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Essays on Political Actors and Attitudes: Do They Constitute Distributed Reflexivity? Part 3: Long-Term Dynamics Towards Deliberative Democracy

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Abstract

In this final part of our series of essays we discuss the consequences of our earlier stated hypotheses that in times of well-being the logic of appropriateness prevails among both the constituencies and their political representatives, while in times of crisis constituencies resort to the logic of arguing, and leaders predominantly use the logic of consequences with some admixtures of the logic of arguing. Over a longer term we expect a gradual shift from the logic of consequences toward the logic of arguing in times of crises. However, we do not expect that such a shift necessarily leads to a greater societal problem-solving capacity, since self-referential communicative processes may lead to what we call “communicative bubbles”. Yet, we also argue that societies developing more deliberative strands of democracy have significant potential to come close to the condition of distributed reflexivity, characterized by the fact that each member of a society is able to start or join a discussion on any issue of his or her concern, to exercise his or her reasoning freely, and to make up his or her mind on any such issue, taking into account, when doing so, that other people have equal capacities and equal rights to do the same. We conclude that a plurality of deliberatively democratic societies have significant potential to develop genuine problem-solving capacities, and not merely communicative bubbles.

Keywords: political philosophy, deliberative democracy, distributed reflexivity, logic of appropriateness, logic of arguing, logic of consequences

¹The ordering of the authors follows alphabetical order and does not indicate any priorities.

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1. Introduction

In the previous two parts of this series of essays we have argued that the median voter theorem does not provide an appropriate description of a complex interplay between the agency of constituencies and their political representatives. At the systemic level we have proposed the "competence fields approach" as the one capturing the main features of the more complex dynamics. We have also attempted to integrate the competence fields approach with a micro-level description of political phenomena, which led us to consider different types of logics characterising different types of rationality of political actors under different contextual conditions.

In particular, we have begun to investigate how different types of logics become prominent under different contextual conditions of economic well-being and crisis, respectively. We have argued that in times of well-being the logic of appropriateness prevails among both the constituencies and their political representatives, while in times of crisis constituencies resort to the logic of arguing, and leaders predominantly use the logic of consequences with some admixtures of the logic of arguing, and we have identified this gap between different types of arguing as a source of the current crisis of the political systems in Europe.

2. Longer-Term Dynamics

Now it seems to be the right time to ask how the unfolding of such dynamics over longer time periods looks like. What are its systemic implications? This refers back to the feedback cycle between political actors and political attitudes outlined in the first part of this series of essays. Obviously, we can expect a growing importance of both the logic of consequences and the logic of arguing in times of economic crisis, while in times of recovery and relative well-being we can expect a moderate retreat toward the logic of appropriateness. Thus, somewhat paradoxically, we can relate cycles of increased economic activity and growth with predominance of relatively "passivist" logic in political sphere,² whereas the more "activist" types of logic seem to gain importance during economic downturns.³

There are indications, however, that over a long term we can expect a gradual shift from the logic of consequences toward the logic of arguing in times of crises.⁴ Elster (1995, p. 257, emphasis in original) refers to "a *multiplier effect* of impartiality, by which the presence of some genuinely impartial actors may force or induce self-interested others to behave as if they, too, were swayed by such motives". This becomes possible since even one's rhetorical commitment to values opens the way for other (perhaps truly committed) actors to hold this actor accountable for complying to the proclaimed values.

Elster (1995, p. 246) provides an example of a well-off advocate breaking taxes for the well-off, and only for them, and supporting such a decision with a universalist-style argument that this policy will have beneficial effects for all by a trickle-down effect. However, such a move has minimal chances to withstand counter-arguments pointing to other possible policies that would have more direct beneficial effects for all,

² Such "passivist" logic is often reflected in the narratives of "the end of history", "the world beyond antagonism" and other similarly optimistic visions of a harmonious, consensual society. Moreover, we can speculate that "passivism" in political spheres can be one of the very causes of the impending economic decline.

³ The more "activist" logic is often reflected in the views of society as inherently adversarial, antagonistic, and conflictual (e.g. Schmitt, 1932; Mouffe, 2005). Mouffe (2005, p. 121) argues that "democracy requires a 'conflictual consensus': consensus on the ethico-political values of liberty and equality of all, dissent about their interpretation". However, even if an overarching reasoned consensus is not possible, the logic of arguing, when applied in political struggles, does have its strengths, as we shall demonstrate shortly.

⁴ That is, we can roughly expect a somewhat higher importance attached to the logic of arguing in each successive crisis cycle.

such as breaking taxes for all, without exceptions. In other words, as soon as impartial arguments are invoked, even if only rhetorically, it nevertheless becomes increasingly demanding to foist off partial interests under the guise of impartiality.⁵

Thus, as Risse (2000, p. 9) observes, “*argumentative processes might well begin as purely rhetorical exchanges but often evolve toward true reasoning*”. This occurs because “speakers need to respond to each other’s arguments. They cannot simply repeat their utterances, if they want to convince a skeptical audience, but need to come up with ever more sophisticated justifications”. Theorists of deliberative democracy underline opening “*the constellation of discourses... to dispersed and communicatively competent popular control*” (Dryzek, 2000, p. 15) as one of the crucial preconditions for deliberation. Searching for ever more sophisticated justifications may be one of the mechanisms by which such control becomes possible.

It is the multiplier effect that we may expect at work between constituencies and elites during times of crises, with the constituencies gradually swaying elites toward the logic of arguing and greater axiological rationality. It must be stressed, however, that the evolution of strategic rhetorical moves toward true reasoning is probably slow and unfolding in a two-steps-forward-one-step-back manner.⁶

The emergence of bizarre politicians, discussed in the first part of this series of essays, can be regarded as part of such oscillations. For example, the slogan: “*Everything to me, nothing to you!*” can be regarded as a desperate attempt to come to grips with excesses of instrumental rationality. Ridiculous as it is, such slogan, however, does not only make fun. It also brings to the fore the unacceptability of “might is right” ruling style, which is all too often exercised in daily politics. The sarcastic tone of the slogan invites the audience to reflect, for a moment at least, about the unacceptability of such ruling style, which is probably the first step toward articulating (possibly strong) reasons for this unacceptability, toward persuading others at the strength of those reasons, and thereby toward further contestation of such ruling style.⁷ Consequently, although in a somewhat circumscribed way, even this ridiculous slogan has the potential to make some rather contentious issues more prominent in public discussions.

Returning to Elster’s example, note that the advocate’s proposal to break taxes for most, but not all, who are well-off, and for some of the worse-off as well, might be generally more acceptable than reducing taxes for the well-off only. Elster’s general point is that arguments that deviate enough from the self-interest of the proponent, but not so much that nothing is gained, have better chances to become accepted than supposedly impartial arguments that fit too well with one’s self-interest. We can only add that when power differentials are significant, as in the case of elites vs. constituencies, it becomes even easier for the more powerful side to perform various rhetorical manoeuvres under the guise of impartiality.⁸ The

⁵ In the previous parts of this series of essays we have repeatedly emphasised that the notions of “good”, “fair”, “legitimate”, etc. are contextually dependent. In accordance with such a view, whenever we use terms such as “impartiality”, “general interest”, “true reasoning” and the like, we assume the meaning of these terms which is acceptable to the most of the members of a society in a given moment, i.e. the meaning which can be justified by strong reasons, under the given contextual conditions.

⁶ For example, the processes of abolition of slavery, introduction of universal suffrage, achieving gender equality, and many others that can be considered in the context of arguing between elites and non-elites, have all been slow and gradual. Note, however, that they have also been irreversible, if viewed on a sufficiently long-time scale (Boudon, 2001).

⁷ On the process of articulating good reasons in public, from the perspective of the deliberative democracy model, see Benhabib, 1996b, pp. 71-72.

⁸ Economic crisis, in particular, can serve as an excuse for elites to push for various restrictions on democratic processes and for downward revision of democratic rules, principles and rights (Mastropaolo, 2012, pp. 24–25). Moreover, deterioration in employment and living conditions undermines the potential for collective action and political involvement of constituencies (Mastropaolo, 2012, pp. 60–61). Mastropaolo (2012, p. 67) also notes that “it is likely that leftist forces undervalued the opportunities for redistribution of the resources of power that would become available to the entrepreneurial and financial *millieux*

possible spectrum of strategic manoeuvres is very large, as there are numerous possible fields of competence and the elites may in any time attempt to divert public attention from discussions of their leadership competences toward some other fields (e.g. ethnicity, abortion, same-sex marriage, etc.), where competence claims can be more easily established within the given context. All in all, in the presence of large asymmetries of power,⁹ one obviously cannot expect an overly rapid transition from strategic rhetoric to true reasoning.

However, how does the logic of arguing unfold its persuasive power? Following Boudon (2001), it can be expected to be based in strong reasons. To gain relevance in public discourse these need to be intersubjectively valid. These assumptions are unproblematic. However, as it has been emphasised in the theory of securitisation, the roots of intersubjective validity are to be found in contextual conditions: namely, how the subject is historically, institutionally or discursively "sedimented" (Williams, 2003). Referencing such sedimented items may become a self-referential process. This is of consequence for the question if and how the self-organised feedback cycle between political attitudes and political actors truly generates a problem solving feedback cycle (comp. **Figure 1** in our first essay). It may well solve ecological problems, generate economic prosperity or peaceful international relations. Numerous examples can be found: the emergence of "green" political movements and parties has brought ecological problems to the political agenda in the 1980s. The New Deal was a successful answer to the global economic crisis in 1929 and after the catastrophe of World War II a peace system has been established in which the European Union fundamentally changed the European inter-state relations. These are examples of successful problem solving.

However, there is no "logical" guarantee that the multiplier effect of argumentative processes will necessarily generate a *problem solving* feedback cycle: numerous examples exist in which the logic of arguing generated public perception of public problems that can be called "communicative bubble". In analogy with "speculative bubbles", the term "communicative bubble" denotes a self-referential communication process, i.e. a communication in which the validity of an argument is based on prior arguments and not on other sources of evidence such as face validity. Here, the contextual conditions are crucial: the intersubjective plausibility of arguments needs to be built up on various sources of sedimentation of arguments. This does not need to result in a convergence to some kind of truth that can be measured in objective terms. As an absurd example, by arguing people could agree that the solution to – say – oil crisis would be – say – a prayer at Stonehenge. While this is not sedimented in current discursive practice, numerous historical examples can be found that the discursive feedback cycle turned out not to be a truly problem solving one: to mention just one, in 1892 there was a juridical process in Germany against a Jew who was accused of murdering a child. In this process even the prosecutor argued that the accused man was not guilty. But this did not help the poor man who became the subject of an invidious media campaign. This could be related to a widespread *discursive* sedimentation of anti-Semitism in Germany around 1900. In turn, this discourse could rely on a *historical* sedimentation of anti-Semitism within the European and Christian tradition. For instance, the media campaign against this Jew could build on a medieval suspicion toward Jews, which portrayed them as people who drink blood of Christians for ritual purposes. This is just one small example. The reader may think of others. However, being part of history, only the history itself can show what kind of political action and discourse will emerge as true problem-solving and what will turn out to be a mere communicative bubble.

to the cost of their constituencies" and that the leftist forces, in fact, often succumbed to the rhetoric of political and economic elites. In all probability, one needs to be very careful in order not to underestimate the power of elites' strategic rhetorical moves.

⁹ Far from an "ideal speech situation", or from the presuppositions of "discourse ethics" (cf. Habermas, 1983).

3. On the (anti-)political character of the model

Although this may sound like an oxymoron, it can be said that our model is “anti-politically political”. It is “political” since it conceives of political agency, in the sense of attempts at establishing political actors’ competences in front of audiences, as a fundamental feature of social life. However, it is also “anti-political” in that it predicts, with time and particularly in times of crisis, increasing difficulties for political actors to ground their competence claims in anything other than strong reasons, which would be acceptable to their audiences. In particular, the model predicts that the capacities of political actors to keep constituencies from realising what the latter would normally regard as their own “true interests” would gradually diminish with time due to multiplier effect of impartiality.

The model converges toward a state of “perfect meritocracy” in which it would be impossible to claim competences that cannot be publicly verified. Note that this condition would arise not because people are exceptionally “good-hearted”, or “highly moral”, but due to a simple fact that any claim of unverifiable competences would immediately provoke reasoned counterclaims that would prevent success of such “political projects”. In other words, this ultimately “anti-political” condition, which we shall call “democratic utopia”, would grow out from its own “political” roots.

Two caveats should also be added at this point. First, we do not claim that the condition of democratic utopia would ever be reached. It is quite possible that the process of convergence would continue without ever reaching the equilibrium.

Second, as we have already suggested, even reaching the condition of democratic utopia need not imply that societal problem-solving capacities at such a stage would be anywhere close to perfect, at least not in the sense of “problem-solving” as it is conceived in contemporary Western culture. The prospect of communicative bubbles looms large. It is possible to imagine a society happily indulging in free and unconstrained communication amplifying what would appear to an external observer as nothing more than collective delusions. Hence the issue of reaching democratic utopia and the issue of problem-solving seem to be largely independent of each other.

4. What about distributed reflexivity?

The main difference between the model outlined in this series of essays and the model of deliberative democracy – or better to say, a family of deliberative democracy models, since there are subtle differences between them¹⁰ – is that our model is descriptive, while the latter are normative. However, deliberative democracy models fit well with our theoretical framework since they prescribe conditions that would quicken the convergence of our model toward the ideal state of “democratic utopia”.

We shall call the basic precondition of deliberative democracy models “distributed reflexivity” – that is, the condition in which each member of a society – i.e., each potential political actor – is able to start or join a discussion on any issue of his or her concern, to exercise his or her reasoning freely, and to make up his or her mind on any such issue, taking into account, when doing so, that other people have equal capacities and equal rights to do the same. As an important special case, each member of a society is free to claim competence on any matter of concern, but each claim of competence is, at the same time, subject to thorough public scrutiny.

¹⁰ See, e.g., Benhabib (1996a) for an overview.

It is important to note that the reflexive capacity is distributed, i.e. this capacity cannot be entirely ascribed to a single actor. It is the feedback generated by an initial claim or proposition that is capable of developing the problem solving capacity of a society, not the logic of arguing confined to an isolated mind of an individual actor. The argumentative feedback augments the reflexive ability of an individual and provides an opportunity to articulate further arguments in response, without ever losing from view, the interlocutor as a moral and political equal. In such a way, by living together and providing reasons to each other, we become collectively more reflexive as a society¹¹.

As we have already noted, significant power differentials characterise all contemporary democracies (cf. Mansbridge, 1996). Yet, if all citizens were to have "*the same chances to initiate speech acts*", "*the right to question the assigned topics of conversation*", and "*the right to initiate reflexive arguments about the very rules of the discourse procedure and the way in which they were applied or carried out*" (Benhabib, 1996b, p. 70), then "*rhetorical action*" (Risse, 2000; following Schimmelfennig, 1997) and "*strategic uses of argument*" (Elster, 1995) would have less chances to succeed, while the multiplier effect of impartiality could be expected to work more effectively. In other words, the convergence toward democratic utopia would speed up.¹²

Here is, perhaps, once again the place to warn against putting too much faith in smooth and rapid convergence occurring naturally by itself.¹³ In the words of Claus Offe (2013, emphasis in original): "*While (...) projects of making democracies more democratic clearly deserve great social scientific attention and imaginative experimentation, political theorists should also look into the social conditions under which interest and political preferences are **formed** before they are voiced. After all, new procedures may not be sufficient to increase and broaden participation by citizens unless the **supply** of public policies and its 'possibility space', as perceived by citizens, is prevented from becoming ever more restricted...*" Using the vocabulary of this series of essays, we can say that we are thus referred back to the questions of historical, institutional and discursive contextual sedimentation "under which interest and political preferences are formed before they are voiced". For example, if "*policy-making moves to other sites that are typically out of reach of the participant agents of normal democratic politics*" (Offe, 2013), then one can hardly expect strengthening of deliberative democracy and convergence toward democratic utopia.

At this point we should also remark that we do not feel an urge to ground deliberative democracy in any *absolutely* valid procedures. In our view, which naturally follows from our general approach elaborated in this series of essays, the chances of deliberative democracy to succeed within a particular cultural tradition will be highest if its procedures are justified by strong reasons grounded in local contextual conditions. We believe that in most contemporary cultures one can find historical, institutional, discursive and other sediments conducive to development of a compelling case for at least a variant of deliberative democracy – that is, a variant that would betray neither the main idea of establishing legitimacy through

¹¹ The notion of distributed reflexivity extends the argument set forth in Neumann and Cowley (2013) that the development of individual rationality is a distributed process. Rather than being a property of individuals, rationality is a property of language enacted in Wittgensteinian language games. Theories of bounded rationality demonstrate the incomplete capability of biological humans to unfold cultural standards of rationality. Here the argument is extended to the domain of political discourse, by emphasising that the reflexivity of societies is a distributed phenomenon.

¹² Cohen (1996, p. 107) makes a similar point: "...ensuring that all citizens have effective political rights serves as a reminder that citizens are to be treated as equals in political deliberation, and, by reducing inequalities of power, reduces the incentives to shift from deliberative politics to a politics of bargaining". Since "deliberative politics" corresponds to the logic of arguing and "a politics of bargaining" corresponds to the logic of consequences, this is to say that reducing inequalities of power by granting equal political rights will reduce the incentives to use the logic of consequences in place of the logic of arguing.

¹³ See also footnote 8.

public deliberation, nor the basic “*reciprocal moral recognition of one another’s claims to be participants in the moral-political dialogue*” (Benhabib, 1996b, p. 79).¹⁴ In other words, we believe that the general framework of deliberative democracy is wide enough to allow for “*a weak plural agreement, to which each side could assent for **different** reasons*” (Bohman, 1995, p. 269, emphasis in original).^{15, 16}

If different cultures can find different strong reasons for adopting the principles of deliberative democracy, this would mean that different ways of approaching democratic utopia can be taken. If these different approaches and their corresponding sources of argumentative sedimentation would be mutually accessible and if different cultures could crossfertilise each other’s experiences, this could lessen the chances that each particular culture remain locked into communicative bubbles. In particular, we expect that, under conditions of cultural exchange based on principles of mutual moral respect and reciprocity similar to those guiding interpersonal exchanges under deliberative democracy model,¹⁷ individual actors could get acquainted with fresh ideas that could be tried and further explored within their own cultural contexts. All this being taken into account, we can conclude that cultural exchange could make development of problem-solving capacities, both within and across various cultures, more likely.

Now we should also be able to address the question figuring in the main title of this series of essays: Do political actors and political attitudes constitute distributed reflexivity? As should be clear by now, we do not believe that any society, not even the so-called “most advanced democracies” currently satisfy this requirement (cf. Mansbridge, 1996). However, according to our view, democratic societies, and particularly societies developing more deliberative strands of democracy, have significant potential to come close to the condition of distributed reflexivity. Moreover, as we have argued, a plurality of deliberatively democratic societies have significant potential to develop genuine problem-solving capacities, and not merely what we have called “communicative bubbles”.

5. Outlook

The current crisis of European democracy provided a motivation to call the principles of political action and communication into question. How is it possible that in many European countries bizarre quasi-politicians gain public support?

¹⁴ For example, one can imagine that the slogan: „Everything to me, nothing to you!“ can invite the audience to reflect about the unacceptability of “might is right” ruling style in most cultures. This is, of course, not yet a compelling case for deliberative democracy, but it indicates that different cultural contexts are at least similar enough to sustain reflection on the meaning of equality, power, coercion, justice, etc.

¹⁵ In Benhabib’s (1996b, p. 79) formulation: “What is distinctive about the discourse [i.e., deliberative democracy] model is that although it presupposes that participants must recognise one another’s entitlement to moral respect and reciprocity in some sense, the determination of the precise content and extent of these principles would be a consequence of discourses themselves”. As we understand, such open-endedness of the deliberative democracy model is compatible with Bohman’s notion of “weak plural agreement”.

¹⁶ An example of a weak plural agreement (although not entirely deliberatively democratic) from recent international politics is the case of American non-intervention in Syrian civil war. Various parties have various reasons for the non-intervention: the U.S. are not eager to intervene for fear of “another Iraq”, Russia and China oppose the intervention primarily because they do not like to see American display of power, and most of other countries oppose the intervention for fear of additional collateral damages and casualties. The confluence of these different reasons leads to the same outcome, i.e. the non-intervention.

¹⁷ It is important to note that such plurality of deliberatively democratic societies communicating with mutual moral respect and reciprocity can be regarded as satisfying the requirement of distributed reflexivity on a higher, i.e. societal, level. In other words, distributed reflexivity is a condition that should ideally hold at all levels of aggregation: individual, group/associational, and societal.

We have argued that the logic of argumentation can be dissected by referring to Boudon's (2001) cognitivist model of instrumental and axiological rationality as a framework for the analysis of political communication. However, in contrast to controlled procedures e.g. in science, in political communication the roots of intersubjective validity of strong arguments can be found in contextual conditions. Here, it is essential how much a topic is entrenched: how much a topic is institutionally, discursively or historically "sedimented". By recourse to Risse's (2000) typology of argumentation this can be brought into a dynamic framework. This allows to identify a crisis mechanism – namely a divergence of argumentative logic of constituencies and political actors in times of crisis. While political actors should exhibit a tendency to favour the logic of consequences, the constituencies tend to prefer the logic of arguing. We presume that in the long run, this process will tend toward the logic of arguing. However, the roots of intersubjectivity of strong arguments in political communication do not allow for a definite answer on whether this will generate problem-solving communication or mere communicative bubbles.

In future work, the inherent dynamics described here should be analysed by means of a simulation model that would be developed for this purpose. This can be implemented building upon the framework outlined by Cioffi-Revilla and Rouleau (2010) and Markisic, Neumann and Lotzmann (2012). Such a model would allow for a more rigorous treatment of the long-term dynamics and a detailed study of the crisis mechanism. While simulation studies of the long-term dynamics of the interplay between political actors and political attitudes can be envisioned to inform primarily theoretical research, empirical research would benefit from closer integration of quantitative and qualitative studies. A comparative view on political attitudes might be deepened by opinion polls such as Eurobarometer and sharpened by means of quantitative analyses. Analyses of political actors, on the other hand, call for predominantly qualitative studies, such as discourse analyses of politicians' speeches.

In any case, democracy is not a project fixed once for all times. It is "*an imperfect human invention*" (Mastropaolo, 2012), an ongoing process that needs to be analyzed as such. As we have argued in this series of essays, this process continues, among other ways, through endless claims and counterclaims to competence in various matters of public concern, set forth by various political actors in front of various audiences. With this process coming closer to the condition of distributed reflexivity, the prospects that democracy become a "more perfect human invention" will be brighter.

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