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The Political Meanings of Institutional Deliberative Experiments

A Response to the Comments

by Anna Carola Freschi *and* Vittorio Mete

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We are very grateful to three colleagues not only for devoting their time to our work but also for prompting further reflection with their largely flattering comments. We thank in particular Luigi Pellizzoni [2009] for his valuable reconstruction of the development of studies on deliberative democracy, and for having located our work into the “fourth stage” of this field of studies. For us this is a gratifying as well as demanding acknowledgement. We are thankful to Gianpaolo Baiocchi for his invitation to place more emphasis on the non-inevitability of the tendencies that we have identified, and to Andrew Perrin for encouraging us to give more salience to certain of our theoretical assumptions concerning the authenticity of deliberation. The comments received provide us with a good opportunity in this brief response to give better specification to the overall significance that we believe attaches to our study.

We also wish to use this response as an opportunity to express our gratitude to *Sociologica* for enabling us to present this study on Italy to a vast international audience and to discuss it publicly with authoritative colleagues. Our work offers a point of view on institutional deliberative experiments which is more critical than the one predominant among studies on the Italian case, which concentrate more closely on the internal workings of the new institutional devices and on their “technical” improvement. Among Western democracies, Italy’s situation seems to exhibit some rather critical features due to the intensity of populist tendencies in the country [Tarchi 2007], the long-standing disorientation of the centre-left opposition, and the marked concentration of the information media. In this difficult context, criticism

of deliberative experiments may even seem inopportune and politically exploitable. Of course, in this as in other areas of inquiry, empirical analysis obliges politics, like research, to address the theoretical and practical limitations of its reference models more directly. In particular, empirical analysis highlights the gap between rhetoric and practice and the diversified uses to which theory can be put, especially when the symbolic dimension assumes crucial salience in political practice.

Re-framing the Dominant Approach

In this work we have sought to evade the pressure applied by the framing of research predominant in Italy, as well the climate created around the deliberative experiments put forward by their proponent institutional actors and experts in the sector as *the* way to oppose plebiscitary and mediatized politics. Instead, we have pursued a line of inquiry more closely integrated with the international debate, which comprises decidedly more critical empirical studies. As Pellizzoni aptly puts it in his comment, we have shifted attention from the restricted domain of policy to the broader one of politics. By privileging a point of view typical of political sociology, we have concentrated on the meaning that the institutional adoption of the deliberative techniques assumes for political actors in the local and wider political context. We have therefore not imagined actors with “nefarious” intentions and a long-period strategy [Baiocchi 2009]; rather, we have considered interested actors operating in an unstable context of challenges raised from various quarters, which proceed with a view to the short to medium term, which mobilize themselves on various levels and with different strategies, and which engage in a difficulty contest to preserve or to increase their role and power. This, we believe, is the main explanation for the widespread adherence to a mainstream which is global and to a large extent exogenous to the specific political context examined. Independently of the temporal extent of the action perspective adopted by political-institutional actors, the consequences of such action may give rise to broader effects heightened by many other factors operating in the direction that we have signalled.

The subject of our article was therefore not the theoretical perspective of deliberative democracy in its entirety, nor the efforts made by many different actors to develop it in practice. Our contribution to the broader debate specifically concerned institutional experiments. The aim of our research was to understand the *development logic* of institutional initiatives. For this reason, we studied the evolution in recent years of an initiative by one relevant institutional actor. We therefore focused on the accompanying rhetorics and self-representations, as well as on practices with their

intended and unintended effects; the meanings constructed by the various subjects according to logics of action inevitably conditioned by their relations with different forms of power.

It was this methodological approach which brought out the increasing incapacity of the experiments studied to respond to the assumptions on which they had been based by their promoters. As was seen, the reason for this “failure” in terms of deliberation was only partly inherent to the techniques used; although it tells us a great deal about the vision of the promoters. The reason, we believe, instead lies in the ineradicable nature of political relationships, and in particular those between institutional power and actors in conflict with it. Hence what one finds in these and similar institutional experiments is only apparently paradoxical. The frame (televoting and “representative” samples) defined by the political-institutional actor was deemed a sufficient guarantee of the supposed authenticity of the representation and therefore of the deliberation. In parallel, the same political-institutional actors denied authenticity to both the oppositional public sphere and the flow of everyday life: in the former case explicitly, in the latter implicitly, by disorganizing and dividing everyday social experience with the devices adopted. We therefore certainly agree with Perrin [2009] when he says that the institutional deliberative experiments that we studied lacked recognition of the “necessarily multidirectional and distorted practices of representation.” This recognition would certainly have prevented the proponents from reasoning in terms of “micro-publics” (this being a term dear to the promoters of this kind of experiment) created by institutional initiative. It should instead have induced them to recognize the full legitimacy of the plurality of the opinion-formation processes active both in the private and intermediate sphere and in those forms of participation able to access the public sphere [Perrin and McFarland 2008].

Creative or Decorative Representation?

Nor could the mixed techniques used to select the participants and which mingled diverse criteria of citizen representation – while management of the processes remained in the hands of the institutional actors – remedy the underlying incongruousness of these experiments, which resolved into a “management” of participation. To resume Perrin’s comment, the type of distortion engendered in the production of the experience that we analysed was specific and, we could say, systematic, in that all its aspects were regulated as far as possible by the political-institutional practitioners and experts in the emerging (for Italy) field of deliberative actions. A public of this kind can only respond to a “decorative” function – as suggested by a participant in

one of our focus groups – vicarious with respect to the representation relation in each of the three meanings evoked by Perrin [2009]. Besides being inadequate in terms of political and cognitive representation – and in terms of claim-making representation [Saward 2008] – a public thus constructed cannot be expected to fulfil the criteria of “creative” representation. Often, this purported creative function is the final argument used to defend the legitimacy of the new arenas “managed by institutions.” This argument is not convincing, however. The arenas that stem from this prolific strand of experimentation may relate to the “aesthetic” dimension of representation – as Perrin tellingly calls it – as decoration relates to painting. Constructed so that they are momentary and isolated, with neither a history nor a future, and above all without autonomy, these new arenas end up as simply the background to the political-institutional initiative. There is, in short, an important qualitative difference, to our mind ineradicable, between distortionary processes in the presence or absence of an actor endowed with state power.

As we have seen, the political-symbolic use of these evanescent publics and these sterilized forms of participation assumes different meanings: it does not serve only indirectly to delegitimize other forms and arenas of participation or to shape the political agenda; it is also directly useful in easing the passage of a bill submitted by the executive to the legislature, also by legitimating it in the eyes of public opinion; or also to promote a political career within the party or the government. In effect, our study shows that institutional claims regarding the authenticity and representation of the public involved are not solely unfounded but have become part of the armoury of political competition, without producing divergence from the post-democratic canons – with which, as Pellizzoni points out in his comment, they share crucial theoretical assumptions. It is this normative affinity of principles (individualization and isolation, quantitative logic and abstract rationalism, effort to define the legitimate boundaries of the political conflict in increasingly restrictive terms, technological fetishism and the conflation of political logic with that of market) which calls for reflection on, and more careful analysis of, the new institutional practices, and with specific regard to their repercussions on political representation and government.

The Outsourcing of Participation in Post-democratic Politics

We now turn to a second aspect of our interpretation that we consider important: the relationship between the spread of these instruments and the reorganization of party-political structures. In relation to a mass party heritage, and threatened or unfavourable control of the public sphere, our hypothesis that these *ad hoc* arenas

may represent the outsourcing of participatory functions from the party system, and thus weaken the role of activists, seems confirmed by subsequent developments. The ETM technique has in fact recently been applied to discussion between members and sympathizers of the party in government. Against the background of a radical recasting of the identity and organization of Italy's largest centre-left party, the event was promoted by a regional Councillor running for the party's regional leadership. In this case, too, the importance of the symbolic use of the deliberative experiment outweighed the direct practical results obtained: the experiment was expected to enhance the image of a leader and to strengthen support for his candidacy. The discrepancy between the objective and the result may have been due to numerous causes, but nothing gainsays the meaning that the actor attributed to his action. This, we believe, is a distinctive aspect of our article. For this reason, we do not entirely understand Baiocchi's objection that our study does not furnish sufficient evidence regarding the political class's achievement of its re-legitimation objectives. Our analysis in fact concerned the meaning attributed by the political-institutional actors to their action, not efficiency in achievement of those objectives. The specific contribution made by these initiatives to the re-legitimation of the governing political class is difficult to measure with precision and in static manner, since such processes are conditioned by a wide set of factors, among which one of the most important seems to be the symbolic effect. It is however certain that the public self-representation of the deliberative experiments was emphatically used to boost the regional government's image and its programme at the institutional level (before the legislative assembly), within the party (to characterize the proponent's leadership in the intra-party competition), and generally among citizens.¹

Our conclusions are that the institutional initiative reflects convictions and conditions of post-democratic politics, such as, for example the political class's increasing need to uncouple its selection from participation by citizens in party-political activities, thereby restricting the role of activists and hampering and/or regulating the entry of new actors into the institutional political arena, while organized citizens increasingly contest both the political and technical legitimacy of decisions, as well as the legality itself of more controversial policy initiatives.

Indeed, it is on the increasingly fragile legitimacy/legality nexus that the post-democratic balance hinges. And it is the shift by this balance towards plebiscitary legitimation that may delegitimize forms of conflict participation with respect to post-

¹ This emphasis is borne out by the constant reference made to this regional initiative in institutional communications, at many national and international events (for example a recent seminar at the University of Beijing), and in the end-of-mandate balance published by the regional legislature.

democratic power arrangements. From this point of view, we agree with Pellizzoni that it is very important to explore in future research the relationship between the new institutional mainstream and the securitarian tendencies of the contemporary democracies [Mouffe 2005].

Conflicts and Deliberation: Divergent Roots

Although expressing concern about the tendencies reported by our article, Baiocchi believes that its conclusions underestimate the movements-driven origin of the concern with deliberative democracy, the leftist political backgrounds of its institutional proponents, and the reactive capacity of citizens. In fact, the institutional adoption of a lexicon with powerful symbolic appeal does not necessarily guarantee the achievement of either political goals or *de facto* congruent outcomes. As well known, there are many reasons for this: the conditions and the needs of actors differ, so too do the political-institutional and social contexts, and also the ways in which the reference theories are received. Equally important is the dynamic and polysemic relationship among ends, means, and their representations/justifications.

To remain with the Italian context considered by our study, we would point out that there is not just a marked divergence of positions between the rank-and file and elitist-institutional components of the alter-globalization movement in the institutionalization of deliberative democracy. Also be stressed is that this phase of experimentation has proceeded in parallel with profound discussion within the largest party in the regional government, as well as in the largest opposition party at national level, on its identity and political position.

The results of our research on the concrete form assumed by the experiments studied suggest that they are most closely akin to the New Public Management doctrine [Parkinson 2004]. After all, the technique of deliberative polling attracted attention in the early 1990s amid crisis in the efficiency of traditional polling methods in the USA [Blondiaux 2002], and therefore as an innovation to one of the key tools of marketing and technopolitics in general. Adoption of this interpretative frame in future research appears much more promising for the development of a field of studies free from the rhetoric recurrent among institutional actors. Recent years, in fact, have seen the growth around institutional deliberative practices of a broad sector of services and consultancy which attracts large public investments, not only in Italy but also in Europe and around the world, and often with important investments in technological platforms. We still know too little about this side of the phenomenon

– that is, the professionalization of the sector – although it is of increasing economic and organizational importance [Mutz 2008; Ryfe 2002; Ryfe 2005].

The doubt raised by Baiocchi concerning the success of the tendencies emphasised by us warrants particular attention. Baiocchi argues in his comment that civil society and citizens are able to resist the new institutional framing of participation and tendencies towards de-politicization. We entirely agree that this resistance “from below” is a vital phenomenon not to be neglected, and that one should maintain a dynamic vision of current political transformations. Yet our study shows very clearly, not the absence of reactive capacity against the effects of regulation and de-politicization of participation, but rather its differentiation. The capacity to resist the new frames, in fact, cannot be understood as all or nothing; instead, it is diversified according to the social and political resources of the subjects involved. Opportunities to elude the disciplining mechanisms are undoubtedly greater for active, self-organized, or at least interconnected, citizens, both within the deliberative situation, where explicit protest is raised and the rules are manipulated, and externally to the deliberative experiment, when its legitimacy, methods, and results are contested and alternative forms of consultation are proposed. Subsequent adjustments of the institutional deliberative device, however, have shown that the space for political discussion tends to diminish, with exclusion of the most active and interconnected citizens.

The Indirect Target of the Institutional Deliberative Experiments

As well known, the critical ability and relational capital of critical citizens is not possessed by the majority of the population, who are exposed more passively to communication by the institutions and/or political parties and to processes of social and political individualization. There is in fact a large group of politically unsophisticated citizens cognitively distant from politics and alienated from it. For entirely different reasons, also this group of citizens is little or not at all affected by the public representations of deliberative experiments. Their distance from politics insulates them against such refined political messages, although they are still sensitive to coarser forms of political communication, often populist and openly demagogic. But between these two publics “impermeable” to institutional deliberative initiatives there is another one characterized by its close attention to politics and current affairs, with a progressive orientation, dissatisfied with the current workings of the political system and the behaviour of its consolidated actors, and therefore sensitive to calls for political and institutional reforms. It is on this larger group of people, politicized

but not stably part of participative networks or movements, that the new institutional rhetoric of the deliberative “innovation” will probably be targeted.

Deliberative Democracy in a Neoliberal Society?

In short, it is today possible to identify both the type of use made by political actors, and the trends favoured by the institutional action within a broad and congruent cultural and structural framework. The conditions that foster domestication and depoliticization largely arise from the persisting cultural and political hegemony of the neoliberal discourse (which the recent global financial crisis has left unscathed), even beyond its conventional boundaries [Mouffe 2005]. If one cannot give way in analysis to the determinism of the power relationships at play – if, therefore, one should never forget the conflictual and dynamic nature of social and political processes – nor should one underestimate the fact, also underlined by Pellizzoni, that the margins of action of “combative sectors,” though not eliminated, appear to have been reduced by the creation of the new artificial *ad hoc* arenas, although these are certainly not the main sources of current political exclusion. But there is no doubt that deliberative experiments with the characteristics described constitute a new front in the political contest for legitimacy. Yet it still difficult to foresee the extent to which these institutional practices will be able to impose themselves as a new “legitimate frame” for participation, or whether they will foster the disaffection of increasingly more citizens and encourage them to seek other participative forms or other political interlocutors, or again whether these concerns will induce institutional-political actors to go into reverse.

Nor is it clear whether and how generational change – more and more experiments (particularly those making most use of the new digital media) are now addressed to young people – will be a resource for the development of these tendencies. It is true that the spread of these institutional practices testifies that some change has already taken place in the political culture of Italians, also those resident in areas like Tuscany where the tradition of political participation has been very high and party militancy very strong. Probably, in the recent past, an institution’s proposal to discuss themes (like healthcare charges) with the “Taylorized” procedure adopted at the two ETMs would have been regarded as bizarre, if not outrightly provocative. It would certainly be difficult to bring the deliberative experiments that we studied within the frame of political participation.

Baiocchi also seems to hypothesise a direct relationship between passivization of citizens and participation in the new deliberative arenas. In fact, it is not on the direct

involvement of all citizens in the artificial *ad hoc* arenas that the institutional political actors can rely to legitimate themselves. Rather, these experiments – or, better, their representations – are used as positive symbols to enhance the administration’s image. They become significant “demonstrative” elements within a broader symbolic strategy where participation by citizens is once again a slogan of a left disorientated by the neoliberal hegemony and therefore in search of a recognizable political identity. It is no coincidence that these events have been greatly publicized *after* they have been held, rather than before.

To conclude, our study did not have normative purposes: its intention was not to set a “gold standard,” to use Perrin’s expression. However, should we wish to draw a normative conclusion, the results of this research show that the type of instruments studied – which, note, are attracting considerable interest from the political class and are a major topic of debate in several disciplines – cannot keep its promise (to restore deliberative space to representative democracy). It instead emerged very clearly that many of the shortcomings of the experiments in progress are also responsible for the current deficits of representative liberal democracy itself. It is above all necessary to move beyond what we believe to be a misleading approach characterized by the more or less instrumental/”authentic” belief that, because of the alleged impossibility of dealing with the causes of political poverty, the only alternative is to try and intervene on its effects and hope for some form of positive retroaction.

We maintain that we are faced, not with any real prospect of citizen empowerment, but with a logical short-circuit. If one admits the ineffectiveness of the representative democratic institutions, which require new arenas founded on different operational principles, how can one at the same time expect arenas shaped by the institutions to remedy the shortcomings of the post-democratic representative institutions? At normative level, interest in the institutionalization of “deliberative” practices, in the absence of direct action to reduce or remove the causes of political and social inequality [Dahl 2006], seems not to fulfil the requirements of any deliberative democratic theory. Rather, it is located in a domain equally distant from the paradigm of liberal-representative democracy. Certainly – and this is beyond dispute – deliberative experiments cannot be blamed for the exacerbation of certain tendencies in the contemporary democracies, which are instead caused by the erosion of the individual and collective, civil and social, rights necessary for democracy to operate effectively; an erosion which has, like post-democratic politics, its roots in neoliberal globalization and related denial of “the political” [Mouffe 2005; Rosanvallon 2006].

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The Political Meanings of Institutional Deliberative Experiments

A Response to the Comments

Abstract: Based on evidence from empirical analysis of an emblematic case within the Italian context, this article proposes an interpretation of the political meanings implied in the institutionalization of deliberative practice. Through the adoption of a mix of quantitative and qualitative techniques, we conducted contextualized analysis of two experiments of public deliberation which have recently been promoted by the Regional Government of Tuscany. The research findings show that the general effect of the two processes was more the domestication of bottom-up participation, rather than the opening of new inclusive and participative spaces. Relevant political functions have emerged with reference to the internal needs of party elites and to the competition/negotiation between consolidated and new political actors.

Thus, we suggest that institutionalization of deliberative democracy can be better understood when put in relation to the current process of functional adaptation undertaken by some institutional political actors. Through 'outsourcing' and individualizing participative processes away from the party arena, ruling elite would maintain the control over their own selection and political agenda. In other words, in some contexts the institutionalization of public deliberation operates more like a complementary instrument than a real remedy challenging post-democratic governance.

Keywords: public deliberation, post-democracy, participation, local governance, Italy.

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