

## **Democracy and participation as a relational space. A contribution to resolve the inclusion/exclusion dilemma in policy-making processes.**

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The interest in understanding the dynamics of political systems, starting from the lowest – and the widest – level of the social structure, lies at the core of the research around political participation. Participation, as we often read in political science textbooks, means to influence the selection process of decision makers and the contents of public choices: but this does not only determine political-institutional change, it also tends to modify the entire social system of interests and values. Therefore, studies on participation as a measure of democracy, both in a quantitative and qualitative sense, have always accompanied political research. Just as the separation and estrangement between society and politics seem to reflect the core of the difficulties of democracy for millions of people today, for the same reason the development of a culture of participation (Benjamin Barber 1984), can bring back the ideal of a society that is able to self-determine.

A rich empirical research on the theme highlights the relevance of participatory phenomena and, at the same time, a certain ambivalence: participation is not in itself, always and in every case, a process of positive development, promotion and intensification of people's rights. Our challenge is not simple: how to consider the relationship between political participation and decision-making processes? Why does participation often produce intense conflicts? How to intervene in its strong selectivity feature? How to resolve the representation deficit?

Studying participation means taking into consideration a long list of facts: the history of universal suffrage, where the right to vote makes the foundation of the definition of liberal democracy; the historical events of parties and trade unions, along with their crisis and the progressive "overtaking" of social movements and interest groups, associations and other organizations at the grassroots level. This means trying to understand new networks of governance at the local, national and supranational level and the growing demand of involving the actors of civil society, but also the identity closures of the contemporary societies, with forms of exclusionary communitarianism and defensive localism.

As shown by Alessandro Pizzorno since 1966 (*Introduction to the study of political participation*), on the one hand citizens' participation and the legitimization of the political system are closely linked, while on the other, participation is often "a way of fighting against the conditions of inequality of civil society".

In my opinion, while respecting the specific formal aspects of the discipline, we have to ask ourselves if political participation, its phases and expressions, should be studied as one of the many social phenomena of the political dimension, or rather if a wider interpretation is possible, in order to be able to understand the human in itself.

Charles Wright Mills wrote in 1959 (*The Sociological Imagination*), "What they need, and what they feel they need, is a quality of mind that will help them to use information and to develop reason in order to achieve lucid summations of what is going on in the world and of what may be happening within themselves." He further explains, "The first fruit of the sociological imagination – and the first lesson of the social science that embodies it – is the idea that the individual can understand his own experience and gauge his own fate only by locating himself within his period, that he can know his own chances in life only by becoming aware of those of all individuals in his circumstances. In many ways it is a terrible lesson; in many ways a magnificent one."

## **Participation between inclusion and exclusion**

On the whole, there is no controversy when we affirm that political participation represents one of the essential contents of the very definition of democracy (Giovanni Sartori 1993) but how citizens may collaborate with effectiveness and continuity remains one of the main questions. The local dimension continues to gain relevance and we observe a growing demand for a government made and controlled by the different stakeholders. However, how can we succeed in composing the growth of social and cultural pluralism of our societies?

In front of ever-increasing interaction between generational, ethnic, cultural and religious differences in our territories, the functioning of the electoral mechanism, which is built around the majority principle, so far had achieved a satisfactory composition of differences. But the crisis in the conventional forms of democracy, which began in the seventies with an abrupt “rupturing of the delegacy” between representatives and those represented, is asking new paths and tools. The simple selection of prevailing opinions, on a quantitative basis, no longer satisfies the need to represent the rich multiplicity of resources of social subjects in the decision-making places. And such unresolved plurality of competing interests undermines the traditional political mediations formally entrusted to democratic representation.

Nevertheless, the activation of grass-root participation tools and mechanisms and the inclusive decision-making processes are not a foregone or painless process; far from it: they bring along a bundle of problems and paradoxes. As many authors observed, the problem is to identify the maximum feasible participation. Since the 1960s, the results of numerous surveys of individual political behavior led to the formulation of the well-known thesis of “social centrality”: which are the most active social groups exercising political participation? Essentially those in the central positions of social stratification, in the innermost and stable circles, tending to maintain the *status quo*: predominantly male, with a higher level of education, belonging to the middle class and to the majority racial group, mostly residents of urban centers, of medium-high age. Furthermore, the availability of economic assets and cultural resources are a prerequisite for efficient participation, which is more easily competent and influential. Very often those who possess political resources and have direct access to the decision-making processes translate these resources of power to attain more directly greater assets; and vice versa: those who possess greater social and economic resources generally know shortcuts to influence collective choices. Finally, those who have already participated once will make another attempt more easily (Cotta, Della Porta and Morlino 2008). Hence, the image that we obtain is that of a circle, almost closed, highly selective. As a result, sometimes paradoxically participation procedures can strengthen the predominant groups of stakeholders and weaken social cohesion.

In many situations people choose on the basis of the cost of their participation. With the development of the local democratic fabric, participation tools and processes offered by an administration, a local school district, a city council, continued to increase. However, for a majority of people, often occupied with great workloads and the management of daily family life, it is very costly to find the time for political commitments in their overloaded calendar and poor social ties. For many, participation remains an expensive choice, far from their life horizon. One could say that the capacities to put into practice the right to participate, promised and proposed by modern democracy, is unequal. And the failure to include these people and these groups halts participation more and more.

For these reasons, an in-depth analysis reveals that there is an essential contrast that weakens the meaning of participation and makes it ambivalent: the tension between an inclusive aspect and an exclusionary aspect. In fact, if participation means including new resources, activating new contributions, consolidating identities and enhancing competencies, what often happens really results in the disadvantage of other individuals and groups that face the selective and exclusionary

effects of these processes. While some are strengthened, others are weakened. On the one hand, participation is called for to increase the subjectivity of civil society, to improve the quality of the bonds within the community, the sense of identity and belonging; on the other, lots of constraints and limits restrain these effects. The phenomenon of the digital divide is another obvious example that seriously weakens the democratic status of the Net.

Along this road, a certain soft vision of participation disappears. By encouraging participation, we are managing not only light regulatory instruments that open possibilities, invite innovation, recognize rights, but also the harshness and rigidity of the mechanisms of power and its distribution: underestimating these dimensions can be dangerous.

### **Participation and deliberative democracy**

In order to overcome or integrate the problems of citizens' participation in the process of public decision, in the last twenty years a new research field has been enhanced: "deliberative democracy", called to focus again on the essential conditions of the democratic process (Jon Elster 1998). Experiments of deliberative democracy are, for example, the deliberative polls, the citizens' juries, the town meetings... procedures that help people in small and large groups to cooperate, in order to produce a collective act or decision, through methodologies that seem to soothe rigidity and selective effects.

Above all, it should be noted that the adjective "deliberative" does not refer to the final moment in which the deciding subject concludes his evaluation, but to the phase preceding the decision. It is the phase of debate and dialogue between the subjects of the decision. Democratic quality—it is said—will not grow by increasing the ability of the political elite to represent people, but by improving the quality of public opinion. In this sense Jürgen Habermas (1994) affirmed the need to return to the origin of democracy and to exploit the full potential of linguistic communication (*government by discussion*), where free and equal citizens can mutually persuade each other. In fact, in the course of a correct deliberative experience, the initial preferences, the starting convictions that are not set once and for all, can be modified and consensus can be formed progressively through dialogue. This can happen, not because the parties in question pretend to ignore the differences, but, by focusing on a series of shared values and through deliberation, they can discover a common base and take a decision, while the objectives can continue to be different and at times even distant.

What deliberative democracy propose is an integration of the traditional democratic decision-making process (James Fishkin 1991). As we know, the ordinary representative mechanisms essentially use two logics: first, the majority vote, in which one proceeds by counting the votes and the winning decision is the one supported by the greatest number of preferences. Second, the negotiating logic, in which one proceeds by balancing advantages and disadvantages and both parties lose and gain. The deliberative logic, instead, proceeds by argumentation, with a conversational process that aims at consensus through mutual conviction. The solutions are found one at a time: conflicting or strongly passive positions are appeased through a learning path.

For the success of the deliberative procedures some conditions are necessary: first of all, all those who will receive the consequences of the decision must be convened, directly or through their representatives; moreover, there must be a cooperative and trustful climate in which the participants can listen to each other to reach an agreement; finally, a mediator must preside over the communication, control the timing and record the results. For these reasons, even when it is not possible to reach an effective convergence, in general, a deliberative path can more easily desempower dissent and reinforce a sense of legitimacy for the decision taken.

The horizon drawn by these experiments appears broad, but not conclusive (Luigi Bobbio 2004). What we observe is a positive attempt to overcome the traditional two-track model; so far it

would be up to the societal interactions to raise the issues and define the public agenda, while decision-making would remain to the political-administrative system. This separation amply demonstrated its insufficiency and constant and profitable connections must be put in place. However, even the deliberative procedures cannot resolve definitely the influence produced in the public sphere by private interest groups.

The deliberation process strengthens the vocation of democratic institutions to settle conflicts (Antonio Florida 2017). But deliberative democracy can be an empty space in which the recognition of the parties' requests remains symbolic; the higher is the possibility of the parties involved to exert influence outside the negotiation process, stronger are the interests at stake. For the same reasons, it is difficult to implement correct deliberative procedures when conflicts are strongly polarized: it is more difficult to mitigate two radical positions if whoever wins, wins everything and whoever loses, loses everything. But if we can give "communication rules" to the conflict, it probably does not cross a certain threshold.

An important improvement produced in the deliberative arenas is the growth of the information level of the participants and the corresponding decrease in the communication asymmetries. But we have to check that everyone should be able to enjoy the same resources; if it's not so, even these procedures can become an instrument of manipulation, favoring those who are better trained to political participation and rich in persuasive skills.

### **A different theoretical horizon**

A more profound question is emerging, concerning the definition of social relationship: can we continue to interpret it as a vacuum to be crossed, an abstract functional bond, an accessory and unstable element?

Recent analysis of the concept of political participation may provide a suggestion, highlighting two different profiles of its definition, that are equally relevant: participation, in fact, means not only taking part but also feeling part of a process (Maurizio Cotta 1979). One cannot take part if one does not feel part of it. At the same time, a sense of a common belonging grows and is strengthened if we accept to act concretely for one another and in favor of the other. Thus, choosing participation does not mean just adopting an instrument or a procedure to share an objective – the production or the assignment of a resource or of a right – but above all giving space to the construction and care of the social bond. Numerous experiments confirm this hypothesis: investing in the community cohesion becomes the first fundamental public work, able to generate and regenerate that capital of trust, gratuitousness, solidarity and responsibility that is necessary for every hypothesis of coexistence and government.

In fact, when a participatory process decides to invest resources and favor a frame of healthy relationships taking care of their human qualities, it generate a social impact with a specific performance: creation and strengthening of ties between people who come from different settings, a refined attitude of discussion, sharing and development of common languages, learning and transmission of new knowledge, identification of unexpected negotiation paths, up to ensure political representation event to those who live on the margins of our democracies (Luca Fazzi 2003).

Once the insufficiency of a mere procedural political vision has been measured, a "relational space" seems to emerge. This perspective highlights again the social meanings and practices that precede and overcome a political-institutional system in plaster, giving it its foundation, in which values, culture, art, spiritual and religious experience, civil traditions, voluntary service and paths of reconciliation are living resources at the heart of coexistence. Men and women, young and old, the healthy and the sick, citizens and foreigners, belonging to my culture and those of another, all

are part of it. In this light, democracy should not be limited to refining the technical aspects of political interactions: our priority must be to recognize, enhance and promote vital social bonds. But this could not yet be enough: in fact, the same relationship can be destructive or constructive, can bring or not cohesion and development. It is not enough to qualify the relationship with a series of characteristics conditioned solely by the willingness of the political actors. A broader context of meaning must be sought, in which the qualities of the social relationship that we are looking for should be rooted. Therefore, our question is: if the relationship that we choose to adopt has to increase unity and cohesion in the society, the qualities of this relationship must come from a culture of unity. And what is a culture of unity in politics?

A new research agenda must explore the possibility of resolving some of the questions posed by the exercise of political participation, starting from a new theoretical horizon which is called to study the concept of unity, where unity respects diversity, knows how to dialogue and to share, redefines the concept of centre and periphery, opens the decisional arenas and gives voice to those who appears peripheral. The result could be a deepening of the same vision of democracy, where no one is marginalized and excluded from social and political processes, and the limits that everyone puts to the other must be considered not like a moment to avert, but like an ordinary condition that must be accepted and addressed. Where the umpteenth opinion does not slow down the decision-making process but enriches it, because it's an expression of a political competence that belongs to everyone as a result of living in society; where pluralism become a start point and not a hindrance to avoid, a trait of society that political institutions are called to organize and harmonize.