

Public reason and history in contemporary deliberative practice. Legacy and limits of liberal categories in the governance of democratic pluralism

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Abstract. Public reason's paradigm, configured by John Rawls in *Political Liberalism* [1st Or. ed. 1993, 2005], is increasingly criticised for its limits in regulating a deliberative praxis able to deal with democratic pluralism. In fact, deliberative theorists usually tend to stretch and modify the ideal of a political use of public reason in order to point out the consequences of Rawls' theses in multicultural societies, so that the philosopher's paradigm turns out to be weakened from a normative point of view; this approach paves the way to aporias as the one between cultural minorities' freedom of expression and normativity of communication. In the first section of the present article I begin my analysis from a recent publication by Monique Deveaux [*Deliberative Democracy and Multiculturalism*, 2018] to study an example of public reason's theoretical weakening and its aporetic effects; in the second section new research perspectives are hypothesised in order to offer an alternative proposal to the removal of liberalism's criteria in multicultural democracies. More specifically, I propose the concept of "history" as a point of balance between democratic inclusion and normativity of communication in contemporary liberal democracy.

Keywords: Multiculturalism; Deliberative democracy; Public communication; History; Normative comparison.

Introduction

Deliberative democracy's paradigm is increasingly criticised in the international academic debate on the political future of the West; particularly, the contemporary scenario offers to our sight numerous situations (the governance of multicultural and continental democratic systems, the interconnection of global markets, the climate change emergency, the rupture of geopolitical symmetries which have been dominant throughout the second half of the XX century) the critical points of which [See Latouche 2014; Dryzek & Pickering 2019] highlight the importance of epistemic dimension¹ in the action of major political subjects and their context, on one hand, and the predicament faced by deliberative theory in interpreting contemporary policies' dynamics on the other hand. The question rises then about the possibility that deliberative democracy (after forty years of activity [See Florida 2017]) might still contribute to an institutional foundation aimed at developing democratic systems from an epistemic and normative point of view². Specifically, here I am going to study the confrontation with multiculturalism that deliberative theory has been engaged in for two decades, in order to argue in favour of a different theoretical foundation of multicultural democracies' institutions; until now the problems of democratic multiculturalism have been faced by

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¹ It should be stressed that scientific-technological competences and rational-strategic behaviour have acquired remarkable weight in both national and international governance processes.

² See Majone [2005]; as an example, one of the most important themes at the centre of the contemporary debate on EU's governance – a continental, multicultural and historically democratic geopolitical context – is undoubtedly the tension between epistemic competence and democratic legitimacy.

deliberative theory under the influence of two great philosophical paradigms from the '90s – those of Rawls and Habermas³, whose works moreover framed some of the most important differences in deliberative theory's field (let's think about the methodological differences between the analytic/descriptive approach and the normative/prescriptive one⁴) -, a fact that can be easily seen by looking at how public reason's problematic definition is still at the centre of multicultural studies:

A much-touted advantage of Habermas's model of discourse ethics over Rawls's conception of political deliberation is that it does not seek to limit the scope of citizens' contributions in advance of actual deliberation. Those liberal theories of justice in which citizens' deliberations figure prominently—including Rawls's later writing—appeal to unrevised norms of impartiality and public reason that arguably pose barriers to the inclusion of cultural minority citizens in political deliberation on terms that are acceptable to them (...).⁵

In light of such considerations the first section (1.) will be devoted to the analysis of Monique Deveaux's reading of the Rawlsian paradigm of public reason: what I intend to highlight is the theoretical aporia - between ethno-cultural minorities' democratic safeguard and the need for a shared normative dimension of political communication – that deliberative theory falls into once it reads public reason as a dominating and asymmetric dialogical criteria. Instead of adopting this approach, here it is argued that a more careful interpretation of *Political Liberalism* suggests that this work configures a paradigm extremely sensitive to multicultural democracies' need for a flexible⁶ dialogical standard; it follows then that the political philosophy of the so-called “second Rawls” does not grant any space to universalistic and dominating claims on political communication, but on the contrary it constitutes one of the most remarkable openings that Liberalism has ever made towards the concept of “historical differential”⁷ (for example represented by ethnical, cultural and religious differences) through which democratic societies have developed in modern and contemporary eras. In the second section (2.) I argue that the aforementioned aporia, met by deliberative theory considered as a leading research field of contemporary political theory, cannot be solved by weakening further public reason's paradigm, as Deveaux claims, (it should be stressed that in order to preserve deliberative praxis – and its epistemological virtues conceived in opposition to strategic behaviour in politics - some minimal dialogical standards must be held), but by developing the philosophical grounds of deliberative theory – considered in its Rawlsian version – and the idea of “overlapping consensus”. Finally, to support this thesis the concept of “historical differential” will be examined as a largely underestimated theoretical source for democratic theory's predicament; more specifically, I will try to show how the elaboration of such a philosophical category could offer an alternative to the transcendental-normative paradigm which has been at the core of deliberative studies since its was born.

1.

In *Deliberative Democracy and Multiculturalism* Monique Deveaux proposes a research path to study a harmonious coexistence and interaction inside multicultural contexts; as the Author underlines at the beginning of her article, object of the inquiry is the efficacy of a certain theoretical approach to democratic communication in pluralistic societies:

³ *Between Facts and Norms* [1st or. ed. 1992, Eng. tr. 1996] and *Political Liberalism* [2005];

⁴ See Florida, 2017, pp. 327-328;

⁵ Deveaux, 2018, p. 160;

⁶ It has been argued – on good grounds – that what Rawls proposes after *Political Liberalism* is nothing more than a minimal group of norms able to sustain a peaceful life among different social groups [Croce & Salvatore, 2012].

⁷ From now on I will use this term to address the amount of differences - historically situated and politically detectable – which make up a pluralistic democracy.

Deliberative democracy is widely associated with a public sphere that is more inclusive of cultural and religious minority groups than that established by a model of politics as interest aggregation. But it has also been criticized for stipulating unjust terms for this political inclusion [...]. This chapter argues that models of public deliberation less beholden to Habermasian discourse ethics are able to offer a more promising response to these multicultural challenges. [...] The advantages of compromise over consensus for deep moral conflicts are obvious: compromise allows citizens with significantly disparate viewpoints or worldviews to reach some form of agreement without resorting to (unjust) coercion. Where processes of moral argumentation and public discourse are expected to culminate in moral consensus, deliberative participants may be pressured to set aside identity-based claims or demands that challenge the political status quo.⁸

The thesis here is that replacing consensus with compromise might allow multicultural societies to meet the needs for fair standards of democratic interaction claimed by their members, and that any deliberative agreement conceived on the grounds of moral consensus could achieve better inclusion of minorities but also annihilate their identity claims and cultural heritage; after mentioning Habermas' approach⁹, Deveaux starts confronting *Political Liberalism* by focusing on its public reason's paradigm:

An adjacent ideal, shared public reason, is, however, still widely endorsed by deliberative democracy theorists. But as with the notion of a common good, this norm may be taken to require that members of cultural minorities treat their identity-related claims as contestable and negotiable in deliberation (thus rendering their claims consistent with commitments to norms of impartiality and shared public reason). This seemingly reasonable norm may therefore unwittingly compound existing colonial structures of power and privilege.¹⁰

Now, even though public reason's normative *pondus* is certainly an important element of deliberative theory as it has been developed from the '90s (it was at that time that deliberative studies were radically changed by the philosophical foundation – indirect as it may have been¹¹ - made by Rawls and Habermas' works [*Political Liberalism* and *Between Facts and Norms*]), it might be argued that Deveaux's lines reveal a relevant exegetical error. In fact, scholars now generally agree¹² that what Rawls designed in his 1993 work¹³ was a remarkable step back from any form of a priori normative intersection between different comprehensive doctrines (it is surprising then how Deveaux does not consider the better adherence of Rawls' approach – if compared to Habermas' one, which emphasises moral agreement among the subjects of democratic communication - to her argumentation), a gesture that left only liberal, institutional and legal borders to dialogical praxis:

How is it possible for there to exist over time a just and stable society of free and equal citizens, who remain profoundly divided by reasonable religious, philosophical, and moral doctrines? [...] It is inevitable and often desirable that citizens have different views as to the most appropriate political conception; for the public political culture is bound to contain different fundamental ideas that can be developed in different ways. An orderly contest between them over time is a reliable way to find which one, if any, is most reasonable.¹⁴

And still, from *Political Liberalism*'s introduction:

⁸ Deveaux, 2018, p. 156 and 160;

⁹ It should be underlined that in the '90s debate between Habermas and Rawls the German thinker strongly supported the idea of "moral consensus" instead of Rawls' conception of the "reasonable" [See Florida, 2017; Rawls, 2005; Habermas, 1998].

¹⁰ Deveaux, 2018, p. 160;

¹¹ See Florida, 2017;

¹² See Maffettone [2010], Petrucciani [2003, 2014], Florida [2017], Croce & Salvatore [2012].

¹³ The present article aims at confronting itself with the general reading of public reason worked out by Deveaux; then, in order to examine the question fully and consider also the evolution of *Political Liberalism*'s theoretical framework, the 2005 edition has been taken as a better textual source than the 1993 version.

¹⁴ Rawls, 2005, Lecture 1, Fundamental Ideas; Lecture 6, §5.

Rather, we formulate a freestanding political conception having its own intrinsic (moral) political ideal expressed by the criterion of reciprocity. We hope in this way that reasonable comprehensive doctrines can endorse for the right reasons that political conception and hence be viewed as belonging to a reasonable overlapping consensus.¹⁵

It can be argued that what rises from Rawls' work is the concern for designing a political scenario the deliberative criteria of which be formulated with little normative weight, possibly not overstepping the concept of "reciprocity"; in other terms, it might be claimed that the Rawlsian argumentation in favour of an autonomous idea of justice constantly takes into account that concepts as "overlapping consensus" or "public reason" are precarious [See Florida 2017, p. 282]. Therefore, by underlining the potentially dominating texture of public reason, Deveaux seems to ignore the real essence of *Political Liberalism's* notion of justice.

However, the cogency of Deveaux's theses is left untouched if we consider the question from another perspective; indeed, what Rawls cannot avoid in its theoretical framework is conceiving an institutional structure clearly rooted in a specific geo-historical context. As it has been noted, Political Liberalism's proposal is independent from metaphysical, epistemological and moral premises as far as the citizens of whom it narrates recognise themselves in a Constitution and in specific liberal standards, regardless of any extra-political belief [Croce & Salvatore 2012, p. 7]; *quae cum ita sint*, notwithstanding the idea of reciprocity at the ground of Rawls' deliberative-democratic conception, the idea of justice framed in *Political Liberalism* cannot cancel its liberal-democratic essence:

The general idea consists of dividing individuals' morality in two parts. On one side, there would be people's morality in its integrity, which is rooted in solid religious or ethical bases, and can be reconducted to different comprehensive doctrines. On the other side, there would be a more restricted institutional morality which looks at citizens more than people and which is not rooted in everyone's religious or ethical morality, but in their loyalty to the constitutional-political system in which they live their public life.¹⁶

In light of this brief investigation, it seems possible to argue that on one hand there is an idea of justice - that of Rawls - declined so that it does not impose any normative coercion over citizens' claims, apart from those which do not respect the constitutional framework of their political arena. On the other hand, we can detect a proposal - replacing consensus with compromise as first aim of democratic interaction, brought forth not only by Deveaux and some multicultural theorists - that moves from a specific reading of the works of the second Rawls, i.e. public reason as an ideal that both historically and culturally excludes the expression dynamics of cultural minorities. As aforementioned, even though Deveaux's interpretation might be proved wrong by an exegetical examination, the political vision underneath her exposition is remarkable. Indeed, the Canadian philosopher points out that the constitutional standards that according to *Political Liberalism* should regulate democratic deliberation are not neutral at all, a fact that moreover can be ascertained by observing the demographic changes occurred in western democracies over the last decades. At the same time, however, *Deliberative Democracy and Multiculturalism* seems not to alter the political-philosophical framework of its analysis significantly:

It remains the case, of course, that even accounts of political deliberation that foreground interests, bargaining, and negotiation remain committed to the use of normative reason and the principle of communicative (as opposed to strategic) action in politics. But on the more political conception of deliberative democracy I have outlined here, conflict—including interest-based conflict—is no longer treated as something (necessarily) to be sidestepped, sublimated, or even necessarily transcended. Rather, conflict is seen as part and parcel of an understanding of democracy as a process that includes struggle (Young 2000, 50).¹⁷

¹⁵ Rawls, 2005, Introduction;

¹⁶ Maffettone, 2010, p. 113, my translation;

¹⁷ Deveaux, 2018, pp. 164-165;

Hopefully, it is now possible to more deeply appreciate the fundamental aporia of contemporary multicultural-democratic theory: by reading the Rawlsian text as the proponent of a dangerously coercive model of communication in western liberal democracies, it is not possible to understand that the interaction asymmetries detected by multicultural theory are caused by the transcendental and liberal foundations of deliberative theory itself, and not by the Rawlsian declination of dialogical rationality. *Political Liberalism* already constitutes an outstanding expansion of deliberative-liberal classic paradigm and an accurate exegesis shows that it is not possible to weaken public reason's ideal further; if it were deemed necessary and legitimate to overcome the concept of "overlapping consensus", it would be necessary to elaborate the political-philosophical building at the origin of deliberative theory.

2.

The radical aporia between freedom of expression and normativity of communication, now more evident due to both deliberative theory's new research approaches (as intercultural-comparative analyses [See Sass 2018]) and democratic pluralism, directly questions liberal tradition's fundamental axioms; indeed, it can be argued that over the last decade these historical and academic factors have brought western thought to more deeply consider the historical nature of the universal criteria that three centuries ago were spread by the Enlightenment and that rapidly imposed themselves as dominating standards of modernity's political project. If we consider the quality of democratic communication, the exercise of reason and the normative implications of any kind of institutional model, it is immediately obvious that today democratic societies do not express anymore a singular version of the factors just mentioned, since they are made of culturally differentiated human groups belonging to numerous historical differentials; hence, democratic theorists point out reasonable questions as they try to find normative intersections between citizens' political interaction and the safeguard of cultural minorities: the more strong standards are built to regulate discursive dynamics in politics, the more it is possible to make space for contexts of dominance over smaller social groups.

Implausible as it may seem to solve such an aporia, it could be a fertile research hypothesis to investigate on its existence conditions, i.e., Enlightenment's heritage and deliberative democracy's philosophical foundations. At a first glance, all classic authors in deliberative tradition belong to liberal thought as long as the focus is put on their efforts to theorise universal communication principles in order to regulate public sphere's discourse¹⁸; as it was outlined in the previous section, even the original Rawlsian declination of liberal democracy entails necessarily the pursuit of a criteria for the intersection of citizens' consensus. It follows that the aporias pointed out by authors as Deveaux actually mirror the predicament caused by a philosophical perspective – that of liberal democracy – unable to fully read the social texture of contemporary western societies, the pluralistic dimension of which now challenges directly the universal-dialogical principles at the origin of liberal democracy:

Pressed by the radical reaction of both 80's Liberalism and communities-political minorities' ethnical-identity claims not manageable anymore through the State logic which had prevailed until that moment, liberal theory ends up opening to recognition requests put forth by supra-individual communities of various origins and absorbing much part of rival

¹⁸ If we analyse the proposals put forth by theorists as Manin [1987], Elster [1986], Fishkin [1991], Cohen [2009], Rawls [2005] and Habermas [1996], it is evident that the diversity of their approaches cannot be sufficiently synthesised by this definition. What should be underlined, however, is that even in an extremely open theoretical framework as Manin's one, according to which minorities and majorities are focused on deliberating and modifying their individual preferences without any possibility of reaching unanimous consensus on the common good, discursive rationality has different features from the ones detected by recent scholarship in non-western social deliberation.

traditions' heritage (especially Communitarianism), consequentially recognising the plurality of approaches and world visions, which seem hardly compatible themselves.

What deliberative theory is called to work out then is a new normative foundation of its communication criteria, able to reconduct the tension between freedom and norms to a coherent philosophical framework; moreover, this research project should be led without forgetting deliberative democracy's possible inadequacy to face the transformation of western political contexts. In this section I would like to suggest the possible contribution that an investigation founded on the concept of "history" and sensitive to the philosophy of contemporary Idealism [See Preve 2013] could give to solve the aporia at the centre of the present article. Such a theoretical approach would differ significantly from that of Communitarianism and its critique of liberal thought [See Walzer 1983; Taylor 1985; MacIntyre 1986; Sandel 1982], since a neoidealist study over democratic communication would not limit itself to contemplating a minimal way of coexistence among different social-ethnic spheres and would not separate the concepts of "cultural pluralism" and "community"¹⁹; on the contrary, this kind of approach would be able to find a political intersection among contrasting social claims by virtue of a focus on the historical genesis of democratic deliberation's criteria and of its own philosophical categories. This configuration of research entails the possibility of formulating judgements on the legitimacy of democratic citizens' normative claims.

The difficulties of the approach that I just hypothesised are immediately evident; formulating value judgements on normative claims means to bring back to the centre of democratic debate a theoretical point of view which would try to reconcile transcendental and historical dimensions in contemporary deliberative praxis²⁰. Before describing the essential points of such an approach, it is perhaps better to define its differences from Communitarianism. As an address of contemporary political theory, Communitarianism defined its position in contrast to liberal tradition and John Rawls' philosophical work; although Communitarians diverge significantly, it is possible to assert that their main thesis claims the implausibility of the existence of universal standards by which to formulate judgements on specific communities' practices [See Kukathas & Pettit 1990]; the debate on the "original position" and other Rawlsian concepts, animated by theorists as MacIntyre, Taylor, Sandel and Walzer, can be regarded as extremely clarifying in order to achieve a satisfying definition of the historical-transcendental approach:

As there are many caves but only one sun, so political knowing is particular and pluralist in character, while philosophical knowing is universalist and singular.²¹

We know that our lives are ruled by political performance and not by philosophical promise [...] [this makes the] search for transcultural criteria of justice...philosophically relevant...but politically irrelevant.²²

Similarly MacIntyre, in his criticism of the liberal failure to provide substantive account of the human good, arrives at this "provisional conclusion" about the good life: "the good life for man is the life spent in seeking for the good life for man, and the virtues necessary for the seeking are those which will enable us to understand what more and what else the good life for man is" [MacIntyre 1986, 204]. Yet this conclusion, particularly in its provisionality, is not so far from the liberal insistence that the good society is one in which individuals are left free to discover what is the good life.²³

¹⁹ Kukathas & Pettit, 1990, p. 95;

²⁰ See Cesarale, 2019, p. II intr. As the author observes, the neoliberal era caused "the end of universalism rooted in the powers of Enlightenment's «European reason», transcendental, dialectical, and its rising – thanks to the globalisation of goods market, of labour-force and of capitals – in a neoliberal frame, as imposition, inside all places of social division of labour, and in the fashion of productivity and behaviour's international standards." [My translation]. It is arguable that at least one of the causes of the difficulty mentioned above lies in European reason's fading as outlined by Cesarale.

²¹ Walzer, 1981, p. 393;

²² Jackson, 1986, p. 164;

²³ Kukathas & Pettit, 1990, p. 117;

If on one side communitarian thought insists on the impossibility of finding justice criteria through philosophical theorisation, by definition universalist and transcultural, and claims that only political knowledge can deem a society just on the grounds of its shared meanings [Walzer 1983, p. 313], on the other side the liberals cannot but detect the uncertainties of Communitarianism when it argues in favour of a normative proposal alternative to their own; from the theory of virtues to the relationship between social coefficients and individual freedom in human beings' development²⁴, Rawls' critics do not manage to work out a theoretical position philosophically independent from the liberal, transcendental and illuministic premises at the centre of their own critique. The elaboration of a historical-transcendental approach would try to overcome the theoretical difficulty met by communitarian theory, and it would be articulated in specific lines of argumentation which here are hypothesised in propositions:

- I. Considered how liberal tradition founded its philosophical gesture on a moral theory able to deduce and universally found the political-juridical criteria of the good society, a historical-transcendental approach should necessarily elaborate a theoretical philosophy as the ground of its political and moral judgements on the community;
- II. Liberalism's challenge to its critics historically consists of the predicament met by whoever tries to rationally and morally justify a not completely transcendental political theory²⁵; an alternative political-philosophical proposal then would benefit from inscribing in the same framework the historical differential and the transcendental dimension.
- III. The theory of philosophical categories' historical-social genesis, crafted over the last decades by contemporary Neoidealism and Marxism [See Preve 2013; Antonopoulou 2000] represents a possible theoretical foundation of political judgements and a conceptual source able to solve the aporia between freedom of expression and normativity of communication at the centre of the debate on deliberative democracy's destiny.

In the end, a historical-transcendental approach as the one just outlined might give pluralistic democracy's dialogical criteria a more solid normative legitimation, answering multicultural theorists' objections with a philosophical theory which grounds discursive rationality in its geo-historical path; a consequence of this argumentation is that cultural minorities' claims might be judged by western open societies on the basis of their own Constitution and public reason while avoiding any coercive dynamics, since this approach is founded on the connection between deliberative rationality and its historical dimension, with the constant possibility of inclusion guaranteed to minorities by democratic deliberation²⁶. If it can be argued that such a perspective differs quite radically from classic Liberalism, it cannot be ignored how liberal theory itself has been posing the basis for a new elaboration of its philosophical texture since the second phase of Rawlsian thought began at the end of XX century; in fact, with *Political Liberalism* Rawls distanced himself from the Kantian liberalism of "rational consensus" [Habermas 1996] in favour of the concept of "reasonable", in order to work out a public use of deliberative reason suitable for the radical pluralism

²⁴ Gutmann [1985, p. 317] e Kymlicka [1988, p. 192] have highlighted how Sandel's thesis on the constitution of individuals, considered as only partially defined by their community, make the author of *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* hardly different from liberal thinkers.

²⁵ Although this philosophical perspective is not the only one in political Liberalism's field, certainly it can be regarded as one of the most influential and enduring ones in the history of the western canon.

²⁶ Changes in the social composition of a liberal democracy do not only affect elections, but also political communication; accusations of dominance moved by multicultural theory against rational regulation of deliberative praxis hence can be refuted through a historical-transcendental approach as long as it finds communication's normative legitimacy in the historical path of the political community and in its transcendental sensitivity to justice claims.

of our time [Ferrara 2021, p. 9]. This allows us to hypothesise that a research path of historical-transcendental kind might develop further the unsolved questions inside liberal theory's field, overcoming the aporetic results which even the second Rawls could not work out [See *supra* sect. 1; Deveaux 2018]. To conclude, the perspective here only provisionally outlined - as the premise for a long-term research project – seems to be a promising path towards the solution of the aporia at the centre of contemporary deliberative theory: the friction between freedom of expression and normativity of communication could be overcome if political deliberation's criteria were configured at the same time as 1) rooted in the historical horizon of the society in which they work and 2) transcendental standards that shed light on the historical path of public reason.

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