

# **A Critical Assessment of ‘Between Deliberative and Participatory Democracy: A Contribution on Habermas’ By Denise Vitale**

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*Habermas has suggested that ‘more democracy’ will lead to the completion of the Enlightenment project of rationality. It is widely known that Habermas has sought to develop various instruments for this task, such as a strengthening of communicative rationality in order to enhance democratic practice. His conception of deliberative democracy, drawn from the amalgamation of a liberal focus on justice and a republican perception of negotiations and self-understanding, aims to improve the practice of democracy.*

*Similarly Denise Vitale, in her article ‘Between Deliberative and Participatory Democracy: a contribution on Habermas’ (2006,) stresses the importance of democracy. However, she questions the Habermasian conception of democracy, due to its lack of concern with social and economic justice, and its failure to illustrate concrete procedures for institutionalizing democratic processes. Thus, she developed her own conception of Participatory democracy, and stresses its focus on social and economic inequalities. As a result, she concludes that a Habermasian focus on deliberation combined with a concern for social and economic justice can enhance democratic practice.*

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This essay looks deeper into Vitale's perception of Habermasian deliberative conception and finds that, in fact, she fails to employ key concepts in the way that Habermas intended. Moreover, Habermas' aim to legitimise the process of deliberative democracy can also be argued to have failed, succeeding only to prompt us to ask the right questions. Last, but not least, the essay will illustrate that Vitale's interpretation of participatory democracy underestimates the voting usage.

## *The Importance of Applying Critical Theory to Social Problems*

It is widely known that Critical Theory is a theoretical outlook associated with the Frankfurt School. Max Horkheimer, in his essay ‘Traditional and Critical Theory’ published in 1937, set the features of the theory. Accordingly, Critical Theory deals with what Horkheimer (1982: 247) calls an ‘explanation of historical events’ and is dominated ‘at every turn by a concern for reasonable conditions of life’. Moreover, bearing in mind the

importance of economy, CT takes on a philosophical tone when it engages in a critique of economy because it sees capitalism as a dynamic force which affects the conditions of life.

This essay explicitly claims that Critical Theory is different from traditional theory because it sets normative grounds for critique. Such a view derives from a historical analysis of the goals of human activity, focusing particularly on the idea of the reasonable organization of society so 'that will meet the need of the whole community' (Horkheimer, 1982: 213). Hence, it is not only a research hypothesis, but it is an essential element in a historical effort to create a world which satisfies the needs of individuals. Additionally, Critical Theory can be described as a 'unity system of science' (Horkheimer, 1982: 198), an interdisciplinary approach which emphasizes that the normative task can only be accomplished through interplay between various research spheres.

Finally, Horkheimer distinguishes Critical Theory from other forms of theory, because it is practical, with the goal of creating 'men as producers of their own historical way of life in its totality' (Horkheimer, 1982: 244). Bohman (2005) sums up the importance of CT, it explains what is wrong with the current social reality, identifies agency or actors to change it, as well as working towards the provision of both clear norms for criticism and achievable practical goals for social transformation.

### *Habermas' Intellectual Project*

Today, the focus on practical intentions in political theory can be seen in the work of Jurgen Habermas. Like Immanuel Kant, Habermas harbours faith in the Enlightenment philosophy, seeing it as a promise of autonomy, justice, democracy and solidarity. Hence, his intellectual project is dedicated to the quest for reason, and defends its existence against the postmodern critique. With this in mind, Habermas declares that the use of reason hasn't been successful, due to a lack of understanding as well as the conditions available to it. Hence, he states:

'My problem was a theory of modernity, a theory of the pathology of modernity from the viewpoint of the realization – the deformed realization - of reason in history' (Outhwaite, 1996: 8).

Jurgen Habermas first gained public attention with the publication of the 'Structural Transformation of Public Sphere' in 1962, in which he outlined the social history of the public sphere in 18<sup>th</sup> century Europe and its transformation in the 20<sup>th</sup> century through the influence of capitalism. In this work, Habermas illustrates how the literate bourgeois public of the 18<sup>th</sup> century had a strong political role. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century however, a politically active public was replaced by something more like publicity in the modern sense - a term which represents the manipulated of the masses by commercial and party political interest groups. In this respect, 'public opinion' began to take on two potential meanings: (1) a critical authority (2) the manipulative propagation of publicity in the service of persons and institutions, consumer goods, and programs (Outhwaite, 1996: 32). However, due to what Habermas calls the '*refeudalization of society*', the latter always prevails because of the societal organizations that are active in state related affairs through parties, or directly in communication with public administrations. Hence, political

functions are dissipated to smaller centres of powers, whereupon organizations manipulate the public in order to gain political advantage, a process which Habermas characterizes as the 'weakening of the public sphere' (Outhwaite, 1996:8). As Bohman (2007) has noted, in his description of the Public Sphere, this is where we see Habermas' interest in a communicative ideal spring from. Thus, in his two volumes of 'The Theory of Communicative Action', communication forms the core of its normative ideal, in order to build-up a socio-institutionally feasible concept of public opinion formation that is historically meaningful and meets the needs of a society (Bohman, 2007; Finlayson, 2005: 12).

To begin with, Habermas discovers that there are two sphere of activity coordinated by: (1) instrumental rationality, which is action that takes as its point of departure, the view that the actor is primarily oriented towards attaining an end, that he selects means that seem (to him) appropriate in the given situation (Outhwaite, 1996: 160), and (2) communicative rationality, where the action of agents involved are coordinated not through egocentric calculations of success, but through a process of reaching understanding (Outhwaite, 1996: 161). In this respect, in the latter, participants harmonize their plans of action on the basis of common understanding. Since Habermas believes that the pessimistic approach to rationality lies in a lack of understanding of cultural dimensions of modernity, he seeks to apply an interdisciplinary approach to set normative grounds. Hence, the provisional concept of society in Habermas' work consists of two radically different environments: the lifeworld and the system. The latter possess two subsystems, the first characterised by money and 'the market', and the second by the power of the state, bureaucracy, administration or organized political parties ruled by instrumental rationality. The lifeworlds, on the other hand, refers to a world of systems characterized by the family, households, or social movements. Consistent with this, Habermas notes that the lifeworld is regulated by cultural common values.

According to Jurgen Habermas, the problem with modernity is that the system and lifeworld are differentiated in the sense that the complexity of the one and the rationality of the other grow (Outhwaite, 1996: 278). In other words, the domination of instrumental rationality has enabled the system to overdevelop at the expense of lifeworld, the system has colonized the lifeworld. Such colonization has created a norm free social structure, because actors tuned away from the orientation toward mutual understanding and adopted a strategic alternative, where economic and bureaucratic spheres regulate modern society, society becomes characterised by money and power. Moreover, instrumental rationality came to be presented as the proper form of reason, limiting communicative rationality and therefore limiting the modern project of enlightenment. In this respect, the fundamental decisions of society are left to the systemic domination, where market or private organizations decide on the fate of society. In so doing, Habermas looks for a mechanism which can save the lifeworld and overcome the complexity caused by modernity. Indeed, Habermas illustrates such a mechanism in his *Discourse Theory* which we now examine through the article of Denise Vitale.

Vitale's article 'Between Deliberative and Participatory Democracy: a contribution on Habermas' (2006) is an attempt to discuss, through a Habermasian analysis of modernity, reason and democracy, whether and to what extent deliberative and participatory democracy are conducive to enhancing democratic practices. The article begins with

the Weberian description of the World drawn by the foundation of modernity. Max Weber claims that the advancing process of rationalization ruptured the strength of morality through religion, and caused fragmentation in the various spheres of value, such as economics, art and science. In this context, the now fragmented and differentiated spheres coexist in a high tension, since nothing could embrace them all as religion had done (Vitale, 2006: 740).

Due to such fragmentation, Vitale recalls Weber's pessimistic conclusion that modernity has resulted in both the loss of meaning and the loss of liberty (Vitale, 2006: 741). In Weber's view the loss of meaning was connected to the rationalization of the cultural sphere of value as a unifying element, which increased tensions in various spheres of life. Such tensions deprived modern life of unified meaning (Vitale, 2006: 741). The loss of liberty resulted from a substantial increase in the bureaucratization and rationalization of society. Indeed, Weber believes that the problem was due to a historical alliance between bureaucratic structures and capitalist interest, which together enhanced 'the range of possible compromises at the expense of freedom' (Vitale, 2006: 742).

However, regarding the loss of meaning, Habermas provides a more optimistic view by identifying some instruments of mediation that link up the fragmented society, and restore a 'mediation of the unity' (Vitale, 2006: 741). In this respect, the very existence of the lifeworld ensures that all actors share a certain horizon of meaning, within the massive fragmentation and complexity caused by modernity. Habermas does not deny that increasing bureaucratization and its related problems are substantial, rather he sees the problem as part of a broader dilemma resulting from the fact that there is not a rational equilibrium between various spheres. However, in the Habermasian perception as stated above, capitalism and the modern state, as subsystems of the system are in tension with the lifeworld, even though they have essentially equal roles (Vitale, 2006: 742). Accordingly, systemic development at the expense of the lifeworld fragments society, thus preventing the completion of the modern project of enlightenment.

Alternatively, Habermas provides an instrument for enabling the lifeworld to resist through the process of strengthening communicative rationality. With this, Habermas develops a new paradigm in which, contrary to the Kantian perception, modern society is viewed from the perspective of the common space that exists between individuals. In this sphere, Habermas sees democracy as the only instrument that can establish a true process of mutual understanding towards consensus. Hence, it is explicitly stated that the completion of the project of modernity requires the implementation of democracy.

Vitale agrees with the Habermasian approach, suggesting that the quest of reason can succeed through the practice of democratization, and goes further by offering an analysis of the fundamental features of democracy. Firstly, democracies require free speech, and secondly, democratic institutions must have a mediating role. Vitale's article is mostly interested in the latter because it offers a more promising strategy 'to make politics meaningful in the dimension of the lifeworld' (Vitale, 2006: 744). She asks the question; 'what kind of democracy can save the modern project, and emancipate human beings?'. In answer to this question, she proposes two forms of democracy.

## *Deliberative Democracy*

Habermas' deliberative conception of democracy is grounded in discourse theory and political deliberation. In order to legitimate the process, Habermas stresses the importance of public decision-making, in which all participants can discuss various issues. Hence, the deliberative aspect of democracy corresponds to a collective process of reflection and analysis, 'permeated by the discourse that precedes the decision' (Vitale, 2006: 745).

Law, on the other hand, plays a fundamental role of mediation between discourse and democracy. In other words, it institutionalizes the discourse principle. Hence, it is illustrated that Habermas' deliberative democracy is a procedural theory measuring the legitimacy of norms in terms of the rationality of the democratic process of political legislation. In doing so, it has an essential role in linking the lifeworld and system.

On another level, Habermas' conception of deliberative democracy is situated between a liberal and republican vision of citizenship, and constructed with the elements of both (pg 746). Like a republican, he understands democracy as an essentially common process, giving a place to the process of political opinion and will formation. In this respect, rather than a society based on competition, he envisages a decision-making process led by dialogical practice. On the other hand, in line with the liberal tradition, he seeks to justify political practice by the criteria of justice. As a result then, Vitale stresses, the useful synthesis of both renders the democratic conception less idealistic than the republican view and less utilitarian than the liberal perspective.

Vitale also describes Habermas' 'twin pillars', which act to sustain and legitimize modern law: popular sovereignty and human rights. With regard to the former, it is stated, law is legitimate when all members of a community can rationally assent to it. The latter, on the other hand, illustrates that the rights to communicate and participate institutionalize the communication conditions for rational will formation. In this respect, the double foundation of modern law breaks with the liberal and republican perception that there is a tension between human rights and popular sovereignty, claiming that they are in fact complementary (Vitale, 2006: 747). However, she questions the Habermasian perception of human rights, as well as his approach towards institutionalization, which we will investigate later on.

Alternatively, participatory democracy, as can be seen from its name, considers participation to be the central aspect of political practice (Vitale, 2006: 749). It is justified on three grounds: (1) democracy will improve as citizenship is restructured and the political picture is enlarged beyond the representative system, (2) increased participation is directly related to the reduction of social and economic inequalities, and (3) political participation has an educational function in that it develops the social and political capacity of individuals.

The main objective, Vitale (2006: 750) argues, is to democratize the decision-making process led by representatives, transforming it into a strong democracy, to be exercised and enjoyed by active citizens who can participate in ways other than voting. The directness of participation, proportionally, disrupts social and economical inequalities, because elected representatives will be more accountable to the represented, and the informal structures of the

parties will be democratized to make them more inclusive (Vitale, 2006: 751). Hence, in sum, the main goal of participatory democracies is to provide every citizen with the right to speak and vote in the political process, and to decrease social and economical inequalities (Vitale, 2006: 752).

On another level, most importantly, she demonstrates that despite the distinction between the participatory and deliberative approaches, there is still considerable common ground between them which is essential to the improvement of the democratic process. In this respect, deliberative democracy, as well as participatory, recognizes the crisis of legitimacy which necessitates political participation. However, commonly they are challenged by the systematization of economy, which pushes citizens' participation to a 'peripheral role (Vitale, 2006: 753). As a result of this, the primary goal of both democratic theories became the re-absorption of citizens into public debate and the political process by means of participation and public differentiation.

On the contrary, however, each theory possesses different focal points. Participatory democracy, for example, focuses on the importance of extending forms of direct democracy to include non-state actors and seeks to foster substantial democracy in order to reduce social and economic inequalities which, accordingly, will guarantee effective political rights to all citizens. Deliberative democracy, on the other hand, prioritizes the institutionalization of discourses of will formation and deliberative processes of opinion among free and equal individuals.

#### *Participation and Deliberation: towards a happy marriage*

Vitale posits an optimistic approach to their intersection, believing that the combination of both can democratize society. For instance, each theory places communication and public debate at the forefront of the project (Vitale, 2006: 754). However, participatory democracy fails to provide a legal institutionalized condition for such a process, whereas deliberative democracy adds a dimension of legitimacy through institutionalization.

Vitale presents two interrelated critiques of such an approach. Firstly, that Habermas' conception of human rights is too limited and too close to the liberal view in prioritizing civil and political rights over social and economic rights. Human rights, according to Vitale, call for a global perspective including not only civil and political rights, but also social, economic, environmental, developmental and cultural rights, which are complementary and equally important (Vitale, 2006: 784). Furthermore, she argues that Habermas lacks a deeper discussion about how to institutionalize discourse ethics.

In this respect, Vitale asserts that human rights – such as social, economic, cultural, environmental and developmental rights are as essential as the rights of participation and communication, and must be considered as central to the democratic project as civil and political rights are (Vitale, 2006: 755). As a result then, Vitale concludes, unless these fundamental rights are legally protected, the rights of communication will fail crucial empirical tests (Vitale, 2006: 757). It is thus not surprising that, Vitale (2006) suggests, concern about human rights calls for such a holistic approach; social, economic, cultural, environmental and developmental rights are in fact

crucial to the existence of civil and political rights. Therefore, the focus on substantive democracy, grounded on a more equal distribution of social and economic resources is fundamental for the actual exercise of political rights.

In this respect, Vitale's article identifies the existence of a lacuna in the theory of deliberative democracy which neither challenges, nor engages in depth discussion of either the problem of social and economic rights, or issues of re-distributive justice (Vitale, 2006: 758). In order to fill that gap, Vitale suggests a happy marriage between participatory and deliberative democracy, enabling the former to focus on more equal distribution of social and economic resources.

### *Assessment*

Vitale notes that deliberative democracy is a mixture of liberal and republican forms. In this respect, it weaves together negotiations and discourses of self understanding; that of republican', and of liberal justice, presuming that such conditions will provide fair results (Habermas, 1998: 246). If we let Habermas talk, he will begin by stressing the importance of inter-subjectivity in decision-making. Afterwards, he will seek normative grounds for a balance between the three resources of money, administrative power and solidarity which meet modern society's need for integration and regulation. What will follow then is obvious: the normative implications will hold the integrative force of solidarity against two subsystems, money and administrative power. As a result, it doesn't necessarily transpire that Habermas prioritizes civil and political rights over social rights; he in fact looks for common rationality in order to save the lifeworld. As stated above, the over-development of the system at the expense of lifeworld will limit the freedom of human beings, preventing them to freely participate or deliberate in issues of common concern. As we can see, Vitale neither explains, nor implements Habermasian theory properly.

On the other hand, as Vitale states and Habermas would agree, deliberative democracy adds legitimacy and a testing space for political deliberations. The procedures and communicative presuppositions of democratic opinion are institutionalized by the legal system. Such practice is formalized by equal and free participants.

However, as Blaug (1997:110) illustrates, political theories cannot design legitimate democratic institutions, which might be different 'than those we currently have'. Blaug does not wholly reject deliberative democracy's communicative role as a tool to interrogate practice, but suggests that limitations of the theory constrain it to the role of a regulative ideal, because it can illuminate the component of fair communication, and 'prompt us to ask the right questions'.

Finally, Vitale illustrates the importance of social and economical inequalities in the participatory approach, arguing that it will expand the spheres of political practice in decision-making process. Such expansion, accordingly, will transform representative democracy into a strong democracy, exercised and engaged in by active citizens. To support this argument she explicitly refers to the Porto Alegre style of participatory democracy.

However, her approach to participatory democracy underestimates the presence of voting within the concept. Vitale's reading of participatory democracy is similar to that of deliberative one. Contrary to this, if we take

municipal elections in Switzerland as an example, institutions have repeatedly used voting. Hence, Vitale fails to interpret participatory democracy properly, by underestimating the voting usage.

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