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SYMPOSIUM/7

LOCAL DEMOCRACY AND DELIBERATIVE ARENAS

Politics in the Garbage Can?

Giulio Citroni

University of Calabria

The debate on the political or unpolitical nature of deliberative decision-making processes might be based on a misunderstanding concerning causes and effects in the transformation of contemporary politics. Much like blaming the thermometer for fever, or the symptom for the disease, the allegations against deliberative processes may underestimate endogenous change in politics and policy, and the potential for re-politicisation which is in fact hidden in citizen participation and deliberation.

To support this argument, we should look at what – I believe – is a turning point in Luigi Bobbio's work, namely the book *La democrazia non abita a Gordio* (1996). Democracy – so the title implies – cannot be dealt with the way Alexander the Great dealt with the most intricate knot in human legend, simply by cutting it in half. The search for consensus, the elaboration of intricate conflicts, the internalization of politics in decision-making processes are part and parcel of the democratic process. As had been clear in political theory since Tullock and Buchanan's *Calculus of consent* (1962), and well-known in Italy since Sartori's definition of the "theory of committees" (1974), increases in participation and negotiation in decision-making processes may lead to a more effective and efficient – not just a more equitable – model of democracy.

In his book, Bobbio takes a decisive step in further defining why inclusive processes are necessary in contemporary democracies: democratic governance has changed dramatically, as have the locus and focus of policy-making in the welfare state. The action of the state – says Bobbio drawing on the works of Mayntz, Dupuy and Thoenig, Dente, Cassese – has expanded and diffused both horizontally and vertically: horizontally, into new policy fields and through the development of an increasingly complex web of policy sub-systems; vertically, with the development of ever stronger supra-national and sub-national policy-making arenas. A pyramid-state model is thus no longer useful to describe contemporary democracies and must be replaced with a network-state model.

Of course, the national and international literature that Bobbio cites, as well as the ample debate on governance, contains proof enough that the state and public policy had changed. At the same time, however, his own previous research and a very specific strand of debate on local policy-making in Italy may have made all the difference in his understanding of the political implications of such change, demanding that he delve further in the analysis of resources, strategies, and democratic settings of local policy: I am referring to his engagement in the collective endeavours led by Bruno Dente and others, including Bobbio himself (1990), and by Massimo Morisi and Stefano Passigli (1994), in the study of urban re-development, and to the complex interpretation of the transformation of local politics that sprang from such work.

Looking back at Bobbio's chapters in these two books, and at the chapters that the editors wrote to comment on the results of the research, the debate on the political role of deliberative arenas takes (back) on specific historical salience. Three elements appear clearly both in Dente's concluding chapter and in Morisi and Passigli's introduction:

- Urban regeneration and urban transformation policies – which constitute a large part of the most innovative and most important local policy processes in the 80's and early 90's – have evolved from an approach based on general, systemic planning to one of "diffused project-making": individual areas, individual economic actors, individual projects are discussed and dealt with as they come up, and general planning instruments are revised accordingly once an agreement is reached. The pyramidal, hierarchical design of planning procedures is thus called into question and practically reversed, as is the formal chain of authority on which it was based.
- Decisions can no longer be described as rational, nor just as incremental. As in the garbage-can model proposed by Cohen, March and Olsen (1972), actors change over the course of decision-making processes, as do their strategies, their rationales, their definitions of the problem and of their own interests. Also,

solutions may be looking for problems just as well as vice versa. Thus, the definition of the issues at stake, the identification of respective interests of different actors, and the very definition of their identities, are all part and parcel of decision-making processes themselves and need to be monitored and managed.

- Hence, politics and the role of public authority are profoundly transformed, as are the needs for their reform. Local authorities, and metropolitan municipalities in particular, can no longer be viewed as actors in local policy, but are rather transformed into arenas where actors (political, administrative, economic, social...) play out their respective parts. In the process, political partisanship is dramatically weakened, partly because of the inherent pluralism of local policy, partly because there no longer is a single authority to be driven according to ideology or majoritarian will. The role of experts, and more generally of culture, becomes key to the understanding of urban policy, rather than class or party interests and *Weltanschauung*. In this changed political understanding of their role, local authorities must develop or foster new competences, which include the mobilization of interests and social groups, the art of brokerage, the capacity to negotiate.

Bobbio's own contributions in these two books describe and discuss two specific decision-making processes in the city of Turin: the establishment of a new site for the Court of Justice and the redevelopment of the former FIAT "Lingotto" factory. Prominent in his discussion of the cases are 1) the emergence of a garbage-can dynamic, 2) the transformation and the unbundling of problems and decisions, 3) the need for metropolitan government to acquire abilities to pursue win-win, *integrative* negotiations (as they would later be called) rather than all-or-nothing, *distributive* negotiations.

Let us try and reframe (part of) this set of arguments by referring briefly to Lowi's "Four systems of policy, politics, and choice" (1972): where policy-making is increasingly diffused, fragmented, non-hierarchical and post-pyramidal, redistributive policy cannot be the dominant model; the juxtaposition of general interests cannot be the main feature of politics: regulation, distribution, log-rolling, clientelism and lobbying are more likely – hence the very title of the book by Morisi and Passigli referring to the role of interest groups.

Such reflections are evidently seminal to the work which Bobbio will later develop into a full-scale model of participatory and deliberative model of policy making as described in the ground-breaking "guidebook" published a decade later (2004): where general planning by central authority is not the dominant form of policy, where interest-group and clientelistic politics threaten to become the dominant model for framing agendas,

identities, problems and solutions, where culture and expert knowledge prevail on large-scale, party-political, collective definitions of interests, public deliberation may well bring politics back in the garbage can, not simply throw it in the bin.

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