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EPISTEMIC FEATURE OF DEMOCRACY: THE ROLE OF EXPERT IN DEMOCRATIC DECISION MAKING

ABSTRACT

In her book *Democracy and Truth: The Conflict between Political and Epistemic Virtues*, Snježana Prijić Samaržija advocates that a purely procedural justification which defines the authority and legitimacy of democracy only in relation to the fairness of the procedure itself is not enough for a full justification of democracy. Some epistemic values should also be included. This epistemic quality of democracy depends on the quality of the decisions that the democratic procedures produce. In that sense, the author is advocating a hybrid theory that secures harmony between political and epistemic values, favoring deliberative procedure for this purpose, and thus promotes equal respect for both democratic values. In doing so, she is advocating the specific type of division of epistemic labor that I will attempt to critically re-examine here, as well as to bring into question the privileged role of the experts in democratic decision-making.

KEYWORDS

epistemic democracy,
cognitive diversity,
bounded rationality,
deliberative democracy

The book *Democracy and Truth* gives good insights and an overview of social epistemology and theories about epistemic justification of democracy, especially deliberative democracy. It has in focus a recent discussion on epistemic values of democracy¹ – the potential of its procedures to produce epistemically valuable decisions – as addition to a more traditional, purely procedural justification that defines legitimacy and authority of democracy only in relation to fairness of its procedures, regardless of the outcomes they produce. This book deals with an alleged opposition between *democracy as a system that enables and protects moral and political values* (such as fairness, equality, freedom, dignity, autonomy etc.) and *truth*, arguing in favor of a hybrid position that respects both values. In this text, however, I'd like to raise several issues concerning the last chapter of the book – “Reliability Democracy and the Role of Experts in a Democratic Society”. In this chapter the author promotes a hybrid

1 David Estlund was first to argue that the normative concept of democratic authority must include an epistemic dimension (Estlund 2008).

approach that aims to develop truth-sensitive procedures that presuppose the division of epistemic labor between citizens and experts and at the same time preserve political values. The author concludes that we can say that there are experts in the domain of politics, that citizens should trust their experts and that involvement in political decision making ensures higher epistemic quality.

The author supports the solution for (alleged) conflict between political and epistemic values of democracy, proposed by Thomas Christiano, which (in order to keep both) implies the necessity of division of the epistemic labor. According to his view, we need to be aware of the distinction between the moral and the technical knowledge (Christiano 2008). We can say and (mostly) agree on who the technical experts are, but we can't agree so clearly about moral expertise. We cannot simply give more political power or political authority to those who are well educated and "know better" (Estlund 2008, Christiano 2008), as Plato suggested (Plato 2000). But this doesn't mean that expertise is irrelevant or that in politics everyone is equal in terms of knowledge. So, the author agrees with Christiano that there should exist some division of epistemic labor between the expert and the citizens, which would secure both values – the demand for political equality and the epistemic reliability of democratic decision making. In this sense, the role of citizens is to choose the aims of the society they live in and to evaluate whether the socially valuable and desirable goals are met or not (through deliberation). The role of the citizens is to identify problems, choose aims and evaluate experts, politicians and their proposed ways to reach those aims and values. On the other side, the experts are those that possess the necessary knowledge that ordinary citizens do not, and so they are, in the end, those who solve problems and find the best means to fulfill the aims that the citizens have agreed upon.

1.

I would like to bring into question this presupposed trust we should have in experts. The reason for that is not because they are not better at knowing things. They are. The reason is the cognitive functioning of all human individuals, including experts. As a matter of fact, the extensive and very significant empirical literature generated over the last three decades shows that the actual decision-making process often deviates from the normative assumptions of a theory that starts from an ideal decision maker who has all the information, who can calculate with perfect precision and who is completely rational. Herbert Simon and his colleague, the political scientist James Marsh, have developed the thesis of "bounded rationality", which departs from the assumptions made by neoclassical economics – perfect rationality assumed by models of *homo economicus* (March & Simon 1958). This limited rationality assumes not only that an individual may not have all the information he or she needs, but that even if they did, they would not be able to process them adequately. The human mind necessarily limits itself. The expert's mind as well.

Today's dominant approaches to the study of decision-making, judging and reasoning have convincingly demonstrated the existence of numerous errors that are, more importantly, systematic, identical and predictable to most members of our species. These phenomena have been termed cognitive illusions or biases, and everyone is prone to them - from "ordinary people" to experts (they are not truly objective and "neutral" and they also suffer from various cognitive limitations). According to argumentative theory of reasoning, this unquestionable fact about our cognitive functioning causes the reasoning to work best within the group (Mercier & Sperber 2011). According to this theory, group decision-making can compensate for the limitations of individual decision-making, judging and reasoning. Their model indicates that during public deliberation, when discussing diverse opinions, group reasoning outweighs individual, no matter who that individual is. In other words, this bold assumption leads to the conclusion that not only is cognition not damaged by social processes and social needs, but rather that all the cognitive illusions we are systematically inclined to come precisely through the use of reason in isolation, i.e. out of group.

2.

These findings are consistent with deliberative democracy assumptions and epistemic justification of deliberation. Helen Landemore, referring to the results obtained by Hong and Page argues that democracies and democratic decisions satisfy both conditions of legitimacy (procedural and epistemic), because what enables democratic decision-making, under certain conditions, to be of greater epistemic value than any other alternative form of decision making is the existence of cognitive diversity within a political decision-making group (Landemore 2013; Hong & Page 2004, Page 2008).

Cognitive diversity implies the existence of different perspectives, heuristics, interpretations, predicative models. But, Page says that his model of cognitive diversity can be applied to economic and democratic decision making only for the cases where group jointly solves problems or predicts an unknown outcome (deliberation and aggregation). However, there are conditions under which a group of diverse members achieves better outcomes than individuals or a small group of like-minded people, even if they are also its best members (experts). Their findings suggest that in the case of opinion aggregation, cognitive diversity is just as important as individual ability. However, for a better quality of collective response in the context of deliberation, i.e. problem solving, cognitive diversity is more important than individual ability. In other words, when it comes to problem solving, and certain conditions are satisfied, diversity trumps ability (Page 2007, 2008). The logic behind this claim is that large or randomly formed groups are more likely to be diverse, while a small group made up of those who meet a certain criterion (expertise, education, material status etc.) will often be made up of people who think alike.

In other words, individuals who are identified as the best at solving problems (experts) will most likely have similar perspectives and heuristics and so likely to be “stuck” in the same places (Landemore 2012).

Of course, this will not always work. One of the conditions that Page and Hong define is that this diversity must be relevant, that is, there must be some kind of competence of decision makers (Hong & Page 2004; Page 2008). This condition is not strict as in the case of Condorcet’s Theorem (Condorcet 1785), but only requires that citizens can understand the problem in question and that they can distinguish better from worse decisions. So, when talking about the problem of competence of ordinary citizens, it is necessary to distinguish between the (non) possession of factual knowledge and their cognitive ability to solve political problems when they are provided with relevant information and knowledge. And, as many deliberative experiments suggest, the problem with the lack of factual knowledge can be solved with the help of certain deliberative institutional mechanisms. This is important because the theorists who have argued anti-democratic conclusions have generally focused on the incompetence of ordinary citizens in terms of the knowledge and information they (don’t) possess.

So, according to Page and Hong findings, when the problem is complex and involves conditions of uncertainty (and most political problems in contemporary societies are just like that), the group’s epistemic performance will transcend the abilities of the individual. For the group to be better than any individual or any few people, even the smartest ones, individuals in it have to be relatively smart (minimal competence) and cognitively diverse.

I have claimed that the proposed way of division of cognitive labor may be reconsidered. When thinking about the competence of ordinary citizens, it is necessary to distinguish between (non) possession of factual knowledge and their cognitive ability to solve political problems when information and knowledge is presented to them (Landemore 2012). Individual competence will be defined by an individual’s ability to critically examine different arguments, with different reasons and evidence, and tell the difference between good and bad decisions. Regardless of their exposure to the same set of arguments (that are different among themselves), each individual has different cognitive “tools” to help her look at the problem in different ways, from a different perspective, focus on different dimensions of the problem, etc., allowing to satisfy the condition of independence. We can use the deliberative practice and institutions to increase the competence of ordinary citizens on issues that need to be solved, without disrupting the group’s cognitive diversity. Deliberative democrats showed that the ordinary citizens, when they were given the chance to become better informed through the process of public deliberation, can truly contribute to finding solutions even for issues and problems that are specifically technical (Fishkin & Lushkin 2005). Comparing the pre-deliberative and post-deliberative survey, it is evident that in the deliberation process, citizens become more informed about the discussed political issues (Ackerman & Fishkin 2005; Fishkin 2009; Fishkin, Luskin & Jowell 2000).

Concerning all said, my question is, then, why limit the role of the public only to decisions about *which* experts will make good political decisions and solve common problems? If we doubt the competence of ordinary citizens, if we say that they lack knowledge about complex issues which are essential for political problems resolution, how do citizens evaluate which experts are effective and who should be trusted and who will make best decisions? I am not arguing we don't need experts or that there are no experts in particular fields, but only that they shouldn't be the only ones who make decisions about complex common problems. Bearing in mind the proposed arguments based on idea of collective intelligence, more involvement of ordinary citizens in every stage of decision-making process can, as we saw, be epistemically beneficial, under the right conditions. Inclusive deliberation may thus increase both political and epistemic values of democratic decision making. Not because every single member of that group is smart (or all are equally knowledgeable) but because they all, as a group, can come to better solutions.

Conclusion

If we consider the thesis about the importance of cognitive diversity for the quality of decisions, then the very fact that the same group of people – professional politicians and experts, who become more and more alike in their attitudes and actions through time – identifies problems of the wider community, creates a political agenda and makes final decisions that are binding for all, leads to the conclusion that we should include a larger number of (cognitively diverse) people in the democratic decision-making process. In that sense, I would argue for more deliberation between citizens and experts, that would maintain the diversity assumption in all stages of democratic decision making - defining best and most realistic social goals and values and creating the best solutions for problems. And, it is not because the experts don't possess a greater knowledge than lay people – they do and that knowledge is crucial for good decision making – but because they are not impartial, don't have all a information and perspectives and suffer from cognitive biases, like the rest of us. – they do and that knowledge is crucial for good decision making - but because they are not impartial and have cognitive biases, like the rest of us. Given the complexity and uncertainty that exists in the realm of political decision making, we agree with Aristotle that the assumption that there is someone who is wiser than everyone else and whose decisions would be better than those of any other individual member of the community is not inconsistent with the fact that those decisions would be even better if that individual would include in problem solving someone (even) less wise, and then someone else and then someone else (Aristotle 1988).

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Epistemička odlika demokratije: uloga eksperta u demokratskom donošenju odluka

Apstrakt

U svojoj knjizi *Demokratija i istina: sukob između političkih i epistemičkih vrlina*, Snježana Prijic Samaržija se zalaže za stanovište po kom čisto proceduralno opravdanje, koje definiše autoritet i legitimnost demokratije samo u odnosu na pravičnost same procedure, nije dovoljno za potpuno opravdanje demokratije i da, stoga, treba uključiti i neke epistemičke vrednosti. Ova epistemička vrednost demokratije zavisi od kvaliteta odluka koje demokratske procedure proizvode. U tom smislu autorka se zalaže za hibirnu teoriju koja obezbeđuje sklad između političkih i epistemičkih vrednosti, favorizujući deliberativnu proceduru za tu svrhu, i na taj način promovise jednako poštovanje obe demokratske vrednosti. Pri tome, autorka zagovara specifičnu vrstu epistemičke podele rada koju ću ovde pokušati da kritički preispitam, a samim tim i izolovanu ulogu eksperata u demokratskom odlučivanju.

Ključne reči: epistemička demokratija, kognitivni diverzitet, ograničena racionalnost, deliberativna demokratija