
Foundations of deliberative democracy. Empirical research and normative implications

On 22-24 February 2012, the Faculty of Political Science “Roberto Ruffilli” in Forlì hosted three open lectures by **Jürg Steiner**, Professor of Political Science at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and at the European University Institute in Florence and Professor Emeritus at the University of Bern.

The series of lectures entitled “**Foundations of deliberative democracy. Empirical research and normative implications**” was based on a book recently published by Professor Steiner and dedicated to the exploration of theoretical, methodological, empirical and practical aspects of deliberation.

The first lecture was devoted to the philosophical background of deliberation and the philosophical preconditions of research. Drawing on classical **deliberative philosophy** à la Habermas and Kant, the speaker defined the deliberative spirit as the capacity to listen to each other's arguments. The guest invoked Switzerland as an historical example of a deeply divided society. An extremely poor country until the end of the 19th century, Switzerland had been affected by deep divisions since the reformation and experienced five religious civil wars. The country's religious and linguistic cleavages made it comparable to Bosnia and Herzegovina, Iraq and other **divided societies**. Revealing the features that distinguish Switzerland from the Westminster system (proportionality in contrast to the winner-takes-all principle, like in Great Britain and the USA; the grand coalition of large parties; federalism and the veto right), the speaker concluded that the good news about Switzerland is that poor and divided countries can achieve a prosperous democratic system. The bad news is that it takes time to overcome deep divisions. Arguing that the right kind of culture is missing in Iraq and Bosnia, Professor Steiner introduced the terms *spirit of accommodation* and *amicable agreement*, later replaced with *deliberation*. The latter term, denoting the force of a better argument, is opposed to *strategic bargaining*, *rational choice* and the assumption of *individual utility maximization*, which have been prominent in economics and political science in past 20-30 years.



The second lecture was research-oriented, as it focused on ways of doing **empirical research** on deliberation. Linking social science research to assumptions that have a philosophical background, the speaker presented the relationship between philosophy and empirical work on deliberation, transferring theory to the real world of politics.

Attempts to measure the **level of deliberation** resulted in the development of the Discourse Quality Index (DQI), a system of coding individual speech acts. The DQI, applied to the analysis of parliamentary debates and other speeches, focuses on identifying transformative moments that

humanize the other side. According to Steiner, deliberation is participatory, and its elements include: (1) justifying one's arguments in a logical way, where reasoning skills go back to Kant's rationality; (2) justifying one's arguments in terms of the common good; and (3) the will to listen to other arguments, while actors' preferences are not fixed, as in rational choice. The speaker presented practical experiments on deliberation conducted in Bosnia, Columbia and Turkey.

The third lecture was dedicated to the **practice of deliberation**, presenting ways to apply research in practice. To illustrate how deliberation has gained political prominence, the speaker presented experiences in using deliberative methods across the world (Canada, Australia, Holland, China, etc.). In contrast, he claimed that the current degree of deliberation is not sufficient, as shown by the debates between republicans and democrats in Washington with almost zero degree of deliberation.

The lecture aroused great interest on the part of the audience. The examples from various countries analyzed during the **discussion** revealed much variation in deliberative practices across the world.

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