

CONFLUENCE OVER CONSENSUS: RECONCILING PARTICIPATION IN DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY

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“The foundation of democracy is faith in the capacities of human nature; faith in human intelligence, and in the power of pooled and cooperative experience. It is not belief that these things are complete but that if given a show they will grow and be able to generate progressively the knowledge and wisdom needed to guide collective action.”

(Dewey, 1932)

Abstract

The paper will try to connect John Dewey with the ideals of both deliberative and participatory democracy via the theory of communication. To show Dewey’s deliberative side of the project, the writings of Jürgen Habermas will be analysed, wherein the question is whether Dewey anticipated the idea of publicness and communication in the writings of Habermas on deliberation. This will be a way of analysing what Dewey regarded as deliberation against what he did not. In particular, Dewey, being sympathetic about the deliberative aspects, went beyond this approach to claim congruence between the social and political with the aim of highlighting inequalities among people and securing social self-development. This line of argument will help construct a view of Dewey’s writings about the ideal democracy, wherein the role of communication is not to build consensus but confluence, the mutual recognition of issues, where reason is not prioritised. This will be reflective of his participatory approach, which is based on the notion that individuality is social. So, the task in this paper will be to establish grounds for searching the moral philosophy for an individual’s participation and inclusivity via the ideal of democracy.

Introduction

John Dewey’s focus on multiplicity paves the way to correct exclusiveness embedded in deliberative discourse. This shows how, while retaining the elements of deliberation, one can work towards fuller participation in social processes. First, it is vital to note what Habermas and Dewey meant by communication in the public sphere and what makes their ideals different. Thus, the aim of this will be to address what Dewey’s ideal for deliberation is. The paper further highlights the tussle between a rational critical approach and reflective agency. The former is embedded in Habermas’s communication, whereas the latter is in Dewey’s.

It should be noted that the concept of the public sphere advocated by both is not the concern of this paper. Rather, the aim is to highlight the module through which communication occurs. For this,

Dewey's concepts of reflectivity, continual changes, and the idea of growth to advocate a superior theory of communication will be utilised.

Did Dewey Anticipate Habermas's Communicative realm?

Habermas puts strict limits on democracy. The ideal of democracy, for him, was restricted to basic political decisions through the route of discursive will formation. Furthermore, consensus is important. The key concern of Habermas was how political action can occur in rational critical discourse via communication. Communication, for him, produces norms, and norms establish laws. Laws are thus reflective of procedures of communication. For Habermas, the ideal public sphere is where 'rational-critical debate' about public issues is conducted by private persons willing to let arguments and not statuses determine decisions (Calhoun, 2017). His public use of reason is grounded in normative principles of openness and rational political discourse (Habermas, 1992). The requirements of intersubjectivity provide the basis for norms directed towards the notions of justice (Habermas, 1994). He identified a more or less stable zone of publicness – 'the public sphere' – located between civil society and the state, grounded in the former and addressing the latter (Calhoun, 2017). For him, it is 'communicative rationality' in the public sphere that results in consensus. By following normative procedures, the agreements based on 'reason' will stand reliable (Whipple, 2005). Habermas believed that "coming to an understanding means that participants in communication reach an agreement concerning the validity of an utterance; agreement is the intersubjective recognition of the validity claim the speaker raises for it" (p. 168). Thus, his task was democratic will formation via deliberation. This was his discourse theory of democracy. The public sphere was to provide inputs to the state as well as parliamentary decision-making processes. His great emphasis on rational discourse embedded in universalisation elevates certain norms at the expense of other modes or expressions. In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas showed how, in the 18th century, the role of the public sphere was prominent in articulating demands and checking the arbitrariness of the state (1992). He analysed a mutation — from a rational discursive, public sphere inhabiting consensus to the practice of consumption headed by corporations and dominant elites. Citizens became mere consumers. This changed the recipe of public opinion. His idealisation of the bourgeois public sphere opens the door for criticisms like domination by certain people. But critics argue Habermas himself falls into his own criticisms of communicative distortions. That is to say, for him, the advent of system-level distortions in communication hampers the formation of free will. Also, critics have argued that communicative distortions take place even when priority is given to certain rationalities and consensus-building. This is to say, he neglected the positive impact differences of opinion can have in a society. "Consensus, in a liberal-democratic society is – and always will be – the expression of a hegemony and the crystallisation of power relations" (Mouffe, 2000, p. 49). For Habermas, deliberation will result in reasonable outcomes only when the 'ideal discourse' is followed (p. 88). However, the critical-rational debate is prone to manipulation because of power relations in public communication. Thus, Mouffe criticised him for not considering the role of passion and manipulation in critical rational debate. Another critic of Habermas, Shalin, notes how he is not open to the idea of 'constructive properties of dissent' in the public sphere (Whipple, 2005). In fact, Gutmann, Cohen, and other deliberative theorists recognise the need for alternative modes of discourse, but neglect the need for reflectivity and dissent in public

discourse. This is the point where one can find Dewey relevant. The divergence from Dewey comes when one assesses these universal norms stated by Habermas. Dewey rather proposed a more layered principle of communication. Habermas's condition of democracy has roots in certain normative arenas of decision-making based on a critical rational approach, as mentioned above. Whereas Dewey's ideal of democracy is a process for progressive social transformations, intelligence and experience were Dewey's substitutes for reason. He gave space to experiences in constituting communication. Thus, there is a continuous reconstruction of one's concrete self. It should be noted that Dewey is not opposing the idea of 'reason-giving', but this, for him, is not equal to democratisation. His focus on open, critical, and reflective inquiry can help go beyond mere rational deliberation towards a wider arena of individual participation. So the answer to the question that was posed at the start of this section, that is, whether Dewey anticipated the Habermasian idea of communication, moves hazily towards a negation. Although both talked about deliberation via communication, the modules adopted differed. Bringing in the aim of this paper, in the next section, it will be assessed how exactly Dewey moves beyond these limits of communicative deliberation towards communicative multiplicity.

Moving Beyond Deliberation

Here, the point of analysis can be initiated via the Lippmann-Dewey debate in order to explain Dewey's conception of human nature and the role of democracy. Lippmann, in his book *The Phantom Public*, while arguing passivity and political alienation among the masses, said they were incapable of making decisions (1925). For him, too much democracy leads to a crisis. There must be a central body of decision-making headed by elites to make informed decisions. The ideal for him is to "leave their proxies to a kind of professional public consisting of more or less eminent persons" (p.1). While refuting this argument, Dewey traces the role of democracy as realising both individual and collective capacities. To resolve the issue of the 'eclipse of the public', he gave his notion of 'The Great Community' (Dewey, 1946). He distinguishes between an association and a community. "Associated or joint activity is a condition of the creation of a community. But association itself is physical and organic, while communal life is moral, that is, emotionally, intellectually, and consciously sustained" (p. 151).

Thus, for Dewey, the community is not grounded in homogeneity but in free communication. "We are born organic beings associated with others, but we are not born members of a community" (p. 154). For the creation of a community, communication is a prerequisite. Communication must be open, inclusive, and render diverse experiences and conceptions of the good to seek growth. This points out how mere collective action is not communication. Rather, it is a way to set free, pluralistic conceptions of the good, and "the clear consciousness of a communal life, in all its implications, constitutes the idea of democracy" (p. 149).

Dewey's work brings to light dangers of idealising (as in pure deliberation). This is not suitable for unequal social arenas. Idealisation based on universal norms is aimed at consensus (as seen in the works of Habermas). But in contrast, Dewey focuses on the idea of open debate, giving way to the ideas of dissent and reflection. He says, "...the ground or basis for a belief is deliberately sought and its adequacy to support the belief examined. This process is called reflective thought" (Dewey, 1910, p. 1-2). Before

moving on, it is essential to briefly explain an aspect of Deweyan democracy that will help base the argument for reflectivity, as stated above. The medium of self-development for him is social. Hildreth (2012) argues that it is difficult to place Dewey in a purely participatory and deliberative democracy. To sketch compatibility, one must view the Deweyan ideal of democracy as something political as well as social. In his book, *Democracy and Education*, Dewey states:

“Democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience” (1946, p. 91).

Two distinguishing features of Deweyan democracy are as follows:

1. “..not only more numerous and more varied points of shared common interest, but greater reliance upon the recognition of mutual interests as a factor in social control.”
2. “..not only freer interaction between social groups but change in social habits- its continuous readjustment through meeting the new situations produced by varied intercourse.” (p. 91)

This is to say, education must build social relations in a way that people can enable personal interests within them. Moreover, there must be “..habits of mind which secure social changes without introducing order” (p. 104). For him, an individual's intellectual power decays when “it consequently leaves a man at the mercy of his routine habits and of the authoritative control of others” (p. 158-9). Dewey, thus, traces the importance of reflective thinking in everyday life. For social continuity, experience and reflections on habits are important. Reflective openness consists of responsiveness to changing environments.

Hildreth gives the notion of cooperative inquiry in the works of Dewey, which represents a normative model for public problem-solving. This includes both deliberative and participatory stages. This happens when people come together and identify public problems, lay down strategies, and analyse their consequences in return. “Deweyan cooperative inquiry understands deliberation and action as distinct, yet interconnected, phases of democratic engagement” (2012, p. 41). So the central theme is that of ‘action’ instead of which module of democracy should be followed. This, for Hildreth, is a continuous process, not embedded in a predetermined roadmap. He further argues that “..normative theory is better served by applying deliberative and participatory theory to different domains of democratic practice,” and this integration can be traced back to the works of Dewey (p. 44). Hildreth showed the importance of the deliberative as well as participative aspects of Dewey. But the kind of deliberation he talks about is itself embedded in the coming up of individuals to preserve their social identity. Dewey's notions of associated living and the idea of community via communication are where he focuses on the element of debate wherein a ‘public’ is created and appropriated by ‘free communication and inquiry’. Thus, this follows from his argument for “improvement of the methods and conditions of debate, discussion, and persuasion” (Dewey, 1946, p. 208). These are the deliberative elements in his writings. On the other hand, the integration of democracy into our day-to-day lives, the need for self-development, and multiplicity highlight the participatory aspects. Furthermore, in a similar vein, Jeff Jackson argued that the interrelation of political and social factors shows Dewey's

divergence from the purely deliberative aspects (2015). As individuals are embedded in their social circumstances, where power relations are prevalent, one needs to move beyond the deliberative structure to bring in debates about such inequalities. He argues how this aspect of Dewey helps participative democrats preserve their theory. That is, “Dewey’s democratic thinking stresses the interconnection of political and social - the idea that interactions within political and policymaking forums cannot be isolated from the quality of the broader relations existing in society” (p. 9). Talking about self-development, Jackson tried to show how democracy, as something participative, can be used to unblock the road to self-development in Dewey. Deliberative obsession with particular modes of participation can be lethal and exclusionary. But how exactly can participation pave the way to self-development? In other words, how does participation in a community embrace individual freedom? The crux goes something like this - Dewey saw individuality as social. He says, “Self, or individuality, is essentially social, being constituted not by isolated capacity but by capacity in response to the needs of an environment—an environment which, when taken in its fullness, is a community of persons” (Peng, 2009, p. 78).

This is the idea of the community he favoured. Rather than being based on rational circumstances aiming at consensus, it is based on the idea of confluence. Thus, democracy, being both social and political, is based on this confluence. In *Human Nature and Conduct* (1922), Dewey elaborated on the role of ‘habit’ and ‘reflective’ thinking. These two are derived from everyday experiences. The argument here is that dissent can arise in a society due to the very fact that different people with different experiences are a part of it. But keeping them under a single umbrella in the process of communication requires reflective thinking of our own experiences as well as those of others. This is to say, individuality being social is grounded not only upon one’s perspective, but also that of others with whom one may or may not relate. This can be seen as a major shift in the writings of Dewey towards a reconciliation between deliberative and participative perspectives. Here, one participates in others’ experiences. With this, social change and growth take place. And this is what can be called the constructive role of ‘dissent’. This can be seen as linking the idea of dissent with Dewey’s social participation. That is to say, “To Dewey the scientific mind... [is] apparent whenever beliefs [are] not simply taken for granted but established as the conclusions of critical inquiry and testing” (Whipple, 2005, p. 170). “Reflectivity is the painful effort of disturbed habits to readjust themselves...” (p. 162). Habits and reflectivity are born out of experience resulting from social processes. Thus, humans have the agency to reflect on their experiences and march towards change. This is in sharp contrast with the hegemony of consensus, as explained by Mouffe.

Conclusion

Habit is the mainspring of human action. As systematically explained in this paper, for the realisation of self-development and true freedom, one must participate in the community. This space is where open and free communication occurs and becomes a breeding ground for a citizen-centric democratic process. This paper thus showed Dewey’s normative ideal of democracy as the ‘way of life’ in which he highlights the importance of an experimental approach to democratic life. It highlighted how people are not bystanders and passive (as advocated by Lippmann), but rather are active agents who reflect on their

experience to shape their future and make decisions. This is only possible when we go beyond rationality to grasp the advantages of differences of opinion and dissent. That is to say, to go beyond consensus towards the idea of confluence.

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