

DELIBERATION, PARTICIPATION, ACCOUNTABILITY: KEY ISSUES OF DEMOCRACY

This panel focuses on the concept of democracy from two different directions and asks two correlated questions: What are the necessary conditions of democracy? – What practices legitimize democracy? The discussion brings us to three fundamental concerns of democratic practice: Deliberation, participation and accountability.

The idea of deliberative democracy has transformed democratic theory in the last three to four decades. In deliberative democracy the quality and transparency of democratic authority depends on its deliberative qualities where the engagement of citizens in monitoring and discussing policy- and decision-making is of primary importance. Civic participation has become a prominent topic of democratic theory more recently which to some extent reflects dwindling trust in democratic institutions, doubts about democratic representation and a demand for greater civic control of public decision-making.

Participation however raises questions about accountability. Participation does not guarantee inclusion and even where robust participatory processes are in place minorities and marginal groups may still not enjoy full political access. Participatory practices also do not ensure the respect for individual differences and may we lapse into a constant need for “redescription”.

Speakers explore how deliberation, participation and accountability figure in both outlining necessary conditions of democracy and ensuring democratic legitimacy. Deliberation e.g., does not provide safeguards against special interest or guarantee the quality of decisions. Participatory processes may undermine democratic accountability and lead to doubts about the legitimacy of decisions-making.

What you Represent: The Politics of Representation and the Moral Problem of Redescription

Jeremias Schledorn, University of Iceland, jes20@hi.is

Rationalist accounts of public discourse have gotten more and more questionable in the light of debates around climate change denial, racism, and migration politics that seemed to question the usefulness of the normative idea of emotion-free, rational discussion leading up to consent about moral norms. Participants’ motivation to reach consent through the exchange of rational arguments seems equally questionable in the light of these phenomena.

Meanwhile, directions such as Identity Politics have increasingly made the question of who makes a specific argument part of its assessment, thereby questioning the very idea of general moral norms arrived at in, supposedly, free, rational, and equal debate, leading to unwanted reactions and political consequences. Identity and its representation has, thus, become a major aspect of political discussion and moral argument. Gender ratios in parliaments are one example of recent discussion of the representation of identities. On the other hand, though, ascription of specific identities can become a factor contributing to increasing emotionalization of public debate and impasses in communication if such redescriptions are perceived as wrong by the described.

One result of both these processes is what within recent debates has often been called polarization. The problem with polarization however is not so much divergence of political views, as the hostility it seems to generate between bearers of those views, often leading into arguments about different perspectives caused by differing identities. In my talk I will approach polarization from the point of view of what motivates participation in public discourse. I argue that the primary motivation need not be a desire to convince others of the rightness of one's views, but rather the desire for acknowledgment of one's contribution – for recognition.

This desire can explain behavior in public discourse as part of the intent to escape the constantly perceived danger of being redescribed, to have one's views and identity described in a vocabulary that is not one's own. Such a descriptive model of political discourse leads to an alternative normative differentiation for the evaluation of moral arguments. In addition to evaluating their logical coherence or incoherence, it can be asked in how far arguments are redescribing other discourse participants. As I will show through examples from History, Anthropology, and recent political debates around e.g. migration politics, redescription can be observed in political discourse quite frequently.

I will introduce a distinction between the cooperative redescription of 'us' and the monological redescription of 'you', keeping alive Rorty's proposal that redescription has a cruel as well as a potentially liberating aspect paramount for social progress. I will give examples for what I call the vice of seeing people "as X", and argue that some forms of making identity, and the question of its representation, a central factor in political debate can be seen as morally problematic in this context.

Incorporating aspects of concepts such as political gaslighting or labeling, topics such as the political problem of right-wing protest, 'alliances' or misogynist mechanisms in public discourse can be understood within such an approach as morally problematic redescription.