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The Rebuke of Thersites: Deliberative Democracy Under Conditions of Inequality

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Citation
Hooghe, M. (1999). The Rebuke of Thersites: Deliberative Democracy Under Conditions of Inequality. *Acta Politica*, *34: 1999*(4), 287-301. Retrieved from https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3450631

Version:	Publisher's Version
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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

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The Rebuke of Thersites
Deliberative Democracy Under Conditions of Inequality

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Abstract

In this article, it is argued that most of the literature in favour of deliberative democracy fails to acknowledge the fact that access to deliberative procedures is not equally distributed throughout society. Empirical research shows that culturally and educationally privileged groups have far better chances to prevail in deliberation processes. Proponents of deliberative democracy neglect the fact that: 1) persistent patterns of inequality within society tend to be reinforced during deliberation; 2) expecting disinterested participation from citizens is rather utopian; 3) deliberative processes create new inequalities. Building on Walzer's concept of complex equality, it is argued that a generalization of deliberative procedures can lead to a strengthening of inequalities by giving an undue advantage to those members of society with greater verbal and rhetorical skills. Proponents of deliberative democracy too easily assume that this procedure can simultaneously lead to a democratic and rational outcome.

1 Introduction

In the second book of the Iliad, the belligerent Greeks are strongly divided, and especially the argument between the commanders Agamemnon and Achilles completely gets out of hand. At that moment the relatively unknown Thersites intervenes in the discussion. We are given little information about him, but he certainly does not belong to the small elite club of Greek princes and commanders. His description is not exactly flattering: "Here was the ugliest man who ever came to Troy. Bandy-legged he was, with one foot clubbed, both shoulders humped together (...)" (Iliad, II: 251-253). Thersites takes sides with Achilles, criticizes the greed of Agamemnon, and urges the Greek to go home and stop the fighting. But then Odysseus intervenes and rebukes Thersites: "What a flood of abuse, Thersites! (...) Keep quiet. Who are *you* to wrangle with kings, you alone? No one, I say – no one alive less soldierly than you, none in the ranks that came to Troy with Agamemnon" (Iliad, II: 285-289). Odysseus beats Thersites with his golden sceptre, encouraged by the

laughter of most of the soldiers. Thersites squats low, stunned with the pain, shuts up, and is not heard of anymore in the entire Iliad (Robinson 1996). The name of Thersites reappears in *Philoctetes* by Sophocles, where he is referred to as an inferior man, who keeps on talking, even if no one is interested in listening to him. His name is revived a final time in *Troilus and Cressida* where Thersites functions as a jester, giving pointed commentaries on the actions of the protagonists. But even in that play, Thersites does not escape maltreatment at the hands of Ajax.

The story of Thersites has a direct bearing on the contemporary debate on deliberative democracy. Following the work of Habermas, who states that an open debate among equals is the most rational and most democratic procedure to arrive at decision-making, in recent years a number of authors have re-emphasized the role of deliberative procedures within a democratic political system (Manin 1987; Fishkin 1991; Hirst 1994; Knight & Johnson 1994; Habermas 1996; Benhabib 1996; Bohman & Rehg 1997; Elster 1998). In some instances, deliberation is even represented as a valid alternative for voting procedures (Miller 1993). Although the concept of deliberative democracy is intellectually appealing and can certainly play a role in the current debate on democratic renewal, in this article we want to develop two critical considerations that are seldom addressed in the literature on deliberative democracy. First, the project relies too strongly on utopian assumptions about the way citizens will behave in conditions of deliberative democracy, and second, most authors fail to acknowledge the fact that access to deliberative procedures will not be distributed equally among citizens, not even in ideal circumstances. Proponents of deliberative democracy often neglect the extent to which the rules governing public speech are not neutral, but are in fact an articulation of cultural hegemony within a society. Not everyone is equally entitled to public speech, and taking the floor in a public deliberation; just getting one's voice heard is a confirmation and an expression of power relations (de Certeau 1968). Even in the Greek assembly, it is quite legitimate that the princes engage in fierce arguments, but when a commoner tries to intervene, the princes close ranks and silence the commoner. Therefore, it is legitimate to wonder whether the democratic and egalitarian aspirations of deliberative democracy can ever be fulfilled under existing and persistent conditions of inequality. The aim of this article is not to question the inherent appeal of deliberative projects, it is to explore how these projects can be reconciled with current inequalities within Western societies.

2 Theory

The current revival of academic interest in deliberative democracy can be explained to a large extent by the appeal of Habermas's concept of communicative action. Habermas states that an open discussion, in which only the force of the argument is taken into account, functions as an ideal procedure to arrive not only at secure knowledge, but also at rational decision-making (Habermas 1996). The proponents of deliberative democracy offer two distinct arguments. First, it is stated that deliberation leads to a more rational outcome. This argument is mainly supported by Condorcet's Jury Theorem. Condorcet showed that, if voters in a jury have more than a 50 per cent chance to arrive at the right answer (in a dichotomous answering situation), increasing the number of jurors will lead to an almost infallible jury. The logic is quite simple: the greater the number of people participating in the deliberation process, the greater the chances that they will arrive at a correct solution. This was already hinted at in Aristotle's *Politics* (1281b1-4): "For the many, of whom each individual is not a good man, when they meet together may be better than the few good, if regarded not individually but collectively."

The second argument offered by proponents of deliberative democracy is its democratic appeal. It is argued that deliberative democracy will allow for more citizens to participate effectively in political decision-making, thus leading to a more egalitarian distribution of political influence. Deliberative democracy is portrayed as an alternative for representative government, and the direct participation in decision-making is seen as a clearer expression of the popular sovereignty which is constituent of our present day conception of liberal democracy (Cohen 1997; Fishkin 1991; Hirst 1994). Benhabib (1996: 69) and Fishkin (1991: 29) even state that a decision can not be considered democratic unless everyone who is affected by it has had the opportunity to participate in the making of that decision.

One of the problems with the debate on deliberative democracy is that most of the authors involved in it assume too easily that the two arguments that are put forward, are commensurable. They ignore the possibility that a conflict might arise between the two points in favour of deliberation: democratic decision-making is not neccessarily always rational, while rational decision-making is not always democratic. In this article, I want to question the second assumption in the debate, that deliberative democracy will automatically lead to a more egalitarian distribution of power, while ignoring for the moment the question whether deliberative democracy indeed leads to more rational decision-making. Habermas seems to be unaware of the possibility of a conflict between the two pretended advantages of deliberative democracy, by arguing that deliberation among equals will automatically lead to rational decisions. He assumes that equality has been achieved, if an ideal situation of commu-

nicative action is established, where only the force of the argument counts. He thereby ignores the fact that some people have better chances than others to put forward decisive arguments. When they do address the question of inequality, proponents of deliberative democracy mostly limit themselves to matters of ethnic or religious discrimination (cf. Knight & Johnson 1997; Benhabib 1996), implicitly assuming that the ability to rely on 'the force of the argument' is equally distributed throughout society. Empirical research, however, shows that the ability to offer convincing arguments in a public discussion differs markedly between various groups in the population.

3 Practice

The theoretical discussion on deliberative procedures should not obscure the fact that, in some instances, systems of deliberative democracy already exist. The traditional town meetings, which are held in small American communities, provide a well-known example. This system of decision-making is relatively straightforward: all the adult inhabitants of a community assemble, deliberate and vote on the matters that affect their community. At first sight, this would appear to be the ideal setting for a system of deliberative democracy. However, in practice it is completely different, as is shown by the extensive research carried out by Jane Mansbridge (1983). She studied the town meetings in the village of Selby, Vermont (population of 500), and her results show that these town meetings do not result in equal access to decision-making procedures. The town meetings are dominated by men, by the self-employed, and by the long-term residents of Selby:

> The poorer, less-educated townspeople do not only participate less than the rich but also are significantly less likely to feel that they have any say in the town (...) In spite of the theoretically open character of the town meeting, the costs and benefits of attending are distributed in such a way that the old-timers, the villagers, the elderly, the middle-class, and the self-confident are somewhat more likely to attend than are their neighbours (...) (Mansbridge 1983: 109, 111).

In other situations, too, empirical research reveals that open procedures alone do not lead to equal access to decision-making (Verba, Schlozman & Brady 1995). Gendered behaviour and communication patterns are one of the most important sources of this inequality: discursive practices, which are predominantly used by women, or by people of colour or by citizens with little formal education, are disregarded and are less likely to influence the outcome of the debate (Marsden 1987; Phillips 1995; Sanders 1997). Again, we can rely on empirical research to ascertain the occurrence of this effect. Political scientist Lyn Kathlene (1995) has studied how female and male members of

parliament interact in committees of American state assemblies. Her research confirms what we already know from an extensive body of research on gender and discursive practices: women intervene less in debates, their interventions are shorter, and on average their first interventions come much later in the debate. Female members of parliament make and receive fewer interruptions than their male counterparts. Kathlene's study shows that this gender difference remains robust, even controlling for age, length of the mandate, and status within the committee. If we assume, with Carol Gilligan, that women really speak 'in a different voice', then their voice will be less clear and less powerful than that of men. In the choir of deliberative democracy, the male voices are heard above those of the females.

Even if they address these gender inequalities, most proponents of deliberative democracy disregard them too easily and believe them to be a transient phenomenon. Once women have overcome their historical disadvantages, they will learn to behave just as effectively in discussions as their male counterparts. Or to put it differently, they believe that the game is in principle open to anyone, and that eventually women and other minorities will achieve equal opportunities (Bohman 1997). Iris Marion Young (1990, 1996) and other theorists question this assumption of transient and more or less superficial inequalities. The rules governing the game are not gender neutral, but are systematically skewed in favour of white, middle-class men. What we assume to be a valuable contribution to the debate, essentially corresponds to the way these men are used to expressing themselves. The result is that the contribution of marginalized groups is systematically disregarded, even in ideal speech situations:

> In many formal situations the better-educated white middle-class people, moreover, act as though they have a right to speak and that their words carry authority, whereas those of other groups often feel intimidated by the argument requirements and the formality and rules of parliamentary procedure, so they do not speak (...) (Young 1996: 124).

The work of Young and others reveals a blind spot in the argument of the proponents of deliberative democracy: they underestimate the scope and the force of cultural hegemony, understood in the sense the concept was first used in the work of Gramsci. It is more or less assumed that the contest to gain political influence is open to everyone, but that some groups have an illegitimate disadvantage that can be outlawed under ideal circumstances. For example, Knight and Johnson (1997) debate the possible influence of religious and ethnic differences, but, aside from these sources of inequality, they assume that everyone has an equal chance to participate meaningfully in the deliberative process. The concept of cultural hegemony goes much further by suggesting that even the rules of the game are rigged in favour of the elite. It is

not possible to think of a speech situation in which literally everybody has an equal chance to get his or her voice heard. Even in our efforts to conceive of such an ideal speech situation, we will always be influenced by our own class, gender and culture. 'The view from nowhere' does not exist, not even in the design of deliberative democracy (Nagel 1986).

Unfortunately, Iris Young's critique does not offer any suggestions on how this reproduction of cultural hegemony might be overcome: the alternatives she comes up with are not really convincing. She explores some discursive techniques that are used more frequently by underprivileged groups, but she fails to make clear how these techniques could lead to any form of rational decision-making (Benhabib 1986: 82-83). Young's suggestions do not lead to a clear alternative for the rational rules of behaviour that govern current political debates. These rules are indeed superior if we want to arrive at a rational outcome, but we should not assume that they simultaneously lead to egalitarian and democratic participation.

4 The problem of persisting inequalities

The argument developed so far relies mostly on considerations of inequality: the game is not open to everybody, so we should be cautious about the egalitarian assumptions of the deliberative democracy project. Proponents of the theory will argue that these inequalities are contingent, open to change and therefore not valid counterarguments. Once we have succeeded in creating a truly egalitarian society, there will no longer be any obstacles to an implementation of the deliberative project. This is not convincing on three accounts: 1) inequalities tend to be persistent; 2) it is rather risky to model institutions on utopian expectations about human behaviour; and 3) some inequalities with regard to deliberative behaviour are inherent to the procedure.

Let us consider the first argument. It is hard to think of conditions in which opportunities to take part in deliberation procedures are indeed equally spread throughout the population. In his recent work *Durable Inequality*, Charles Tilly (1998) convincingly demonstrates that every known society installs inequalities among its members. The nature of these inequalities may change: in contemporary Western society it is no longer considered acceptable to make distinctions based on the colour of a person's skin. But distinctions based on age (e.g., in according the right to vote), on cognitive abilities or on educational attainment remain legitimate. This implies that even if we should succeed in establishing a society that is gender and colour blind, other sources of unequal treatment will become more salient. In contemporary Western societies, the distinction between those with high educational credentials and those with little education, seems to be the main source of inequality. Some

authors, like Gutmann and Thompson (1996: 133), deny that this distinction leads to unequal access to the process of deliberative decision-making. They cite some examples of people with little formal education who have nevertheless succeeded in convincing large audiences, by skilfully employing drama, emotions and body language. They forget to mention that these persons are rather exceptional, and that in the day to day functioning of deliberative bodies, those with the best educational credentials will have the best chances to influence the outcome of the debate. After all, one of the things we want our students to learn is to formulate their thoughts and emotions in a coherent and convincing manner. This implies that those who have gone through this schooling experience will have a far better chance to compete successfully in the deliberative process. But this leads us to the question whether it is lawful that the opinion of citizens who have received less formal schooling, and are therefore less able to formulate their opinions in a logically coherent manner, should receive less attention than the opinion of citizens who do have verbal skills? Is there any democratically legitimate reason why we should give more weight to the point of view on abortion of someone who has undergone an extensive philosophical training, than to the point of view of someone who simply *feels* that allowing abortion is right or wrong, but is not able to translate that feeling into discursive action? Although some proponents of deliberative democracy do address this question, their suggestions seldom go to the heart of the matter. For example, Stewart (1996: 52) suggests that: "People who are reluctant to speak could be encouraged to write comments." The point is that those who are not skilled in expressing themselves orally, will also have difficulties writing a convincing text. As Sanders (1997: 348) puts it rather pointedly: "Some citizens are better than others at articulating their arguments in rational, reasonable terms." We simply do not have any historical examples of realizing substantive equality in public discussions and deliberations (Remer 1999: 56).

In the literature on deliberative democracy, the relation between conditions of equality and the deliberative project is often portrayed as being more or less reciprocal. Not only will deliberation lead to a more egalitarian society, but equality is also considered a prerequisite for the successful introduction of deliberative democracy. Communicative action can only be established in a truly egalitarian society: "Equality entails that the possibility that a participant might influence the preferences of other deliberators be roughly the same for all participants" (Knight & Johnson 1997: 293). There is not a single society in which these conditions of equality are present. Even in perfect circumstances, a university professor will always have better chances of convincing others than a manual worker.

The main point I want to make is that as long as this prerequisite is not fulfilled, the generalization of deliberative democracy is in clear danger of

further aggravating existing inequalities within society. It does so because it runs counter to the concept of complex equality as it was put forward by Walzer (1983). Walzer argues that there is not a single, unifying criterion to allocate social goods; these goods should be allocated according to rules that are proper to each separate sphere. The concept of deliberative democracy blurs the distinction between the various spheres. It gives an advantage in the political sphere to those who can argue most convincingly, while this talent seems a more appropriate argument in the scientific or the educational sphere. By advocating a system of deliberative democracy, we come very close to an exchange between the various spheres, which is antithetical to the concept of complex equality. Those who have gained advantages in the educational sphere, can exchange this advantage for a position of influence within the political sphere. The current system of voting, on the other hand, effectively blocks the possibility of such an exchange by artificially rationing political power on a 'one person, one vote' basis.

5 Utopian assumptions

A second argument against the generalization of deliberative democracy is that the project departs from unsubstantiated assumptions about human behaviour. John Rawls (1997: 97) states that deliberative democracy presumes "a willingness to listen to others and a fair-mindedness in deciding when accommodations to their views should reasonably be made." The implication is that deliberative democracy will only work if citizens are rational, fair-minded and open to argument (Cohen 1996: 100) This is an unwarranted assumption about the way people will behave. We have every reason to expect that at least some people will use deliberation to further their own specific interests, or even to engage in practices of what Gambetta (1998) has called 'discursive machismo'. People possessing rhetorical skills will use them to advance the acceptance of their opinion, thus inflicting a competitive disadvantage on those who do not possess these skills (Remer 1999). The project of deliberative democracy is therefore founded on rather unrealistic assumptions about the way people will behave. Thomas Nagel (1989) uses precisely this criterion to ascertain whether a project can be labelled 'utopian' or not. From the point of view of prudent statesmanship, it would be foolhardy to design political institutions based on these kinds of utopian expectations about the way citizens will behave. Since Montesquieu designed his theory of the separation of the spheres, we model institutions without making any unwarranted expectations about the way people will behave in them. The entire doctrine of checks and balances is designed specifically because we want to protect ourselves against the authoritarian rule from a tyrant. Deliberative

democracy is not tyrant-proof: it does not offer any protection against the unlawful use of power by some individuals, and therefore it simply fails the test of what we expect from a good and error-proof political system. Even the great legislators of the Greek city-states were distrustful about the possibility that orators would use their rhetorical skills to influence the assembly unduly and they designed safeguards against the misuse of the deliberative procedures by some citizens. In the current literature, on the other hand, the problem that deliberative procedures could be used to further individual or group interests is seldom addressed. Miller (1993: 76) acknowledges that "the practice of deliberative democracy can be abused by people who pay lipservice to the ideal of open discussion but actually attempt to manipulate their colleagues to reach decisions that serve private interests", but he states that other political systems are equally vulnerable to this kind of abuse. Other authors have proposed institutional designs limiting the possibility for this kind of abuse, for example, by limiting the time allowed for each speaker, or by enforcing *gag rules*, which impose limitations on the kind of arguments that can be legitimately invoked during public discussion (Dryzek 1990; Holmes 1988; Hirst 1994). Rawls (1997) suggests that only the use of public reason should be allowed during this kind of deliberation, while banning the furthering of particular interests or the expression of particular beliefs. These attempts to develop institutional restraints for deliberative democracy fail on two accounts. First, the only thing they can do is curb the possibilities the privileged actors have to manipulate the deliberation. It is much more difficult to raise the ability of underprivileged groups to getting their voices heard. If we want to achieve equality, it is not enough to restrain the dominant groups, it will also be necessary to give more opportunities and capabilities to dominated groups. Second, even these attempts at institutional restraining assume that people will invoke public reason, and that they will do so sincerely. But what we see in current political debate is that every group invokes the general interest to further its own interests, and there is no reason why this practice should stop with a generalization of deliberative procedures. Given the absence of a valid criterion to distinguish public reason from the unlawful articulation of group interests, it would be impossible to censure actors (mis)using deliberative procedures to further their own interests. It is quite unlikely that such a criterion could ever be developed, because there is, and can be, no consensus about what precisely constitutes the 'general interest'. The expectation that people will behave rationally and disinterested under conditions of deliberative democracy in a sense even undercuts the entire argument. If people really were fair-minded and open, there would be no need for deliberative democracy, since every political system would function perfectly under such circumstances.

6 Too many evenings

A third objection against a generalization of deliberative democracy, is that deliberative procedures, no matter what the circumstances might be, bring about their own inequalities that cannot be overcome, but are inherent to the procedure. Empirical research shows that the time and effort people can or will contribute to political participation is unevenly distributed (Verba, Schlozman & Brady 1995; Hooghe 1999a). In a sense, we return to the traditional argument that deliberative democracy cannot work since it will take too many evenings. Even the most public-minded citizens will not want to spend all of their time on political deliberation. The continuous expansion of deliberation could make deliberative democracy a very time-consuming way of decision-making:

> Self-government is a very demanding and time-consuming business, and when it is extended from political to economic and cultural life, and when the organs of government are decentralised so as to maximise participation, it will inevitably become more demanding still. Ultimately, it may well require almost continuous activity, and life will become a succession of meetings (Walzer 1980: 130).

This does not only raise questions with regard to the feasibility and efficiency of the system, it also introduces a new source of inequality. Those with the most time to spare, or the strongest motivation to go from one meeting to another will eventually dominate deliberations. This reminds us of what happened in a lot of the grass roots organizations that originated in the late 1960s, and which were devoted to a system of horizontal decision-making. This system proved to be not only lacking in efficiency, but it also allowed some members of the organization to impose their views on others, in what has been called a 'tyranny of structurelessness' (Freeman 1973). Proponents of deliberative democracy will argue that the time a citizen decides to spend on political deliberation is a matter of free choice, and therefore is an expression of motivation for and interest in the public cause. However, the structural position of citizens determines the extent to which they have time to fully participate in this deliberative process. This position does not depend solely on their economic situation, but also on their responsibilities with regard to child rearing, care of the elderly or relatives, etc. A recent survey on participation in voluntary associations in Belgium showed, for example, that young men, who were still living with their parents or alone and didn't have children, spend on average five hours a week on associational activities. For married women with children at home, this was only 2 hours and 3 minutes a week (Hooghe 1999c). A number of factors help to explain this difference, but an important causal variable is of course the load of household responsibilities. People (and in European societies, especially women) who are involved in

child rearing, have less time to participate in associational life, and, by extension, also in public deliberation. But, from a democratic point of view, there is no reason why unmarried men should have a greater say in decision-making than married women with children. This could imply that deliberative procedures even enhance existing inequalities. Participation patterns tend to be cumulative: those who have high educational credentials and enjoy full-time employment are also those who participate most intensively in political and social life (Hooghe 1999b). If we turn this kind of participation into a prerequisite for having a say in the way a society reaches political decisions, then we give undue advantages to those groups that are already privileged.

But let us take the argument even further, and let us presume we can establish a situation in which each and every individual has equal chances to participate in the deliberative process. Even then, deliberative democracy could not succeed in guaranteeing full participation. The reason is quite simply a matter of scale: in contemporary mass democracies one cannot think of a system in which *all* citizens actively participate in political deliberation. This fact was already recognized in Aristotle's *Politics* when he states that the Greek democratic system is only fit for small city-states where the number of enfranchised citizens remains limited, but that it cannot be exported to large countries. Given these difficulties of scale, two options are available. Either we stick to the deliberative system that was prevalent in the small Greek city-states, thereby introducing inequalities among the citizens who can participate and those who cannot. Or we stick to the requirement of universal participation, and pay less attention to the merits of the Greek deliberative process. We can not have it both ways: both universal participation and generalized deliberation. Based on this dilemma, John Stuart Mill builds a strong case for a system of representative government, which he sees as the only system available to ensure that in contemporary mass democracies *all* citizens will have a say in the way their societies are run:

> Nothing less can be ultimately desirable, than the admission of all to a share in the sovereign power of the state. But since all cannot, in a community exceeding a single small town, participate personally in any but some very minor portions of the public business, it follows that the ideal type of a perfect government must be representative (Mill 1861: 198).

This argument is taken up by Michael Walzer, when he wonders what will be the influence and the role of the non-participating citizens in a system of participatory democracy:

> Words like citizenship and participation may actually describe the enfranchisement of only a part, and not necessarily a large part of the movement or the community. Participatory democracy means the sharing of power among the activists" (Walzer 1980: 134).

This poses a fundamental, and I believe insurmountable, problem for the proponents of deliberative democracy. All the research on political participation clearly shows that the more intense the form of participation gets (in terms of time investment, risks or necessary skills), the more skewed the recruitment to that form of participation becomes (Hooghe 2000). The most equally distributed form of participation is also the one which is least demanding for citizens: that is voting. Especially in conditions of high turnout, which can be reached under a system of compulsory voting, the voting citizens are almost a perfect representation of the enfranchised population as a whole (Hooghe & Pelleriaux 1998). Under these circumstances, voting does indeed function as the great equalizer, ensuring that, to use Bentham's famous phrase, 'everybody is to count for one, and nobody is to count for more than one'. Replacing a very limited, but fairly easy procedure such as voting by more intensive forms of participation will strengthen inequalities in the distribution of political power.

In a sense the proponents of deliberative democracy expect too much from the procedure. Not only should it lead to better decision-making, but also to a more egalitarian distribution of political power and influence. They fail to acknowledge that no single instrument can bring about all of these desired effects. If the warning of Isaiah Berlin against utopian thinking was ever applicable, then it is certainly with regard to the exaggerated expectations about deliberative democracy: "the old perennial belief in the possibility of realizing ultimate harmony is a fallacy (...) we are doomed to choose, and every choice may entail an irreparable loss" (Berlin 1990: 13, 17).

7 Conclusion

If we can not expect one procedure to fulfil the demand for universal participation and the demand for rational decision-making, then perhaps it would be wise to develop two different mechanisms. To a large extent, this is what the current system of liberal democracy already does, by relying on a two-stage model of decision-making. In a first stage, deliberation should be as broad as possible, with indeed an overrepresentation of the verbally gifted and those with much time to spare. But in a second stage, when we have to arrive at a decision, we simply count votes, whereby every citizen counts for one and one only, whatever his or her intellectual or other capabilities might be. Such a two-stage model fits perfectly within the concept of complex equality, as developed by Michael Walzer. In the sphere of political debate, we allow for inequalities, based on intellectual differences, differences in time investment, motivation, and so on. But these advantages cannot be exchanged for advantages in the sphere of political decision-making, where we rely on universal

participation, without any prior capability test, and with an equal say for each and every citizen. I do not see in what way a generalization of deliberative democracy is superior to such a two-stage system. Although the concept of deliberative democracy is intellectually very appealing, its flaw is more or less the same as in most of Habermas's work from which the concept originates: Habermas assumes too easily that divergent ideals can be combined in one single procedure. In this case, the belief is that deliberation can foster a decision-making process that is both rational and egalitarian. The two arguments in favour of deliberative democracy do not necessarily entail one another and to some extent are even incommensurable. The project of deliberative democracy has limits, which are not always fully acknowledged in the theoretical literature on the subject. Given existent conditions of inequality in almost every society, we are faced with a clear danger that a generalization of deliberative democracy projects would enhance an unequal distribution of political power. The main problem remains how conditions of deliberative democracy can be combined with giving equal access to the decision-making process to each and every citizen, even to an ugly, bandy-legged commoner like Thersites.

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