

# Deliberation, a symbolic and powerful weapon of democracy

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## Abstract

When we talk about Deliberation, we may define a process of political discussions to resolve disagreements supported by arguments and require the participation of all citizens by encouraging mutual respect. Deliberation is characterized by a specific scenario of structural inequalities, its civil and moral judgments and its ideal rationality to legitimate political decisions. Nevertheless, any deliberation in a democracy is apparently grounds for contradictions because of the actions from the hierarchy of power and the deconstruction of reality through the communication process to obey the rules for the common good. This response paper based on the reflections expressed by Lynn Sanders, Iris Marion Young, Frank Michelman, Jürgen Habermas and William Rehg in some articles focuses on this topic. The response paper will reflect over the different set of assumptions of political and communicative dimensions of this process of Deliberation that seems to be utopian and unequal at the end.

**Key words:** Communication, deliberation, democracy, politics

## Deliberación, una simbólica y poderosa arma de la democracia

### Resumen

Cuando hablamos de Deliberación, hacemos referencia a un proceso de discusiones políticas para resolver desacuerdos apoyados en argumentos y con el fin de exigir la participación de todos los ciudadanos para fomentar el respeto mutuo. La deliberación se caracteriza por ser un escenario de desigualdades estructurales, juicios civiles y morales y una racionalidad ideal para legitimar decisiones políticas. Sin embargo, cualquier deliberación, en una democracia, es, aparentemente, motivo de contradicciones debido a las estructuras de poder y a la deconstrucción de la realidad a través de los proceso de comuni-

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cación que obedecen las reglas del bien común. Este artículo, basado en las reflexiones expresadas por Lynn Sanders, Iris Marion Young, Frank Michelman, Jürgen Habermas y William Rehg, se centra en este tema. Se ofrece una respuesta a la discusión que versa sobre el conjunto de supuestos propios de las dimensiones políticas y comunicativas del proceso de Deliberación que parece ser, al final, utópico y desigual.

**Palabras clave:** comunicación, deliberación, democracia, política

## A political perspective of deliberation and activism

For Michelman, Deliberation can be understood as a collective action within a democracy where the fundamental lawmaking demands standards of deliberativeness with the development of some attributes such as: organizational, discursive, motivational and constitutive, because a “deliberative democracy is the bottom-line moral demand for political self-government by the people” (Michelman, 1997, p. 150). For this author, the political expression of a government may be identified with justice, the political rightness of a regime and its laws, their validity in a public sphere and the recognition of institutional features to establish constitutive and basic rights for free and equal persons.

Nevertheless, this transcendental political position supposedly represents an incomplete democracy where everyone must be objective and pursue justice within the value, the norm and the duty. First, today, there is not space to consider a perfect harmony in a political scenario where the rational citizen based on his self-agency and his subjectivity may deal with his autonomy. In this political sphere, a citizen may not feel as a part of this system to validate these presumptions to reinforce the ideal to be free and equal.

Second, Habermas, Rehg and Michelman consider that this autonomous discourse for rational people to deliberate can constitute them as free and equal, but it can be deduced that this notion of “people” needs to approve the characteristics of knowledge, educative and economic background to approach the complexity of reality in the societal immensity. They need to recognize themselves as a part of a deliberative democracy, but they are conscious that they are not part of the lawmaking process because of their unequal conditions of gender, race, identity and cultural capital. The citizens have apparently identified their symbolic condition as dominate.

Third, this arena seems to expose a new version of a social contract to participate in a democracy. Habermas and Rehg explain that if for Kant, the political decisions of a society were synonymous with morality through the Categorical Imperative and for Rousseau, it was an abstract and universal form of laws; then, it should be “the new internal connection between will and reason in a dimension of time as a self-correcting historical process” (Habermas & Rehg, 2001, p. 767). The standards of participation of citizens in this deliberation process are profoundly high because Habermas and Rehg ask for “democratic self-determination as an uncoerced process of ethical-political self-understanding undertaken by a populace accustomed to freedom” (Habermas & Rehg, 2001, p. 771). It

is not a convincing argument because there cannot be moral self-control of citizens in a democracy with inequality and injustice, and where the value of law is related to coercion and oppression because it is not considered effective enough to protect a fair balance of basic rights.

Fourth, the deliberation is unequally distributed, but we cannot explore those phenomenon through a polarization of power and political participation. The assumption of Iris Marion Young about the two characteristics of politic actions such as activism and the deliberative democracy may have some extremist and radical connotations. Young explores from a Feminist perspective of gender, the stereotype of the discursive notions of the “deliberative democrat as ‘female’ (because it is emotional and moved by passion primarily) and ‘male’” (because of its conceptions as rational and calm) (Young, 2001, p. 671).

For Young, the deliberative process is completely based on “critical and rational arguments open to the point of view of others to conduct political action, to influence public decisions” (Young, 2001, p. 672), while the activism eschews deliberation with persons wielding political or economic power and official representatives of institutions that he believes perpetuate injustice or harm. Those distinctions point out that deliberative and activist processes in a democracy are two different scenarios and positions of critical thinking, where the people play specific roles from their collective association for morality, hopes and ideals. The activist “has the right physically to defend himself if he is physically attacked” (Young, 2001, p. 674), then the regular and unequal order established in a society will confer less legitimacy than the deliberation. The people can find a representation of themselves as citizens to persuade the fulfillment of their rights in the activist actions.

Nevertheless, both of these democratic mechanisms may have their gaps. Deliberation is an activity of political elites with a special treatment under respect to work out their political differences, and activism always should have enough arguments to defend their actions through communication. Then, from this perspective deliberative actions and activism should complement themselves because it is not enough to protest and to bring attention to injustices. It is apparently required to think in change through deliberative and rational proceedings to persuade the rightness in the democratic public. In consequence, Sanders and Young apparently agree to describe deliberation as an “act of listening and tolerate a common rhetoric evocative of common purpose or a common good, of course, if you have time, money and information” (Sanders, 1997, p. 362).

## A communicative dimension of discursive power

The ideas of Habermas, Rehg, Michelman, Sanders and Young about the power of communicative processes seem to coincide (directly or indirectly) in three aspects within the political deliberation and its consequences. First, deliberation may reinforce a hegemonic discourse that consolidates injustice and a structural inequality, and second, it is a scenario for creating a new society of discourse with a false consensus in the constitution making.

For Habermas and Rehg, “no individual is free so long as all persons do not enjoy an equal freedom” (Habermas & Rehg, 2001, p. 780), but it should include equal rights, representation, recognition and distribution of justice. The reality of democracy shows that the material required for deliberation is unequally distributed because of the characteristics of people in their role as citizens in their collectives are one of the keys to be identified as dominant and to be persuaded by other powerful groups in their role as dominant. From the proposals of those authors, Deliberation may be assumed as a set of actions that requires the definition of actors as rational deliberators and the recognized political stage in a specific chronological-historical moment (Michelman cited by Habermas & Rehg, 2001, p.768).

The persuasive effectiveness of this action depends on the discourse. According to Young, discourse is “a system of stories and expert knowledge diffused through the society, which convey the widely accepted generalizations about how society operates that are theorized in these terms, as well as the social norms and cultural values to which most of the people appeal when discussing their social and political problems and proposed solutions” (Young, 2001, p. 685). Then, the discourse is sending through the language which is a symbolic and powerful phenomenon to represent the order of realities. In a deliberative process, the participants can frame a situation with their ‘rational’ purposes, but also, it can hide their genuine ideology and false promises that suggest to the collective to consent to them.

For example, the importance of a discourse in a process of deliberation in a dialogue of peace in any conflict can be reduced to reproduce injustice, the mask of submission and coercion to the hierarchy of power. Colombia (South America) is a good example of a series of failed cases to reach the ideal of peace between the rebels of FARC<sup>2</sup> and the government during the past 50 years. In the words of Young, the false promises can consolidate the exclusion of victims as members of society from “the normative framework of reality” (Young, 2001, p. 685). Thus, this situation seems to show an agenda of domination with misunderstandings, contradictions and the hegemonic interests of a reality that appears as unalterable with help of the contents from mass media.

The discourse should be a tool for people as citizens to review their political contexts through rational criticism and dialogue because it is an opportunity to fight against the prejudices, but only under the rules of rationality and equality for all, included in the minorities. The problem with those philosophical assumptions are their application in real life. Habermas and Rehg argue that citizens can make an appropriate use of their public autonomy, as guaranteed by political rights, only if they are sufficiently independent in virtue of an equally protected private autonomy in their life conduct (Habermas & Rehg, 2001, p.767). Nonetheless, for a real citizen in exercise of his autonomy and rational thinking, but with different social, cultural and economic conditions from a politician, his arguments in a deliberation would not reach enough echo to participate in lawmaking. They are to listen, not to talk, there. Thus, Habermas’ idea of constitutional democracy based on human rights and popular sovereign is unequal and

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2 FARC: *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*. In English: *Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia*.

limited because they cannot approach to the common will. It just becomes a utopian treat between people and government.

In consequence, the second point in this discussion is that deliberation creates a new society of discourse with a false consensus in the constitution making from two perspectives. The first perspective from the critical ideas of Young and Sanders apparently express that the deliberation actions propose a new order of discourse based on the identification of dominant and dominated. It may be the beginning of a strict society of discourse where your identity, economic, social and cultural conditions define the participation in lawmaking. According to the assumptions of Young and Sanders (and more indirectly from Habermas) the representation of the hierarchy of power determines the forms of communication to provide a public reason and a balance of interests with the needs of the context.

However, Habermas explains that the public sphere is not a paradox between democracy and constitutionalism because the basic rights are not only political rights and they constitute the process of self-legislative. In his words, the citizens have to obey communicative reasons to apply, interpret and supplement constitutional norms, but Habermas was limiting the communicative process into a deliberation. The public sphere with its power and recognition may oppress the private sphere of the vulnerables because their voices do not sound loudly enough about their political opinion and will formation.

Therefore, the decision-making practices of citizens will be contaminated with a hegemonic discourse from the bureaucracies because of their lack of rational reflections. These discourses have their own temporal, social and material expiration, but citizens apparently may not know the interpretation of constitutional history to understand the standards and the intentions of the lawmakers. The political sovereign and the moral acts for the legitimate law represents the contradiction between the discourse of rightness, legitimacy and validity of human rights and the need of a public sphere to dominate the knowledge and arguments of citizens.

Habermas' ideal of the communication process in an act of deliberation may be selective and discriminatory because the citizens do not know how to deconstruct the reality through the process of communication and to obey the rules to become a member of the rational society of discourse. This utopian perspective reflects that neither a perfect democracy exists, nor does equality and justice in a process of deliberation. The deliberation and activism are tools and part of the dream of the autonomy, tolerance and respect in the political world. At the end, Deliberation is a representation of the combination of dialectic and rhetoric discourses with the goals to dominate and persuade the arguments of others, even with promises or fallacies. It is a part of the communicative process in a democracy that wants to offer explanations for the language of rights and for the self-determination of citizens. If the process of deliberation depends on particular interests and may have a lack of rationality through promises from the dominant power in an imperfect democracy, we should think that its effectiveness depends on educating people and powerful members over rational and critical arguments in their political processes to be on the right side of the history.

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