of factors that could disrupt the communication process. The emphasis was on ensuring the rationality of the discussion in accordance with the principles of universal pragmatics developed by Jurgen Habermas in his seminal essay “What Is Universal Pragmatics” (1979).

It is now clear that adherence to abstractly conceived rules of communication is not enough to ensure the success of the reaching agreement process. Numerous factors are listed that affect the quality of discussions. First, it is important to remember the need to take into account not only agreement, but also disagreement, misinterpretation and distrust. This is acknowledged, for

example, by one of the leading theorists of deliberation in the early times of the theory development, James Bohman: “many philosophical approaches to public reason still have very little to say about reasonable disagreement; they suggest that contentious issues simply be excluded” (Bohman 1996, 241). Disagreement, of course, does not necessarily mean that the deliberation process is doomed to failure; on the contrary, it can enrich the discussion if we are able to address it properly (Gutmann and Thompson 1996). However, this requires conscious work by those who organize the deliberative process. This, in turn, entails the proper selection of leaders and organizers of the discussion, who must provide opportunities for revealing disagreement and correcting any errors in communication (Kuyper 2012; Lin 2018; Chankova and Vasilev 2020). We recognize this field as one of the most underdeveloped themes in terms of the theory and practice of deliberation.

Secondly, it is essential to ensure the equality of all parties participating in the deliberation. This is best seen in a shift in deliberative theory that goes from consensus to inclusion. The deliberative ideal quickly became recognized as not only difficult to achieve but even as threatening democratic inclusion, considering the exclusive potentiality of consensus and purely rational speech (Dryzek 2000; Young 2000). The argument laid against the initial ideal type of deliberation is based on a concern that rationality is a hegemonic social construct, i.e. an expression of dominant views and disguised relations of power, therefore a consensus can be only a mere strengthening of already existing political norms, economic structures and social roles. To strengthen this argument, Amanda Machin and Graham Smith state that a consensus-oriented procedure leaves only accidental, but not intentional space for substantial plurality in values (Machin and Smith 2014, 58). Katarzyna Jezierska adds that consensus is even putting an end to open, democratic deliberation (Jezierska 2019). Plurality comes from disagreement, a radical stance against the arbitrary distinction between what is reasonable and what is not (Decreus, Lievens, and Braeckman 2014; Machin 2020; Rostbøll 2009). Therefore, if deliberative inclusion limits itself to inviting formerly excluded people to the “table” and requires them to speak the same language in which their initial oppression is rationalized and fortified, it is not emancipatory, but a symbolic inclusion that, in fact, preserves the *status quo*.

Therefore, a mere formal or even demographic establishment of equal status is not enough, as it does not take into account various types of class, cultural or social differences, or even medical and psychological conditions (Kögler 1999). Thus, there is a need to find such ways of communication to overcome these differences as much as possible. The way to do this is through empowerment of groups that are somehow disadvantaged. This can be done on an ad hoc basis by planning the deliberation process in such a way that disadvantaged groups are better heard and their perspective taken into account. However, this requires a modification of the assumption of equal treatment of all parties to the conversation, some of whom must be privileged. From a conceptual perspective it also indicates the necessity to shift focus from inclusion to empowerment, and also study different relations between these two concepts. Empowerment should assist inclusion, either by leading to it or being its long-term effect.

In the long run, however, empowerment requires thoughtful measures to bridge any gaps that may exist between more and less advantaged groups. An obvious goal, especially in the context of deliberation, is to equalize education levels in terms of civil competencies. This allows all groups to participate in the discussion with the same chances to convince their opponents of their reasons. Education, however, does not operate in a vacuum; equalizing educational opportunities requires a deliberate strategy of action and entails many political and economic decisions (Szkudlarek 2018).

This kind of a civic education should also be directed towards the privileged sectors of the society, for whom deliberations is a “natural state” of political activity. In order to secure equal treatment of participants against each other, everybody should not only recognize exclusion, but also their own privilege and how it impacts – limits – others. This should also be accompanied by a “de-privatization” of citizenship: recognition of the fact that our rights and freedoms (including the right to the city) are not individual, but common goods. Deliberation with its focus on public sphere is a step towards a re-recognition of the commons from the neoliberal dogma of privatization and marketization of all social and public goods.

Deliberation seems to finally be embedded within its “practical” and “systemic” turns, which means that it moved from a theoretical divagations on the ideal deliberative democracy, towards a practical orientation based on 1) downscaled deliberation in assemblies and mini-publics, and 2) implementation of deliberative practices within a broader, non-deliberative political system in order to enhance its functioning. Deliberative scholars proposed a “systemic” turn in the theory (Mansbridge et al. 2012; Asenbaum 2022; Bevir and Chan 2021), which treats the political system as a whole, but with various elements (institutions, actors, mechanisms, resources) taking part in a “division of labor”. This approach emphasizes the need for placing deliberation in well-crafted, carefully recognized places in this system where it can have the biggest impact on the decision-making process or can overcome democratic deficiencies. Focusing on the complexity of the system reveals that even essentially non-democratic actors or institutions can foster deliberation, e.g., when it is organized or supported by the private sector, media, or academic experts.

On the other hand, this approach also implies further conceptual stretching when it comes to features and requirements of the deliberative process, as it proposes a rethinking of the coercive, yet the irremovable role of emotions, self-interest, and expert knowledge in deliberation. While “concept stretching” is a relatively well-recognized problem in deliberative theory (Bachtiger et al. 2010), in our conceptual research in WP1 we’ve also noted a certain shift in what is enacted as a deliberative practice? With a proliferation of deliberative practices in local governments and narratives in social movements, NGOs or governance experts, one might expect a forthcoming “deliberative boom” similar to the one caused by participatory budgeting in the XXI century. However, participatory budgets which were originally conceived as relatively large and complex deliberative processes on a substantial part of local budgets, could only multiply in such numbers after being turned into plebiscitary competitions between small, local projects. They became not only popular, but also “easy-to-use” for both citizens and authorities. We consider a similar process regarding popular tools such as citizen assemblies” to be transformed and popularized in a similar manner, since they are among the most popular, yet still expensive and difficult to organize tools.

The systemic approach relies on a premise that sociological systems are operating through fulfilling their functions, just like mechanical or biological systems. What follows is that given functions, derived from normative claims about epistemic effects and democratic legitimacy of deliberation, are dependent solely on the design of the system, and that can be engineered by policymakers and researchers in a way that will make its operation independent from the intentionality of human actors involved in this process. In other words, it is based on an assumption that “the deliberative system has, either actually or potentially, a self-active problem-solving logic independent of human intentionality” (Bevir and Chan 2021, 8–9). This approach is extended to the question of evaluation of deliberative practices, as functionalists both “define the goals for a deliberative system and then

use empirical measures of outcomes to check whether it is delivering those goals” (Bevir and Chan 2021, 9).

On the other hand, there is an interpretive approach to deliberation, following claims that what underlies human experience and actions are meanings that we ascribe to the world and its different subjects and objects. Moreover, these meanings are not independent of the historic context and actual, social, and individual practice: they are constructed by them. Finally, meanings are not set, but constantly inconclusive and fluctuating, and they can rarely – if ever – be identical between two individuals. The same ambiguity relates to deliberation and deliberative systems. First, within the interpretivist paradigm, it is the policy planner or researcher, whose own intentionality should be considered when designing a deliberative practice. That means that while projecting or planning such practices, we define the boundaries of the deliberative system (i.e. what is of our interest as potentially impactful on deliberation, and what parts we decide to leave out) pragmatically: in accord with our own interests, beliefs and previously acquired meanings (“patterns of intentionality”) (Bevir and Chan 2021, 11).

Secondly, in the interpretivist approach, it is not the institutional design *per se* that is of interest but what it enables (or changes) in actors’ intentionality in the process of deliberation. An interpretive study, consisting of qualitative data and observation, allow for a better understanding of internal group dynamics of meaning. How do they understand deliberation and diversity? How do they incorporate concepts such as inclusion and consensus? Interpretive approach is also more capable of recognizing alternative locations of deliberation, e.g. in social movements (Ercan, Hendriks, and Boswell 2017, 200), and strategies that different actors (politicians, lobbyists, interest groups, media) might employ in order to mislead other stakeholders into deliberation upon false premises (Heath 2021). Even reasoning – the key to regarding a certain practice as deliberative – will vary from person to person, from group to group, and will fluctuate in time, therefore it cannot be assumed by researchers, but rather discovered and interpreted “on the ground” (Ansari, Bevir, and Chan 2022, 4).

Finally, the interpretivist approach focuses on discursive elements that prevail in the system: “the arguments, ideas, claims and justifications” (Ercan, Hendriks, and Boswell 2017, 200–201), adding to the understanding of the historic and cultural context in which it takes place. In this way, the study of deliberative democracy can be intertwined with the observation of radical democrats and other post-foundational scholars, who acknowledge the contingency and exclusiveness which are brought to the table by the discourse, but at the same time refuse to study deliberation and instead, turn to more protest- and resistance-oriented practices.

Changing themes of deliberation in the progress of the EUARENAS project

Of course, it is difficult to capture all these considerations in a single project, as they are in many cases long-term in nature, so only certain elements of these considerations can be covered over the course of the project. Nevertheless, in our analysis of the foundations of the debate on democracy, we also included those concepts that undermine the value of deliberation. The most important and well-known of these is the idea of hegemony and radical democracy developed primarily by Chantal Mouffe (1999, 2013). In this concept, democracy is seen as a sequence of successive hegemonic interventions that temporarily dominate all public discourse. The advantage of democracy over

other political systems from this perspective lies in the fact that mechanisms are reconstructed into it that allow for a peaceful transition from one hegemonic structure of society to another.

Although *prima facie* this concept seems to be the radical opposite of deliberative democracy, it is possible to reconcile them at least partially. Leszek Koczanowicz, for example, has put forward the concept of non-consensual democracy, in which the goal of dialogue is not agreement, but primarily a better mutual understanding of the perspective taken by the other side of the conflict (Koczanowicz 2016). Such concepts bridge the gap between deliberation and the idea of hegemony, but more importantly, by introducing hegemonic discourse into the deliberation process, we can include non-rational factors in the structure of democracy, which is extremely important in terms of the goals set out in the grant. This is because it directs attention towards the analysis of power relations and subordination during the communication process, allows us to incorporate institutional conditions, as well as take into account social and cultural factors. Another researcher in the EUARENAS WP1 team, Wojciech Ufel, further underlines the need to focus on how politics influences deliberative policy-making process (Ufel 2022), making the theory and practice of deliberation less “blind” to power-relations. Such analyses are crucial in designing case studies and piloting and, of course, in interpreting the results obtained during these studies.

So far, we have found that the debate between functionalist and interpretivist approaches is one of the most important in regards of constructing a common, yet pluralistic ground for partners and stakeholders in the project, being capable of integrating different academic, social and political backgrounds represented by researchers and practitioners alike. What seems crucial to our EUARENAS project in this debate is that these two ontological approaches imply different, to a considerable extent, incompatible, research agendas and normative standards of scientific inquiry. Functionalism defends deliberation on the grounds of its outcome and the way it helps the system realize functions valued by researchers, activists, or policymakers. This leads researchers toward designing deliberative systems in which separate parts find their appropriate place and roles that enable the system to function: “If each part plays its role, deliberative system will necessarily fulfill its overall goals” (Bevir and Chan 2021, 15–16). A functionalist approach allows to study, understand and redesign deliberative and non-deliberative institutions (elements of the system) in a way that will be scalable and possible to accept in a form of policy recommendations. This kind of inquiry is essential to a kind of study we undertake in the EUARENAS project, especially in pilots (WP4) and work packages dedicated to policy tools and impact (WP7, WP8). Another key objective of the EUARENAS project is connected to what Bevir and Chan understand as normative design, i.e., “to show that certain principles and processes are core to reforming governance schemes so that they are just” (*D2.2 Methodological Protocol EUARMP*: 7).

However, what Bevir and Chan find to be not compatible with this institutions-oriented approach is the intrinsic defense of deliberation focused on changing relations between stakeholders of deliberation – in terms of how they offer justification to one another, learn to listen, understand, and respect differences. This requires a contrary presupposition, i.e. that “system does not determine the quality and content of people’s reasons (...) By leaving individual agency out of its mode of explanation, the functionalist approach erases the intrinsic reason for ascribing normative significance to deliberation” (Bevir and Chan 2021, 16). On the other hand, it opens deliberative democrats up to understand the dynamics of the process in terms of intentional inclusion, i.e., the one which is facilitated or moderated through human intervention, or through the way ideas are transmitted and transformed within the public setting. It can also find intrinsic reasons for the

failure of the deliberative process, e.g., when people fail to reach an agreement, or their decisions cannot be implemented as a policy. The conclusion of the interpretive approach is that some issues connected to ambiguities in human reasoning, understanding, and giving meanings to facts cannot be solved through institutional design, as they will always appear in any given social context, driving undue domination and subtle hegemony that will impede the process of deliberation itself.

It is undeniable that these questions also play a vital role in the EUARENAS project, and to a significant extent, they are emphasized by an interpretive ontology. It is especially the care for inclusive and democratic deliberation that is reflected throughout all the project Work Packages, from theory and methodology, through practice to dissemination and management. It is mostly reflected in the WP5 that strongly relies on the “community reporting” method, which is dedicated to giving voice and listening to personal stories, and to the valuation of intentionality and agency over functional systemic design (*D5.2 Lived Experience Foresight Guide*: 11-14). There are still unresolved issues that pose practical challenges to the democratic policy-making process, and a good example of such tension is the question of randomization of the selection of participants for deliberation. The *D2.2 Methodological Protocol EUARMP* addresses these issues by invoking different voices that are the most relevant in current literature. Arguments that support randomization as a proper measure for providing equality refer to a modernist, epistemic explanation that relies on a universalizable procedure. At the same time, some arguments against it, such as the risk of disconnection from world politics and the danger of omitting certain groups in the random creation of deliberative mini-publics, are grounded in the regard for individual agency and intentionality of both researchers and participants (D2.2: 6, 13).

Conceptual evolution within the EUARENAS project

There is no simple answer to how to combine functionalist and interpretive approaches and whether it is even possible or desirable. The first attempt to tackle this problem (Ercan, Hendriks, and Boswell 2017, 201) took a complementary approach, claiming that the interpretive approach can offer support and more insights into a predominantly functionalist systemic context. But Bevir and Chan, who studied differences in ontological assumptions, conclude with a strong suggestion that single researchers should consciously limit their approach and commit to one perspective (2021, 17). A field of deliberative democracy, however, should not aim at unifying this approach. On the contrary, differences among theoreticians, researchers, and practitioners of deliberation are valuable and lead to robust and fruitful debates which help identify and solve various challenges posed to deliberative practices making them effective and democratic. We conclude that while it is not necessary for any deliberative democrat to fully “eschew” the modernist – or interpretive – approach, it is imperative to be aware that the difference between these two is not only technical or conceptual but is deeply rooted in incomprehensible assumptions. Therefore, they will always create tension to expand our research methods and conceptual tools to develop the field in different directions, even if aimed at the same goal. While we recognize the functionalist paradigm is suitably covered mostly by the ethical and just deliberative approach of the Co-city cycle (Iaione 2016) and the methodological protocol employed in the EUARENAS project, some important debates and subfields of the deliberative theory are more interpretive – i.e. investigate contingencies and actors’ intentionality – but also more elusive to measure and impossible to solve through a scalable design.

To further complicate the picture, we need to recognize that our evolution of concepts of deliberation – such as aforementioned inclusion and empowerment – has two parallel paths: on the one hand, it is a theoretical reflection on the state of the democratic debate, and on the other, the results of empirical research undertaken in the grant. In the first area, as we said above, there is an evolution away from the merely formal conditions that democratic debate must meet toward consideration of the complex social, economic and cultural factors that affect the success of deliberation. For it is clear that if it is limited to a narrow circle of privileged participants, it will be perceived by the majority of citizens as elitist and therefore unrepresentative. Populism builds on just such a perception, portraying existing liberal democracy as a game available only to a select few. This justifies the fundamental division between the elite and "ordinary citizens," who are removed from all important decisions. This is how the movement is often defined: "a thin-centered ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogenous and antagonistic camps "the pure people" versus "the corrupt elite," and which argues that politics should be an expression of *volonté générale* (general will) of the people." (Mudde, Kaltwasser, 2017, 6). To counter populism, it is necessary to take seriously its critique of liberal democracy. However, this requires modifying the entire deliberation process in such a way that it takes into account the voices of the maximum number of social groups, including the underprivileged.

This, however, requires reference to the specific conditions under which deliberation takes place. Therefore, in empirical research, the second area of evolution of the key concepts, we must pay special attention to the positioning of different groups in deliberation processes, whose voice is heard particularly clearly and whose is almost inaudible. Such a focus of research attention will allow us to draw general conclusions from the research and present an appropriate model of deliberation.

Finally, the piloting conducted in the project does relate to a trend of simplifying and making deliberative practices more cost- and work-effective for local authorities and citizens alike. By testing different solutions and observing how these processes originate, are planned and implemented, we aim at recognizing "good practices", as well as areas that need further improvement and polishing. Our finding will not only impact policy recommendations, but will also add to a conceptual and theoretical development of the field.

Ethical issues in the EUARENAS project.

From the perspective we take, which is presented above, virtually all aspects of deliberation have an ethical side. At the formal level, defined by Habermas as the ideal speech situation (Habermas 1990, 43-115), ethical engagement requires adherence to the rules of communication, which ensures equality for all parties involved and transparency in reaching agreement. However, as we pointed out above, such formal conditions although necessary, are not sufficient for the success of deliberation. The conditions of real, and not just formal, equality of the parties to the conversation must be met. This, of course, is not an easy task, and we can speak of approaching the ideal rather than achieving it. Nevertheless, the entity that organizes and directs the deliberative process has an ethical obligation (which is also political) to ensure an achievable balance in the discussion. Of course, the question of how far we can go in actively organizing the entire deliberative situation is left open. Here we are touching on the whole ethically and politically complex sphere related to positive discrimination, for example (Edwards 1988). Of course, it is difficult to resolve all issues

related to the empowerment of disadvantaged groups within the EUARENAS project, but it is undoubtedly important to bring ethical sensitivity to the process of empirical research.

But we also encounter ethical issues when we start conceiving the EUARENAS project itself as a part of a multi-level and multi-stakeholder political process. Whenever the goal of the project is to offer guidelines, toolboxes and policy solutions for just and inclusive deliberation, we become entangled within certain ethical question that are irremovable from any democratic politics. Such issue can be e.g. related to the selection of experts and facilitators of the process, but also arguments used to convince policy-makers and their own policy and political goals they bring to the table. This is especially striking when talking about such urgent and delicate matters as climate change. We recognize that different stakeholders have different, often exclusionary interests, and the intersection of capitalism, political authority, civil society, and “silent” or “excluded” majority becomes a field of conflicting ethical values itself. In the EUARENAS project we are especially committed to values of democracy and inclusion, but the exact content of these concepts is not defined by all stakeholders in the same way, and it is in the nuances where the actual shape of deliberative processes is decided.

Finally, deliberative and participatory democracy is based on individual and group agency of citizens, or of excluded people who – through direct participation or proper representation – are becoming citizens. Especially deliberative processes are entangled with requirements of rational communication or ability to offer spoken narratives or testimonies. This leaves no space for non-human agency, at least unless humans themselves claim representation of other actors, non-human living beings or eco-systems. Again, the case of climate change and the use of deliberative practices as tools for climate adaptation and mitigation are one of the most important fields where post-humanism raises serious ethical issues connected to the coloniality of a rational being.

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