

Contribution of Feminism to the Deliberative Democracy Concept Evolution

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Abstract

In 1818 Hannah Mather Crocker, one of the first feminists’ representatives, simultaneously stated that God “has endowed the mind of women with equal powers and capabilities” to those of a man and that “to convince by means of reason and power of persuasion should be both the duty and the adequate privilege of women”.

A hundred years later promoters of universal suffrage used the same formula of equality, with a slight difference. In a strategic meaning, they based their demarche upon the power of persuasion, because of the little political power they had. However, many of them were convinced that women would bring virtue in the area of politics, extending the maternal condition to the public domain, replacing rough power with the power of persuasion and party politics with progressive beneficent governing.

Many theorists who support those ideas nowadays in their writings are not trying to replace a political vocabulary based on power with a careful, intimate one. Their goal is to integrate within political thinking a rich vocabulary and a sum of life-based aspects that have been neglected because they were usually assigned to the domestic field and were classified as private, non-political or even anti-political.

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Politics without domination is a goal with a long genealogical line to which both sexes contributed. Claude Henri de Saint-Simon, one of the first prophets of socialism, and Edward Bellamy, a nineteenth-century American Utopian wanted to replace people government with things administration. Karl Marx’s dream was for the gradual “proper political power”, (i.e. of class rule) to disappear gradually. Mill and Barker replaced pure power not by administration, but with deliberation. Yet, when women acknowledged proper domination free politics, their language

contained echoes of their life experience as mothers.¹ The result was not entirely the same. Parental care – a special form of identification with the others' welfare – made its start in politics.

In 1818, Hannah Mather Crocker, one of the first feminists, claimed that God “endowed women with equal intellectual powers and mental faculties” as men and that “convincing by means of reason and persuasion must be a duty and a privilege befitting women”. One hundred years later, path breakers used the same formula of the universal voice, but with one distinction. In a strategic sense, they relied on persuasion as they had little political power. However, many of them were convinced that women would bring virtue in politics extending the maternal condition to the public sector, replacing power with persuasion and party politics with a beneficial progressive governing.

Many theorists who write today starting from these ideas do not try to replace a power-based political vocabulary with another one based on care or privacy. Their goal is to integrate within the political thinking a vocabulary and a set of life experience aspects that are rich, but which have been neglected because they used to be assigned to the domestic field and have been considered as being private, non-political or even anti-political.

The attention paid to relations is not synonymous with the parental care. Nancy Chodorow, an expert in sociology, states that in a society where the maternal care is excessive during early childhood, male children tend to follow their need to detach from their mothers more than female children do. Thus, men may be less aware of the intrinsic links with other people in their relationships. For this reason, or for reasons related to a long tradition of subordination, in the United States girls and women seem to put a higher price on their relations with other people than boys and men do. Girls and women are capable of a greater degree than men to interpret facial expressions and other clues within the climate of relations between people. In public, women speak less and listen more than men do. For many generations, women have been taught to listen carefully to what the people around them say. In the fifth century BC, Sophocles said that “silence is women's crown”.

Learning to listen carefully – but not to be confined to silence – seems to trigger better decisions. Experiments made by the social psychology experts suggest that the best group decisions – those that have the best chance of providing a “right” answer or a creative solution – are taken when the group members ask for

¹ Barbara Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men: American Dreams and the Flight from Commitment*, Anchor Books, New York, 1983, p. 63.

the views of people initially belonging to a minority. When an experimental group of people are instructed to allow all its members to speak, their decisions are superior to those generated by a group of people that do not receive any instructions of this kind. When leaders facilitate the formulation of minority's opinions, the groups give better results than those given by groups without leaders.²

In addition to promoting an ethical concern and ability to listen carefully feminist women also claim that emotions play an important role in deliberations. Emotions help us know what we want to be. Good quality deliberation cannot be facilitated by "the exclusion of emotional states". On the contrary, the solutions that can benefit everybody often require the emotional ability to guess what the others want, or at least the ability to ask questions in this regard in a genuine and non-threatening curious way. The emotional skill is essential if conflicting people are to communicate those feelings that sometimes are at a subconscious level, and sometimes those unnoticed data that can help building a solution which should take into account the interests of all.

The members of certain trade unions sometimes declare strike to support the claims of other unions; some people without children sometimes vote for tax increases designed to generate funds for improving schools. Such actions are based not only on rational adherence to the maximums meant to have universal validity or on the belief in the effort to obtain the greatest welfare for the greatest number of people, but also on a process that inspires congeniality and solidarity, or adherence to a principle. The presence of certain people with interests that differ from one's interests makes it difficult for somebody to insist on some claims based on pure self-interest. When people with claims that are in competition get to face one another, the conflict generates not only selfish competition, but often leads to a clarification of how emotional behavior based on self-interest might harm other people. When individuals are capable of commitment or solidarity of principle, emotional engagement helps self expression changes that are necessary in order to reach a way of thinking focused on "we" instead of "I".

But who are these "we" in a deliberation? "We" can easily represent a false universality, as it was the case of "humanity". Even if said and believed by the subjects, this term may mask a ratio contrary to their interests. Women's experience related to silence, to unexplored desires, to words that do not reveal or mean what they say (and, thus, are not heard), as well as to subtle forms of

² *Ibidem.*

domination prompt theorists and politicians to pay attention to the unequal power traps related to deliberation.³

The positive side of silence allows for a careful listening. On the other hand, a whole relative silence history makes the female political actors to understand more easily that when deliberation becomes acting, it excludes many people who are not actors by nature or education. When deliberation is a logical demonstration, it excludes many people who are not able to state their demands governed by intense emotions in clear enunciations. When a large number of voices compete to be heard in a deliberation, samples of opinion that gets to be heard are not fully representative.

Maintaining personal desires in a state that is not final make it even harder for one's intellect to learn to decipher the signals that one's ego emits with respect to what and how soon one wants. However, the cultural mandate of women as partners and mothers suggests maintaining their wishes to an interim state. The fact that women know how easily this can be done helps them realize that the deliberative meetings must strive to help participants discover what they really want. Preferences themselves, let alone interest, are not given. They require provisional stating, testing, examining in the light of the causes that trigger them, deep analyzing and finally adopting. Creative deliberation must rely on the institutions that promote opposition as well as on adequate behaviour the good behaviour allowing uncertain weighing and changes of opinion which take into account the nature of the process as a trial or attempt. Only such safety mechanisms may allow participants to know exactly where they want get.

The concern about the subtle forms of exerting power dominated the equalitarianism and the commitment to consensus which characterized the beginnings of radical women's movement. Today, it continues to inspire the experiments conducted by the National Women's Studies Association in equalizing power. U.S. women's organizations generally share this concern. Since the beginning, League of Women Voters made decisions "with the consent of a substantial number of members, which was representative for all members, concluded following a number of studies and group discussions." The goal is deliberation and decision made by means of persuasion.

If used without certain distinction, the practices meant to ensure equality and consensus can undermine deliberation rather than promoting it. One needs

³ Barbara Ehrenreich, *Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class*, Perennial, New York, 1989, p. 88.

experiments to evaluate the potential of different methods, and feminist practice offers a great abundance of such experiments.

It is easy to mistake the normative assumption that concern or attention-based methods are good in themselves (or promote values that are valuable in themselves) for the empirical assumption according to which women are more likely to adopt such means. Whether women differ from men in these respects is not so relevant. One should however be able to find a language that should promote in a convincing way any claim without pleading gender as a reason.

Similarly, the claim that feminists can add something new to the political theory because they understand women's life experience does not necessarily mean that women "essentially" differ from men. The only necessary thing is for life experience to be unevenly distributed between men and women. A very small difference in this respect can become a big difference in terms of self-awareness and in terms of how society is perceived.⁴ These distinctions, if amplified, influence our ways of knowing, helping us see the world differently - and sometimes more clearly.

Over the decades that separate us from the Second World War, American political science experts have generally regarded democracy as a phenomenon similar to the market economy. According to this conceptual model, voters pursue their own goals, while politicians act as brokers, trying to satisfy a number as large as possible of competing requirements. Lately, however, theorists have begun to question the validity of this model and to highlight the importance of deliberation and the common welfare within viable democratic systems.

Thus, it is very important to determine the evolution of the deliberative democracy concept, whose roots are in ancient Greece, and which has received contributions from leading philosophers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries such as James Madison and John Stuart Mill.⁵ This triggers the interest in revealing the contribution that feminism can bring to the contemporary debates on governance by consensus. Women's life experience offers new ways of considering power, community involvement, while women's organizations are examples of experiments with different forms of deliberative democracy.

For centuries, while men ran governments and wrote political philosophy treaties, women's life experience was a negligible influence on the democratic thought and its practical application. Lately, however, feminist ideas have come to be at the center of new debates on the nature of democratic politics. The dominant

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 109.

⁵ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, Avon Books, New York, 1992, p. 83.

tradition of political science considers democracy primarily as a way to embed rooted individual desires in their own interest. Those who criticize this tradition emphasize that any viable democratic system requires that citizens and their representatives should not only think of “I” but also as “we” Democracy involves public discussion of common problems, and not just counting the silent individual hands in the air. And when people talk among themselves, the discussion often determines the participants to relate their own interests to the wider context of community interests. Indeed, in an ideal situation, the democratic process does not solve the conflict only through the will of the majority, but also by the discovery of solutions that integrate the interests of minorities. Thus, a “deliberative democracy system” is not confined to recording the preferences that individuals already have, but it stimulates people towards a different way of thinking regarding their own interests.⁶

Two aspects of feminist literature make a significant contribution to the debate on deliberative democracy. One of them - that highlights women’s increased educational contribution - modifies and enhances the deliberative background by providing images and practical experience models of that specific area in their life. According to this view, socialization of women and the role they play in raising children, among other causes, leads them to pay special attention to transform the “I” into “we” and to seek ways of solving conflicts by balancing different and often countered wishes. The feminist authors propose this self-definition ability in broader terms as a model for a democratic political environment.

However, as feminists know it very well, turning “I” into “we” by means of political deliberations can easily mask the subtle forms of control. This distinction dealing with the inequalities between men and women in the political power, and which is provided by the other aspect of the feminist literature, helps us to discern among other forms of domination, such as those based on wealth, which can also contaminate the deliberative process.

Theorists of deliberation also forget sometimes about power. In quite often situations when there is no policy that can bring benefits to everybody, democratic systems require finding a way to legitimize a process by which a group of people cause another group of people to do what they do not wish to do. To avoid giving too much credit to the status quo, democratic societies must facilitate different ways to exerting power. They might make constraint legitimate, virtually giving all

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 97.

citizens equal power in the process.⁷ The system is successful when each of them loses by solving some problems, but wins when solving other problems. Feminism, both as educational and non oppressive, can emend political scientists' vision who so stubbornly and unrealistically insist that politics can only be about power, as well as deliberation theorists' beliefs who either reject power altogether or overlook the ways in which very powerful people often use in their own benefit the openness of deliberation, its procedures and many participants' guidance to the common welfare.

It is expected that in following decades feminism should become a rich source of awareness not only in gender relations, but also in most of the other types of relationships involving unequal power or one's welfare the others' welfare identification. Whatever the chosen strategy, feminists need allies when their goal is to improve political thought and practice in general. In the near future, feminists may find allies among experts in political theory and empirical political theory who have become concerned with the deliberation quality lately. And when democracy theorists are looking for useful ideas that can arouse interest, they can find such ideas in the ever richer feminist literature.

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⁷ Stephen L. Elkin, *The Democratic State*, University Press of Kansas, Lawrence, 1985, p. 79.