

THE CRISIS OF COMMUNICATION IN DEMOCRACY

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Abstract

The predominant theory of democracy that of rational deliberation is based on the presumption that there is a moral theory as a basis of normative validity of the decisions acquired in a process of rational deliberacy. That person that starts from the idea that he has to use rational means of persuasion will implicitly believe that the rational argument will be the only instrument of persuasion, a priori excluding force, coercion or manipulation from the space of the common living. In other words, the process of rational deliberation presumes a equality of positions in society, that deriving from the symmetry of positions in dialogue. Starting from these considerations, Habermas builds up a theory focused on the following principle: in society, rules have moral validity only and if only they are discursively built up as a result of a deliberative process that must follow some conditions: anyone can bring any assertion in dialogue; anyone can contest any assertion; no one can be prevented from practising the rights mentioned above.

The current democracy, totally different from the ancient one, is due to the improvement in modern, contemporary and postmodern media. Even though it sounds like a truism, this statement must be repeated continuously, especially because a democratic political system must never forget whom it owes and who should it be grateful to. This simple statement mainly explains why non-democratic regimes seek to control the media.

If freedom is the defining element of a democracy, its relationship with the interpersonal communication at the level of a society is very tight: freedom helps the development of communication, communication cannot exist without freedom, but, at the same time, political freedom cannot grow in the human society without communication.

The fact that, in a modern sense, democracy assumes the existence of a “transmission belt” which conveys political messages is another element which contributes to democracy being

the most complex human system. The way in which political communication is done directly influences the rules of the democratic game, exacerbating or diminishing its inherent imperfections.

We live in an era in which, as Umberto Eco very well notices, aphorisms replace syllogisms and this has major repercussions in understanding what we call democracy.

Like every other regime, democracy is a discourse about power, “the power of the people, towards the people and for the people.” If Lincoln’s words were true, Lasswell’s formula who, whom, what says would be very simple, the nation would communicate with the nation. The meaning of the contemporary democracy is far from the message conveyed by its etymological definition. This is because of, at the practical level, for centuries, the democratic discourse is the discourse of the representatives, and this “representation” can only be obtained by persuading the elector.

Characterized by a conceptual ambiguity, communication can be analysed more efficient in its relationship with the political world, by researching the effective discourse practices, which end up being political practices. Democratic political life can be characterized as a continuous effort to communicate on behalf of the politicians, who want to support their actions, speaking being the main way in which political participation can be attained. Except that:

„Generally, simple ideas govern the spirit of the nation. A false idea but clearly expressed will always have a greater power than a true, but complex, idea. Therefore, political parties – which are a sort of small nations in the middle of a big one – always rush to adopt as a symbol a name or a principle which usually is an imperfect representation of their aim and of the

means they use, but without which they could neither survive nor act.”²

This model linked to the community’s need for simplifying the communication allowed the development in recent decades of a true “democratization of democracy” phenomenon. Far from being something paradoxical, the term defines something very simple: the political discourse in democracy has turned into a power-point presentation and we notice a simplification of concept, of problems and of their solutions. An option polarizing process takes place, in other words, there is a decrease in the quality of the political discourse.

This fact is generally closely linked to the transformations of the democratic political phenomenon and we notice an interdependence relationship. The decreased quality of the political discourse influences and is influenced by the fact that the democratic discourse refers to the political power, to gaining and maintaining it, exactly the opposite of what the liberals wanted when they built their doctrine: to limit the political power. This means that the only outcome of the democratic approach doesn’t have the individual at its core, as an owner of rights, as a citizen and as a rational being, but he is just a pawn in the political power play, and this is enough for him.

Therefore the contemporary democratic discourse has taken starting from the beginning of the ‘90s a new turning point which “grew out of a long-standing interest in the capacity of ordinary people to order their own lives, and the lack of opportunities for them to exercise that capacity in the political arena in modern democracies”³. And because everything has to have a name, the new discourse was named “deliberative democracy”⁴ and it became, at least in the European academic society, the dominant discourse.

The idea of rational deliberation is, without any doubt, one of the most promising values of the contemporary democratic theory⁵ especially because it raises the level of political communication with several standards and this is why it becomes one of the most attractive. And this attraction also comes from the fact that deliberation excludes many undesirable things from a democracy, such as, for example, the

elitism, and it fights for the rights of the ordinary people. Because every opinion is taken into account and because every individual can take part in the political decisions that interest him, the deliberative democracy model facilitates the development of the civic responsibility, participation and the autonomy of the individual.⁶ Another very important aspect is that deliberation excludes irrationality from the democratic environment. Therefore, expressing its faith in the rational arguments, the theoreticians of the deliberative democracy perceive the political discourse exactly like a scientific discourse, in which the hypothesis, arguments and conclusions follow the same guidelines of rationality, clarity and consistency. Furthermore, deliberation improves the argumentative solidarity of the political beliefs.

There are even more elements that differentiate the deliberative pattern. This

- Leads to the increase of the quality and quantity of information;
- Imposes an intense reflection process on the arguments conveyed;
- It requires the existence of a value and experience learning process (democratic and epistemic);
- It raises the degree of responsibility and the openness to consensus⁷.

This means that, during the process of deliberation, with the purpose of persuading other individuals, based on the solidarity and power of the personal arguments, one must first of all listen to, understand and honestly accept the value of other people’s arguments. Therefore, during the rational deliberation process, the interests, the “individual truths”, sometimes presented in a selfish manner, are transformed, due to the power of the best argument, into positive actions aimed at a more general interest that truly reflects political participation.

That is why, during the discourse, there is a moral theory, as Habermas notices, which stands as the background of the normative validity of the decisions taken during the rational deliberation process. The one who goes down the path of rationally persuading the other implicitly starts from the idea that the rational argument is the only persuasion tool, totally excluding power, coercion or manipulation from

the coexistence of joint space. In other words, the process of rational deliberation speaks about an equality of the positions in the society and this comes from the symmetrical positions within the dialogue. Starting from these considerations, Habermas builds a theory centered on the following principle: social norms have moral validity if and only if they are built discursively following a deliberative communication process which has to comply with certain conditions:

1. No speaker may contradict himself.
2. Every speaker who applies predicate F to object A must be prepared to apply F to all other objects resembling A in all relevant respects.
3. Different speakers may not use the same expression with different meanings.
4. Every speaker only asserts what he believes.
5. A person who disputes a proposition or norm not under discussion must provide a reason for wanting to do so.
6. Every subject with the competence to speak and act is allowed to take part in a discourse.
7. (a) Everyone is allowed to question any assertion whatever.
(b) Everyone is allowed to introduce any assertion whatever into the discourse.
(c) Everyone is allowed to express his attitudes, desires and needs.
8. No speaker may be prevented, by internal or external coercion, from exercising his rights as laid down in 6 and 7.⁸

Starting from these conditions one can create a principle that can establish the defining elements of the deliberative theory of democracy: democratic decisions have normative validity if and only if they are the results of a deliberative process of rationale communication which upholds the following procedures:

- There are no restrictions of any kind related to the implication in the democratic deliberation process;
- Anyone can express any opinion rationally supported and also he or she can contest any other opinion but only with rational arguments;
- There is no interior or exterior coercion on the deliberative process, except for the coercion of the best rational argument.⁹

On this occasion, the rational deliberation offers the democratic process a new type of justification: the rational justification of participation. For the first time in thousands of years from the Athenian democracy, participation receives a primordial meaning in democracy, seeking to equal the contribution of representation.

As a culmination of all those listed above, political communication suffers some major transformations:

- Stops' being unidirectional, from the politicians to the citizens, and it becomes multidirectional according to the contemporary media.
- It is no longer a process characterised by simplification. If the classical democratic discourse uses simplification in order to persuade more easily, the deliberative discourse starts from the need to look into the problems of the human society.
- The trinomial who, what, whom says is explained for the first time by the democratic political discourse.
- The message - power relationship is transformed into a message - community one.

Therefore, aside from its intrinsic qualities, the deliberative model of democracy also assumes a break with the aggregate model at the level of the communication system. For the first time we speak about people together and not about the competition between individuals. That is why the deliberative model can be seen as a fulfillment of the liberal ideals, in which the human being, with his rights and freedoms, represents the center of the political universe.

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 8. Parkinson, John (2006) *Deliberating in the Real World. Problems of Legitimacy in Deliberative Democracy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
 9. Tocqueville, Alexis de (2006) *About democracy in America*. Bucharest: Humanitas.
 5. Jose Luis Marti, „The Epistemic Conception of Deliberative Democracy Defended. Reasons, Rightness and Equal Political Autonomy”, in *Deliberative Democracy and its Discontents*, ed. Samantha Besson and Jose Luis Marti (Asghate Publishing Limited, 2006), 27-56
 6. "The conception consists of three principles: reciprocity, publicity, and accountability; that regulate the process of politics, and three others: basic liberty, basic opportunity, and fair opportunity – that govern the content of policies.", Amy Gutman, Dennis Thompson, *Democracy and Disagreement* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1997), 12.
 7. Jon Elster, „Introduction”, in Jon Elster (ed.), *Deliberative Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 11.
 8. Jürgen Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, Christian Lenhart and Shierry Weber Nicholson, trans. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 87-9. Romanian version: „(1.2) There shouldn't be any speaker who contradicts himself (1.2) Any speaker who uses the F predicate for an object must be ready to use F for every other object that resembles A in all the relevant aspects. (1.3) Different speakers shouldn't use the same phrase with different meaning. (2.1) Every speaker must say only what he truly feels. (2.2) The one who uses a statement or a norm, that doesn't belong in the speech, must bring a reason for it. (3.1) Every subject capable of action and language must take part in discourses. (3.2) a. Everybody must problematize every statement in a discourse. Everyone must express his or her positions, wants or needs. (3.3) No speaker should face, in a discourse, any inside or the outside in order to use his rights established at (3.1) and (3.2).” Jurgen Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action* (Bucharest: All Educational, 2000), 89-90.
 9. See also Seyla Benhabib, „Toward a Deliberative Model of Democratic Legitimacy”, in *Democracy and Difference. Contesting the Boundaries of the Politics*, ed. Seyla Benhabib (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 70.

Endnotes

1. Abraham Lincoln, "Gettysburg Address," in Melvin I. Urofsky (ed.), *Fundamental texts of the American democracy* (Bucharest: Teora, 1994).
2. Alexis de Tocqueville, *About democracy in America* (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2005), 273.
3. John Parkinson, *Deliberating in the Real World. Problems of Legitimacy in Deliberative Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), viii.
4. „Most fundamentally, deliberative democracy affirms the need to justify decisions made by citizens and their representatives”, Amy Gutman, Dennis Thompson, *Why Deliberative Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 3.