Notas de Investigación

Two approaches to communicative rationality: analysing democratic deliberation and collective learning processes

Dos aproximaciones a la racionalidad comunicativa: analizando la deliberación democrática y los procesos de aprendizaje colectivo

MARCOS ENGELKEN-JORGE
Humboldt Universität zu Berlin

Abstract

Political theory's deliberative turn has provided novel theoretical insights, variously interpreted, into the rationality of communication. The goal of this research note is to clarify how these theoretical arguments and concepts have informed empirical research. To this end, a number of studies in this area are examined, and the argument is made that at least two research models inform empirical research, each of which embraces different methodological perspectives and understandings of the concept of discourse. The standard, political theory approach regards discourse as a regulative ideal, with which to assess actual political communication and empirically identify cases of deliberation. Furthermore, it adopts a co-variational explanatory template. The narrative, social theory model sees discourse as a counterfactual ideal in the heads of participants in communication, and assumes a narrative methodological perspective. These two models imply different theoretical choices with different implications for empirical research.

Keywords: discourse, discourse theory, deliberation, deliberative democracy, Jürgen Habermas, communicative rationality, collective learning.

Resumen

El giro deliberativo de la teoría política ha producido un nuevo conjunto de ideas teóricas, interpretadas de desigual manera, sobre la dimensión racional de la comunicación. El objetivo de esta nota de investigación es clarificar de qué modo estos argumentos teóricos han informado

la investigación empírica. Para ello, se examina un número amplio de estudios en esta área, y se formula la siguiente tesis: existen actualmente dos modelos de investigación alternativos que inspiran estos estudios empíricos y que adoptan perspectivas metodológicas distintas, así como diferentes concepciones de la idea de discurso. El enfoque convencional de teoría política entiende la noción de discurso como un ideal regulativo con el que valorar la comunicación política real e identificar empíricamente casos de deliberación. Adopta, además, un enfoque explicativo covariacional. El modelo de la teoría social del discurso concibe el discurso como un ideal contrafáctico en la mente de los actores inmersos en la comunicación, y asume una perspectiva metodológica narrativa o secuencial. Estos dos modelos conllevan diferentes decisiones teóricas con distintas implicaciones para la investigación empírica.

Palabras clave: discurso, teoría discursiva, deliberación, democracia deliberativa, Jürgen Habermas, racionalidad comunicativa, aprendizaje colectivo.

INTRODUCTION

Political theory's deliberative turn in the 1980s and 1990s has provided a novel set of theoretical insights into the *epistemic* or *communicatively rational* dimension of communication. By the latter, I refer to the practice of giving and taking reasons and the capacity of the said reasons to influence the political preferences and behaviours of social actors. The theoretical arguments advanced by the deliberative turn rely on a family of concepts which, depending on the authors considered, have been variously interpreted. This is the case, for instance, of the concept of *discourse*, construed as synonymous with deliberation, as providing a kind of "Weberian ideal type" with which to assess "how far away a particular speech situation is from the ideal type" (Steiner, 2008: 188-189) – whilst other scholars understand it "not [as] a normative model against which we judge the adequacy of existing arrangements", but as a counterfactual ideal assumed by participants in communication, which somehow influences communicative interaction (Eder, 2007: 399). The goal of this research note is to clarify how these theoretical arguments and concepts have informed *empirical research*. Thus, the emphasis of the argument will be laid on the *research models* behind empirical studies, that is, the recurrent theoretical ideals and methodological perspectives shared by a number of studies. More precisely, I will contend that there are at least two such models, which are the result of (1) how the concept of discourse or deliberation is interpreted and (2) which methodological perspective –co-variational or narrative– is adopted. The *standard, political theory approach* sees deliberation as a regulative ideal with which to assess actual political communication and empirically identify cases of deliberation. Furthermore, it is interested in how different variables are regularly associated with one another. This approach is probably best illustrated by the work of Steiner, Bächtiger and colleagues (e.g. Steiner *et al.*, 2004). In contrast, the *narrative, social theory model* understands discourse as a counterfactual ideal in the heads of participants in communication. Moreover, it pays greater attention to the

pathways that connect different events and variables to each other *in time*. Its main topics of research are collective learning processes and processes of ideational change in general. Brunkhorst (2014) provides a recent example of this approach.

This research note therefore seeks to make a contribution to conceptual clarification as regards the empirical research of communicative rationality. The two models reconstructed here partly overlap, thus there is no neat distinction between them. Yet, the fact remains that they follow different logics and pull in different directions. Dealing with the tensions arising from this requires, first, that we acknowledge the existence of these models and understand their underlying logics and implications. For one thing, the range of empirical phenomena linked to the rational dimension of communication varies according to the model considered –the political theory approach admits less variation in what communicative rationality empirically means than the social theory perspective. Furthermore, the distinction between these models challenges a common criticism against the broad conception of communicative rationality of the social theory perspective, namely, that of concept stretching, for this is a criticism that holds within the theoretical parameters of the political theory approach, but is less compelling within the social theory framework. There are also differences concerning the normative impetus of these two models, more visible in the political theory approach than in the social theory perspective; as well as regarding the explanatory logic favoured by each of these models –the standard political theory model seeks to isolate the constant effects of certain variables, whereas the narrative, social theory model pays greater attention to path dependency.

The argument will be structured as follows. First, I will briefly present two methodological approaches, namely, the variable-centred or co-variational one and the narrative or sequential approach. Subsequently, I will introduce two interpretations of the concept of discourse: the political theory reading and the social theory reading. I will then contend that the intersection of these two methodological approaches and viewpoints of discourse leads to the above-mentioned research models: the standard, political theory perspective and the narrative, social theory model. The next two sections will be devoted to discussing these research models, and the last section will summarise the argument made in this research note.

VARIABLE-CENTRED AND NARRATIVE APPROACHES IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

Different accounts of what constitutes a satisfactory "explanation" in the social sciences coexist –whereas some authors privilege *co-variational* approaches, others prefer explanatory templates based on *social mechanisms*, or they base their studies on *thick description*, among other possibilities. For the sake of simplicity, let us call these alternative perspectives *methodological approaches*. Methodological approaches rely on different sets of assumptions about how the social world works and what our epistemological limits and possibilities are, among other things (Della Porta, 2010). Fur-

thermore, they tend to be mutually exclusive, for the assumptions behind these different methodological perspectives often conflict.

Given the scope of this paper, I would like to mention here just two competing methodological perspectives, namely, the *co-variational* or *variable-centred* approach (Blatter and Blume, 2008) and the *narrative* or *sequential* approach (Abbott, 2001). The first perspective is the dominant one in comparative analysis. Essentially, it seeks to define discrete variables and identify whether there is some correlation between them. As such, the variable-centred approach concentrates on the standardised effects of some independent variables over other dependent variables. This perspective is the one that researchers adopt when they seek to pinpoint the "institutional determinants of deliberative interaction", tout court (Landwehr and Holzinger, 2010), or when they explore "whether democratic deliberation", in general, "enhances 'civic virtues'" (Grönlund *et al.*, 2010). Co-variational templates assume what Abbott (2001: 44) calls "constant relevance," namely, that "a given cause is equally relevant at all times." Certainly, this variable-centred approach allows for the interaction between variables as well as for context-specific effects, but once other variables are controlled for and the context is specified, the assumption remains that the effects of a given (independent) variable are constant (in the said context).

This contrasts with the assumptions made by the narrative or sequential approach, according to which *time* as well as the *order* of events matter as much as, or even more than, the standardised effects of a given set of independent variables. A case in point is Fukuyama's (2014: 30) dictum that "sequencing [...] matters enormously," for "high-quality governance" is much more difficult in countries where "democracy preceded modern state building" than in those where modern state building preceded democracy. In this view, action is conceived of as unfolding in time, with previous events conditioning subsequent ones, that is, opening up new paths and possibilities and foreclosing others. As such, social life is taken to have a narrative structure, where events are connected to each other by "casual emplotment" (Somers, 1994: 616), that is, by "causal pathways" that link different events to each other in time (Somers, 1998: 771).

These two methodological perspectives together with the specific understanding of the concept of discourse, to which I turn now, lead to two different research models of deliberation.

POLITICAL THEORY AND SOCIAL THEORY READINGS
OF THE CONCEPT OF DISCOURSE

Two different understandings of the concept of discourse are also at the heart of the two research models of deliberation reconstructed in this paper. Let us call them the *political theory* and the *social theory* readings of discourse (Deitelhoff and Müller, 2005: 177). According to the former, discourse (or deliberation) is a *regulative ideal* against which political communication *should* be assessed. According to the latter,

discourse is a *counterfactual ideal* that *inevitably* permeates communication and thus contributes to shaping it. This has implications for empirical research: the political theory approach uses the concept of discourse as a standard with which to measure the deliberative quality of communication or identify cases of genuine deliberation (typically, Bächtiger *et al.*, 2005; Steenbergen *et al.*, 2003). In contrast, the social theory perspective seeks to account for certain features of communication by drawing on its discursive dimension, that is, the inevitable raising of validity claims in communication (e.g. Brunkhorst, 2014; Eder, 1991).

The distinctive feature of the political theory interpretation of discourse is that it is conceived of as a regulative ideal, or "an ideal to which, all else equal, a practice should be judged as approaching more or less closely" (Mansbridge *et al.*, 2010: 65). There is, however, disagreement among political theorists as to what exactly this regulative ideal looks like and how it can be justified theoretically. Bächtiger *et al.* (2010), for instance, distinguish between two broad conceptions of deliberation in the scholarly literature, which they simply label *type I* and *type II* deliberation. Type I deliberation refers to "a systematic process wherein actors tell the truth, justify their positions extensively, and are willing to yield to the force of the better argument" in order "to reach understanding, or consensus" (Bächtiger *et al.*, 2010: 33). In contrast, type II deliberation "involves more flexible forms of discourse, more emphasis on outcomes versus process, and more attention to overcoming 'real world' constraints on realizing normative ideals" (Bächtiger *et al.*, 2010: 33).

Similarly, there is disagreement regarding the theoretical arguments used to set this normative standard. Habermas (1981, 1992) and Apel (2000), for example, take arguments from the philosophy of language, in particular from so-called universal pragmatics, which they then extend to the domain of politics and morality, whereas Gutmann and Thompson (2004: 3) ground the deliberative ideal on a "moral basis" that is "common to many conceptions of democracy", namely, that "persons should be treated not merely as objects of legislation, as passive subjects to be ruled, but as autonomous agents who take part in the governance of their own society." More often than not, the epistemic value of deliberation is also cited as an argument for these normative standards (Lafont, 2006). Be that as it may, what is common to the work of many political theorists, though by no means all of them (e.g. Gaus, 2013), is that they seek to establish a normative ideal that prescribes how actual deliberation should be (for recent reviews of the literature in this area, see Bächtiger *et al.*, 2010 and Steiner, 2012).

This contrasts with the social theory concept of discourse, which can be traced back to the work of Habermas, in particular to his attempt to develop a critical social theory of society. As a *critical* theory, its goal is to uncover the traces of reason in a world that is taken to be, on the whole, unreasonable. In this context, the concept of discourse is thus intended to grasp the rational dimension of linguistically mediated communication. More precisely, it "captures just those pragmatic features of a communicative setting that anybody tacitly presupposes once he [*sic*] seriously enters an argumentation in order to check a problematic validity claim by either supporting or

denying the truth or rightness of some statement with reasons pro and con" (Habermas, 2005: 385). Nonetheless, given the internal link between argumentation and linguistically mediated communication, the concept of discourse captures not only those counterfactual assumptions that people must make once they enter an argumentation, but also counterfactual assumptions shaping "everyday contexts of communicative action" (Habermas, 2005: 385). This is because there is an internal logic linking the practices of communication and deliberation. Let us unpack this.

The starting question to understand this internal link is the following: How is it possible that the actions of different social actors can be coordinated through communication? According to the theory of communicative action, there are two ways. First, communication can be used strategically. Typically, social actors can give orders and make explicit threats to make other actors comply with their orders. Social actors can also use communication to achieve perlocutionary effects –that is, they can surreptitiously manipulate other actors to behave in a specific way, as when they tell lies. Secondly, social actors can use communication to reach mutual understanding. Essentially, this second use of communication is what Habermas calls communicative action.

The crucial point is that perlocutionary effects are parasitic of this second, non-strategic use of communication (Habermas, 1981: 370). Let us simply illustrate this with the example of a lie. Lies can only be successful if the fact that one is lying remains concealed –in other words, liars have to pretend that they are using language in order to reach mutual understanding, hiding that they are trying to manipulate other actors. This, however, is not the case with explicit threats and orders, the other way of using communication strategically (Habermas, 1981: 391). Since it is strikingly obvious that only a small part of everyday communication consists of explicit threats and orders, it is safe to argue that most of everyday communication consists of communication oriented towards reaching understanding, irrespective of whether this orientation is genuine (as in the case of communicative action) or not (as when one seeks to achieve a perlocutionary effect).

In communication oriented towards reaching understanding, speakers raise validity claims, which can be accepted or not by hearers. Through this type of communication, social actors can coordinate their actions if they accept these validity claims and thus bind themselves to their content. The interesting point is that social actors can be rationally motivated to bind themselves to the content of these claims only if they "know the kinds of reasons that a speaker could provide in order to convince [them] that he [*sic*] is entitled in the given circumstances to claim validity for his utterance" (Habermas, 1998: 232) –in other words, when social actors know what makes a given validity claim acceptable. This means that the coordination capacity of communication oriented towards reaching understanding is internally related to the explicit or implicit practice of giving and taking reasons (Habermas, 1981: 386), for only these explicit or implicit reasons can motivate social actors to accept certain validity claims and bind themselves to them.

In this reading, therefore, communication is a rule-governed social interaction, the regulative logic of which is apprehended by the concept of discourse. What this concept provides is not primarily a regulative ideal of deliberation, but "a 'reality' that

pervades our communication and has to be taken into account when communicative action, i.e. a speaker relating to other speakers in the social world, goes on" (Eder, 2007: 399). The implication of this argument is that deliberation, understood as the explicit or implicit giving and taking of reasons, should be seen less as a *variable* than as a *constant* in communication (Deitelhoff and Müller, 2005: 172) –a constant which, as argued by Eder, should be taken into account in order to understand everyday communication, even communication that violates the rules of discourse (as in the example of a lie). The second point is that the aim of this social theory understanding of discourse is not so much to *assess* communication, but to *account for* certain features of linguistically mediated communication.

TWO RESEARCH MODELS OF DELIBERATION

The intersection of these two readings of discourse and the above-mentioned methodological approaches has given rise to two research models of deliberation: the standard, political theory model, and the narrative, social theory one. These models should be understood as ideal types, that is, analytical constructs. Yet, as shall become clear in this paper, these models partly overlap and can be even combined differently. The point, however, is that despite this overlap, both models emphasise different aspects, pursue different goals, and carry different implications. To clarify this, the ideal types reconstructed here are useful.

The standard, political theory model is characterised by an interest in the constant effect of certain variables, as well as in the quality of deliberation as measured against a regulative ideal. As such, research within this model typically seeks to assess the quality of deliberation, to identify its conditioning factors, and to explore its consequences.

In contrast, research within the narrative, social theory model usually pays greater attention to specific processes of ideational change (or the lack thereof) and the role of deliberation, conceived of as a counterfactual idealisation that is always already part of communication, in these processes. Typically, it strives to reconstruct, model, and explain specific processes of ideational change and collective learning that happen through the medium of communication, as well as to explore collective learning blockages and pathologies. More generally, it also seeks to assess the general utility of Habermas's social theory insights for empirical research.

The recent *systemic turn* in deliberative theory (Parkinson and Mansbridge, 2012) has thus far encouraged little empirical research, notwithstanding efforts in this direction[1] –hence, I will not expand on this perspective here. Yet there are reasons to believe that it might lead to novel ways of combining methodological approaches and

---

1. See, for instance, O'Flynn and Curato (2015) and the workshop on *Deliberative Systems in Comparative Perspective*, organised as part of the 2016 ECPR Joint Sessions.

conceptions of discourse; for example, Goodin (2005) adopts a political theory conception of discourse while stressing the time dimension by theorising about the "sequencing" of deliberative moments. In this regard, emerging systemic approaches illustrate a relevant point, namely, that there is no necessary theoretical relation between the variable-centred approach and the political theory reading of deliberation, nor between the narrative perspective and the social theory understanding of discourse. In sum, conceptions of discourse and methodological approaches are independent from each other and thus can be combined differently.

THE STANDARD, POLITICAL THEORY MODEL

The standard, political theory model is the research model that lies behind most of the empirical studies carried out by scholars involved in the so-called *empirical turn* in deliberative theory. Again, this model is characterised by a variable-centred approach and a political theory reading of discourse, without there being any intrinsic connection between these two elements.

Probably the clearest example of the standard, political theory approach to deliberation is the work carried out by Bächtiger, Steiner and various colleagues (Bächtiger *et al.*, 2005; Steenbergen *et al.*, 2003; Steiner, 2012, Steiner *et al.*, 2004), which essentially consists of measuring the deliberative quality of a debate, usually in a parliamentary setting, as well as exploring the conditioning factors and consequences of deliberation –hence, a combination of a political theory reading of discourse and a variable-centred approach. In the following, let us look at these two aspects in turn.

The notion of deliberation as a normative standard is expressed variously depending on the studies considered. In research carried out by Bächtiger and colleagues, deliberation is empirically measured through a coding scheme, namely, the Discourse Quality Index (DQI), which operationalises different attributes of rational discourse. As interpreted by Steenbergen *et al.* (2003: 24-30), a perfectly deliberative interaction implies civility, which means letting other speakers express themselves freely and without interruption, and showing explicit respect toward other speakers, as well as towards their claims. Furthermore, it requires speakers to be sincere, to explicitly justify their own claims in terms of the common good, and to be constructive, that is, to aim at reaching a rationally motivated consensus or at least to "attempt to reach mutually acceptable compromise solutions" (Steenbergen *et al.*, 2003: 26). Finally, genuine deliberation implies that counterarguments are considered seriously, that is, that they are acknowledged and explicitly valued. This set of features describes in a nutshell both how deliberation as a regulative ideal is conceived of and how it is measured empirically. Leaving aside aspects such as authenticity (i.e. the fact that speakers are expected to be sincere in deliberation), which can hardly be measured, it is assumed that there should be a one-to-one correspondence between the regulative ideal of deliberation and the actual speech acts that qualify as deliberative.

Other coding schemes follow a similar rationale although they rely on normative standards that are reinterpreted and adapted to the specific object of study considered in each research. Wessler (2008), for instance, proposed a coding scheme for "investigating deliberativeness comparatively", which was then slightly modified and applied to studying the "deliberative performance of television news" (Wessler and Rinke, 2014). This coding scheme distinguishes between the input, output, and throughput dimensions of deliberativeness, concentrating on the openness of debates, their dialogical rather than monological features, and the orientation of public debates towards decision-making. Here, a wider gap between the ideal of discourse and its empirical manifestation becomes evident. The crucial point is how this gap is theoretically justified – namely, as the outcome of the researcher adapting the regulative ideal to a new setting in the light of some contextual constraints. In other words, the regulative ideal is modified according to the peculiarities of newspapers, television news, and the like, where some form of deliberation is expected to happen, and this readapted ideal is then used to empirically identify cases of deliberation or measure the deliberative quality of communication. (The fact that it is the researcher, rather than social actors themselves, who adapts the regulative ideal to a specific setting constitutes a key difference between the political and the social theory approach to discourse, as we will see.) Hence, these studies stick to the concept of discourse as a regulative ideal although contextual constraints are considered in the application of the said ideal.

Many research projects, however, do not measure deliberation directly, but rather treat it as a black box or observe it informally. This is the case of some deliberative experiments, as well as a number of studies of deliberation in mini-publics. In said studies, enabling conditions for deliberation are provided and sometimes modified according to the researcher's goals, while the consequences of deliberation are registered, but the actual process of giving and taking reasons is not systematically analysed (Fishkin 2005, 2012; Ganuza *et al.*, 2012; Grönlund *et al.*, 2010; Niemeyer, 2011; Smith, 2009; Smith and Wales, 2000). This notwithstanding, these studies are also guided by an understanding of deliberation as a regulative ideal, in the sense that what is taken to be deliberation in these projects is a form of communicative interaction whose observable features closely approach one of a number of definitions of deliberation provided by political theorists. In this regard it is telling, for example, that the very design of these experiments and mini-publics is intended to bring about the said forms of deliberative interactions that conform to the normative ideal. More generally, this same logic also informs studies on deliberation in the public sphere and cyberspace, relying on research techniques other than those previously discussed, which also assume that the observable characteristics of a communicative interaction should closely approach a given normative conception of deliberation in order to be considered a case of deliberation (Dahlberg, 2001; Dahlgren, 2005; Gerhards *et al.*, 1998; Pilon, 2009; Rohlinger, 2007; Tsaliki, 2002). The argument for this understanding of deliberation is frequently a negative one: researchers avoid the danger of concept stretching only by considering forms of interaction the observable features of which closely approach a given normative definition of deliberation (Steiner, 2008).

Also common to the studies mentioned above is the fact that they rely on a variable-centred perspective, this is, a perspective that seeks to identify the constant effects of some variables over others. By examining the statistical associations between different variables, Bächtiger *et al.* (2005), for instance, explore the favourable contexts for deliberation in legislatures, as well as deliberation's outcomes. Similarly, Wessler and Rinke (2014: 828) study, among other things, "the impact of system, organizational, and news format variables on the deliberative features of television news", again using a standard co-variational template. The same holds for Ganuza *et al.* (2012) when they analyse the variables that influence participants' change of opinion in deliberation, or for Grönlund *et al.* (2010) when they study deliberation's influence over some "civic virtues". Studies that do not rely so strongly on statistical analysis also adopt a variable-centred perspective, as when Smith (2009: 7) explores "to what degree […] different [institutional] designs realise the six institutional goods that form [his] analytical framework", thus assuming that the effects of institutional designs are more or less stable. These examples can be multiplied although I take it to be evident to anyone familiar with the social science literature that this co-variational template is a popular, widely accepted methodological approach, so it is not necessary to dwell longer on this issue to show that it is also common among scholars analysing deliberation.

THE NARRATIVE, SOCIAL THEORY APPROACH TO DELIBERATION

In contrast to the standard, political theory approach, the narrative, social theory perspective combines a sequential methodological approach with a social theory reading of discourse. Let us discuss these two elements in turn.

What the social theory understanding of discourse suggests, as elaborated above, is that the explicit or implicit giving and taking of reasons is a constant in everyday contexts of communicative action, which, in turn, implies that the more people communicate, the more they are exposed to the force of arguments (Eder, 2007b: 45, 49). Here, to be *exposed* to the force of arguments does not necessarily mean that they are actually driven by it, but this argument grounds the expectation that social actors "can learn –and in the long run even 'cannot not learn'" (Habermas, 1999: 8). In this regard, the key concept of this approach to deliberation is that of *learning* and –since learning is understood as linked to communication– of *collective learning*.[2]

Collective learning can be defined as a communicative process (usually a conflict-ridden one) driven by the pursuit of reaching mutual understanding and solving

2. Depending on who learns, under what conditions, what is learned, etc., a number of alternative concepts have been coined: institutional learning, societal learning, normative learning, systemic learning, etc. (Brunkhorst, 2014; Miller, 2006; Trenz and Eder, 2004). So as not to introduce unnecessary jargon, I will simply speak of collective learning.

problems that social actors encounter performatively in coping with the world. Through it, social actors construct, challenge, and modify their common symbolic world. Of course, scholars working within this narrative, social theory perspective acknowledge the fallibility of these learning processes, as well as the relevance of factors other than the force of arguments (e.g. power relations), in shaping or even blocking them –nonetheless, they also acknowledge that there is a (communicatively) rational dimension inherent to communicative interaction, which sometimes leads to collective learning.

Being interested in collective learning *processes*, and *processes* of ideational change more generally, studies within this narrative, social theory model adopt a narrative perspective, according to which different "events" (i.e. ideas, speech acts, arguments, actions of social actors, etc.) are connected to each other in time by casual emplotment, with previous events influencing subsequent ones. Certainly, attention is also paid to constant effects and observable regularities, a case in point being the notion of discourse itself, seen as a (counterfactual) constant in communicative interaction. Yet in the last instance, the said regularities are embedded in causal narratives that depict the pathways connecting different events to each other in time.

Cases in point are varied, from analyses of long-term processes such as the rise of Enlightenment sociology (Strydom, 2000) or the evolution of the societal relationship to nature (Eder, 1996), to micro perspectives dealing with conflicts among children or conflicts over ownership of the land on remote islands in the Pacific (Miller, 2006). Other studies – probably more interesting to political scientists – include the analysis of the emergence of cosmopolitanism and cosmopolitan norms (Benhabib, 2006; Delanty, 2013); cases of normative learning in legal revolutions (Brunkhorst, 2014); the creation of the International Criminal Court (Deitelhoff, 2009); environmental discourse and environmental policy making (Eder, 1995); informal political talk and learning processes regarding the definition of social identities and the formation of political perspectives (Walsh, 2004); Germany's path into modernity and the evolution of the German political culture during the 18th and 19th centuries (Eder, 1991), or the democratising dynamics of the European public sphere (Eder, 2007b; Statham and Trenz, 2014; Trenz and Eder, 2004). These are mostly case studies in which the goal is to account for the unfolding of events in time, examining turning points and how previous events paved the way for subsequent ones, whilst foreclosing alternative courses of action.

Again, this research also embraces a social theory reading of discourse, according to which discourse is a set of counterfactual presuppositions that actors make in communication although, their counterfactual nature notwithstanding, they are expected to influence actual communicative interactions. Unlike the standard, political theory approach, the social theory perspective does not necessarily see the expression of discourse in speech acts that closely approach these counterfactual assumptions or any other ideal redefined by the researcher in the light of contextual constraints. Since they are counterfactual assumptions in the heads of participants in communication, it is social actors themselves, rather than social scientists, who have to negotiate the ten-

sion between these counterfactual assumptions and other factors, contextual or otherwise, that also influence their behaviour.

Leaving aside these *theoretical* differences, the question remains as to what the *observable*, *empirical* manifestations of discourse are. Different answers have been provided to this question. According to the social theory perspective, the typical empirical phenomena that can be traced back to discourse –and which are thus expressions of communication's rational dimension– are more varied than imagined by the political theory perspective.

First, it has been contended that discourse might give rise to "islands of persuasion" (Deitelhoff, 2009), this is, it might shape communicative interactions in such a way that they closely approximate the ideal speech situation. This is what the standard, political theory perspective would also call deliberation. Islands of persuasion can be specific, temporary events, which can nevertheless decisively shape subsequent events by helping to disseminate certain ideas and discrediting others.

Secondly, the empirical manifestation of discourse has also been presented as consisting of *diffuse* and *long-term processes of opinion-formation*, involving the constant reinterpretation, discussion, and updating of prior opinions and attitudes in the face of events and new pieces of information (Benhabib, 2006; Habermas, 2006: 420; Peters, 2007: 202). Along these lines, Habermas (2006: 420) contends that

> [...] in the long term, readers, listeners, and viewers can definitely form reasonable attitudes toward public affairs, even unconsciously. They can build them by aggregating their often tacit and since forgotten reactions to casually received bits and pieces of information, which they had initially integrated into and evaluated against the background of evolving conceptual schemes.

To the extent that this constant updating of opinions happens through the medium of communication, they involve the exchange of explicit or implicit reasons. Again, this is because communication inevitably raises validity claims, which, in turn, can only be accepted (or not) against the background of the reasons that are actually adduced, or could be adduced, in support of them. It might be rightly argued that these diffuse and long-term processes of opinion formation are not as sophisticated epistemically as those cases in which actual communication approaches the ideal speech situation. Yet the occasional *self-correcting* (Habermas, 2005b: 51, 84) or *self-repairing* (Eder, 2014) capacity of communication in the light of the counterfactual standards set by the concept of discourse (as when cases of exclusion from public communication are denounced and rectified), as well as according to the force of the specific arguments put forward in every case, attest to the epistemic dimension of these diffuse processes of opinion formation. This epistemic dimension might not be as sophisticated as in other cases, but in this view there is an epistemic dimension nonetheless.[3]

---

3. Interestingly, some approaches closer to the political theory reading of deliberation also stress the value of everyday talk and the processes of opinion formation triggered by it, yet their main

Thirdly, *argumentative self-entrapments* have also been traced back to the notion of discourse (Risse, 2000). Self-entrapments occur when social actors behaving strategically have to accept validity claims contrary to their interests in order not to appear inconsistent and discredit themselves –that is, in order to continue *pretending* that they are acting according to the rules of discourse (when they are not). Although there is a difference between *genuinely* behaving according to the rules of discourse and simply *pretending* to do so, the point is that argumentative self-entrapments lead, at least superficially, to changes in an actor's discourse, which can constitute a crucial turning point in a wider process of opinion formation (Deitelhoff, 2009, shows this for the case of the creation of the International Criminal Court). On these occasions, it is consistency and the force of arguments that carries the day, even if social actors are not really moved by the force of arguments, but by the desire to save face.

Finally, the empirical manifestation of discourse can simply consist of the *problematisation* of a state of affairs, namely, in rejecting validity claims used to justify the status quo, interrupting routines, "mobiliz[ing] latent reasons," and potentially destabilising certain institutions, practices, decisions, and so on (Fœssel and Habermas, 2015; see also Brunkhorst, 2014, on "negativity"). The problematisation of a situation constitutes an expression of the rational dimension of communication to the extent that it results from the critical examination of the validity claims underpinning the existing state of affairs.

As such, the narrative, social theory perspective does not only depart from the standard, political theory approach vis-à-vis its methodological perspective and its theoretical understanding of discourse, but also regarding the phenomena that it conceives as empirical manifestations of discourse and thus of the rational dimension of communication. Granted, such a broad understanding of discourse can be criticised from a political theory perspective for overstretching the concept of deliberation. Yet it should be noted that the opposite also holds –the social theory perspective can accuse the political theory one of oversimplifying and limiting the meaning of discourse.

CONCLUSION

This research note has sought to contribute to conceptual clarification as regards the empirical research of communicative rationality. It has been argued that there are at least two research models that inform empirical research on this topic, which embrace different methodological perspectives and understandings of discourse. The standard, political theory approach regards deliberation as a regulative ideal with which to assess actual political communication and identify cases of deliberation. Furthermore, it adopts a co-variational explanatory template. The narrative, social theory

goal remains the definition of normative standards with which to assess the quality of this everyday talk (Mansbridge, 1999).

model sees discourse as a counterfactual ideal in the heads of participants in communication and assumes a sequential methodological perspective. These models imply different theoretical choices with different implications for empirical research. One can regard them, however, as implying middle-range theoretical decisions, in the sense that they do not demand a continued and exclusive commitment to them. Indeed, Habermas's work shows that it is perfectly possible to move between these two approaches without this being *necessarily* inconsistent from a theoretical perspective. Yet the fact remains that these two models pursue different goals, emphasise different aspects, and entail theoretical decisions with different implications. Although the two approaches can be reconciled in principle, researchers are well advised to consider them explicitly in order to successfully deal with them.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

References

Abbott, Andrew. 2001. *Time Matters: On Theory and Method*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Apel, Karl-Otto. 2000. "Globalization and the Need for Universal Ethics", *European Journal of Social Theory*, 3 (2): 137-155. Available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/13684310022224732.

Bächtiger, André, Markus Spörndli, Marco R. Steenbergen, and Jürg Steiner. 2005. "The Deliberative Dimensions of Legislatures", *Acta Politica*, 40 (2): 225-238. Available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.ap.5500103.

Bächtiger, André, Simon Niemeyer, Michael Neblo, Marco R. Steenbergen and Jürg Steiner. 2010. "Disentangling Diversity in Deliberative Democracy", *The Journal of Political Philosophy*, 18 (1): 32-63. Available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9760.2009.00342.x.

Benhabib, Seyla. 2006. "Democratic Iterations: The Local, the National, and the Global", in S. Benhabib, *Another Cosmopolitanism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195183221.003.0003.

Blatter, Joachim and Till Blume. 2008. "In Search of Co-variance, Causal Mechanisms or Congruence?", *Swiss Political Science Review*, 14 (2): 315-356. Available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/j.1662-6370.2008.tb00105.x.

Brunkhorst, Hauke. 2014. *Critical Theory of Legal Revolutions: Evolutionary Perspectives*. London: Bloomsbury.

Dahlberg, Lincoln. 2001. "The Internet and Democratic Discourse", *Information, Communication and Society*, 4 (4): 615-633. Available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13691180110097030.

Dahlgren, Peter. 2005. "The Internet, Public Spheres, and Political Communication", *Political Communication*, 22 (2): 147-162. Available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10584600590933160.

Deitelhoff, Nicole. 2009. "The Discursive Process of Legalization: Charting Islands of Persuasion in the ICC Case", *International Organization*, 63 (1): 33-65. Available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S002081830909002X.

Deitelhoff, Nicole and Harald Müller. 2005. "Theoretical paradise – empirically lost?", *Review of International Studies*, 31 (1): 167-179. Available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0260210505006364.

Delanty, Gerard. 2013. "The prospects of cosmopolitanism and the possibility of global justice", *Journal of Sociology*, 50 (2): 213-228. Available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1440783313508478.

Della Porta, Donatella. 2010. "How many approaches in the social sciences?", in D. della Porta and M. Keating (eds.), *Approaches and Methodologies in the Social Sciences*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Eder, Klaus. 1991. *Geschichte als Lernprozeß? Zur Pathogenese politischer Modernität in Deutschland*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

Eder, Klaus. 1995. "Rationality in Environmental Discourse: A Cultural Approach to Environmental Policy Analysis", in W. Rudig (ed.), *Green Politics Three*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Eder, Klaus. 1996. *The Social Construction of Nature: A Sociology of Ecological Enlightenment*. London: Sage.

Eder, Klaus. 2007. "Cognitive Sociology and the Theory of Communicative Action", *European Journal of Social Theory*, 10 (3): 389-408. Available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1368431007080702.

Eder, Klaus. 2007b. "The public sphere and European democracy: mechanisms of democratisation in the transnational situation", in J.E. Fossum and P. Schlesinger (eds.), *The European Union and the Public Sphere: A Communicative Space in the Making?* London: Routledge.

Eder, Klaus. 2014. "The Paradox of Political Participation", *PArtecipazione e COnflitto: The Open Journal of Sociopolitical Studies*, 7 (3): 551-575.

Fishkin, James. 2005. "Experimenting with a Democratic Ideal: Deliberative Polling and Public Opinion", *Acta Politica*, 40 (3): 284-298. Available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.ap.5500121.

Fishkin, James 2012. "Deliberative Polling: Reflections on an Ideal Made Practical", in B. Geissel and K. Newton (eds.), *Evaluating Democratic Innovations*. Oxon: Routledge.

Fœssel, Michaël and Jürgen Habermas. 2015. "Critique and Communication: A Conversation with Jürgen Habermas", *Eurozine*. Available at: http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2015-10-16-habermas-en.html [Retrieved: 6 November 2015].

Fukuyama, Francis. 2014. *Political Order and Political Decay: From the Industrial Revolution to the Globalization of Democracy*. London: Profile Books.

Ganuza, Ernesto, Francisco Francés, Regina Lafuente and Fernando Garrido. 2012. "Do Participants Change Their Preferences in the Deliberative Process?", *Revista Española de Investigaciones Sociológicas*, 139: 111-132.

Gaus, Daniel. 2013. "Rationale Rekonstruktion als Methode politischer Theorie zwischen Gesellschaftskritik und empirischer Politikwissenschaft", *Politische Vierteljahresschrift*, 54 (2): 231-255. Available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.5771/0032-3470-2013-2-231.

Gerhards, Jürgen, Friedhelm Neidhardt and Dieter Rucht. 1998. *Zwischen Palaver und Diskurs: Strukturen Öffentlicher Meinungbildung am Beispiel der Deutschen Diskussion zur Abtreibung*. Wiesbaden: Westdeutscher Verlag. Available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/978-3-663-12466-5.

Goodin, Robert E. 2005. "Sequencing Deliberative Moments", *Acta Politica*, 40 (2): 182-196. Available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.ap.5500098.

Grönlund, Kimmo, Maija Setälä and Kaisa Herne. 2010. "Deliberation and civic virtue", *European Political Science Review*, 2 (1): 95-117. Available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S1755773909990245.

Gutmann, Amy and Dennis Thompson. 2004. *Why Deliberative Democracy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. Available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.1515/9781400826339.

Habermas, Jürgen. 1981. *Teoría de la Acción Comunicativa, vol. I*. Madrid: Taurus, 2003.

Habermas, Jürgen. 1992. *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*. Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1996.

Habermas, Jürgen. 1998. *On the Pragmatics of Communication*. Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press.

Habermas, Jürgen. 1999. *Truth and Justification*. Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2003.

Habermas, Jürgen. 2005. "Concluding Comments on Empirical Approaches to Deliberative Politics", *Acta Politica*, 40 (3): 384-392. Available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.ap.5500119.

Habermas, Jürgen. 2005b. *Between Naturalism and Religion*. Cambridge: Polity, 2008.

Habermas, Jürgen. 2006. "Political Communication in Media Society: Does Democracy Still Enjoy an Epistemic Dimension?", *Communication Theory*, 16 (4): 411-426. Available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2885.2006.00280.x.

Lafont, Cristina. 2006. "Is the Ideal of a Deliberative Democracy Coherent?", in S. Besson and J.L. Martí (eds.), *Deliberative Democracy and Its Discontents*. Aldershot: Ashgate.

Landwehr, Claudia and Katharina Holzinger. 2010. "Institutional determinants of deliberative interaction", *European Political Science Review*, 2 (3): 373-400. Available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S1755773910000226.

Mansbridge, Jane. 1999. "Everyday Talk in the Deliberative System", in S. Macedo (ed.), *Deliberative Politics: Essays on Democracy and Disagreement*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Mansbridge, Jane, *et al.* 2010. "The Place of Self-Interest and the Role of Power in Deliberative Democracy", *The Journal of Political Philosophy*, 18 (1): 64-100. Available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9760.2009.00344.x.

Miller, Max. 2006. *Dissens: Zur Theorie diskursiven und systemischen Lernens*. Bielefeld: Transcript. Available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.14361/9783839404843.

Niemeyer, Simon. 2011. "The Emancipatory Effect of Deliberation", *Politics and Society*, 39 (1): 103-140. Available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0032329210395000.

O'Flynn, Ian and Nicole Curato. 2015. "Deliberative democratization: a framework for systemic analysis", *Policy Studies*, 36 (3): 298-313. Available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01442872.2015.1065965.

Parkinson, John and Jane Mansbridge (eds.). 2012. *Deliberative Systems*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139178914.

Peters, Bernhard. 2007. *Der Sinn von Öffentlichkeit.* Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

Pilon, Dennis. 2009. "Investigating Media as a Deliberative Space", *Canadian Political Science Review*, 3 (3): 1-23.

Risse, Thomas. 2000. "'Let's Argue!': Communicative Action in World Politics", *International Organization*, 54 (1): 1-39. Available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.1162/002081800551109.

Rohlinger, Deana A. 2007. "American Media and Deliberative Democratic Processes", *Sociological Theory*, 25 (2): 122-148. Available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9558.2007.00301.x.

Smith, Graham. 2009. *Democratic Innovations: Designing Institutions for Citizen Participation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511609848.

Smith, Graham and Corinne Wales. 2000. "Citizens' juries and deliberative democracy", *Political Studies*, 48 (1): 51-65. Available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/1467-9248.00250.

Somers, Margaret R. 1994. "The Narrative Constitution of Identity", *Theory and Society*, 23 (5): 605-649. Available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/BF00992905

Somers, Margaret R. 1998. "'We're No Angels': Realism, Rational Choice, and Relationality in Social Science", *American Journal of Sociology*, 104 (3): 722-784. Available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.1086/210085.

Statham, Paul and Hans-Jörg Trenz. 2015. "Understanding the mechanisms of EU politicization", *Comparative European Politics*, 13: 287-306. Available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.1057/cep.2013.30.

Steenbergen, Marco R, André Bächtiger, Markus Spörndli and Jürg Steiner. 2003. "Measuring Political Deliberation: A Discourse Quality Index", *Comparative European Politics*, 1 (1): 21-48. Available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.cep.6110002.

Steiner, Jürg. 2008. "Concept Stretching: The Case of Deliberation", *European Political Science*, 7 (2): 186-190. Available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.eps.2210186.

Steiner, Jürg. 2012. *The Foundations of Deliberative Democracy: Empirical Research and Normative Implications*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139057486.

Steiner, Jürg, André Bächtiger, Markus Spörndli and Marco R. Steenbergen. 2004. *Deliberative Politics in Action: Crossnational Study of Parliamentary Debates*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Strydom, Piet. 2000. *Discourse and Knowledge: The Making of Enlightenment Sociology*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press. Available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.5949/UPO9781846312960.

Trenz, Hans-Jörg and Klaus Eder. 2004. "The Democratizing Dynamics of a European Public Sphere", *European Journal of Social Theory*, 7 (1): 5-25. Available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1368431004040016.

Tsaliki, Liza. 2002. "Online Forums and the Enlargement of Public Space", *The Public*, 9 (2): 95-112.

Walsh, Katherine C. 2004. *Talking about Politics: Informal Groups and Social Identity in American Life*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Wessler, Hartmut. 2008. "Investigating Deliberativeness Comparatively", *Political Communication*, 25 (1): 1-22. Available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10584600701807752.

Wessler, Hartmut and Eike Mark Rinke. 2014. "Deliberative Performance of Television News in Three Types of Democracy", *Journal of Communication*, 64 (5): 827-851. Available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/jcom.12115.

MARCOS ENGELKEN-JORGE
marcos.engelken-jorge@hu-berlin.de
Marcos Engelken-Jorge is a Marie Curie Fellow at Humboldt Universität zu Berlin. He received his doctoral degree in Political Science from the University of the Basque Country, where he worked as a doctoral and then postdoctoral researcher. His research interests are in contemporary democratic theory, the sociology of the public sphere, and democratic innovations. His work on these and other topics has appeared in collective volumes and journals such as *Critical Horizons*, *Política y Sociedad*, *Journal of Political Ideologies* and *Foro Interno: Anuario de Teoría Política*. His current research project, *LearningDemoi*, seeks to bring together the concepts of deliberative democracy and collective learning, and advance our empirical understanding of the latter.