
Is Successful Deliberation Possible? Theories of Deliberative Democracy in Relation to the State, Civil Society and Individuals

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Summary

Deliberative democracy is embedded in different theories and approaches and represents a focal point for most current democratic theory. This article seeks to contribute to an understanding of the theory of deliberative democracy from various theoretical roots, each focusing on a different level or sphere of deliberation. I will consider how each theoretical perspective understands the role of the state, civil society and the individual. Based on a review of the literature, I theorise that the often overlooked combination of micro, mezzo and macro levels of deliberation must all be included for any deliberation to be successful in terms of political equality and democratic decision-making. In my view, critical theory has the greatest potential to include all three spheres of deliberation.

Keywords: Deliberative Democracy, Liberal Constitutionalism, Critical Theory, Rational and Social Choice Theory, Difference Democracy

1. Introduction

Contemporary democratic theory is embedded in the growing differences and distances between citizens and the decision-making processes (Barber, 1984). It is characterised by a deliberative turn, and by 1990 had become the focal point for most decision-making (Dryzek, 2000: 2-5). Deliberative democracy consists of two interrelated poles: democracy and deliberation. A general definition of the first is central to the direct input of citizens into the decision-making regarding rules and policies (Beetham as cited in Elstub, 2015: 101).

Meanwhile, deliberation represents a ‘dialogical process of exchanging reasons for the purpose of resolving a problematic situation that cannot be settled without interpersonal co-ordination and co-operation’ (Elster and Cohen, as cited in

Elstub, 2006: 304). The theory has evolved as a challenge to the weakness of liberal democratic theory as a means of assessing liberal representative institutions that treat political representatives as the main deliberators who make decisions on the public's behalf. Deliberationists recognise the importance of engaging individual preferences and value orientations in the wider public sphere, conditional on inclusiveness and unconstrained dialogue (Smith, 2003: 56; Bohman, 1998). According to Bohman (*ibid.*: 422-423), deliberative democracy has 'come of age' as a practical (critical and oppositional) ideal. There is, however, no generally accepted definition of deliberative democracy due to the many different concepts and empirical research on the matter. It is diverse and complex, being a combination of various ideologies (republicanism, liberalism, socialism and multiculturalism) and of various theories (Elstub, 2006: 1-2). Rooted in the Rawlsian theory of public reason (1970), Dahl's non-participatory pluralism, Arrow's social choice, Riker's rational choice theory and the Habermasian theory of communicative action (1980), there have been four generations of thought on deliberative democracy, each characterised by different orientations. The first generation addressed deliberation at the macro level – the establishment of normative justifications and political institutions as the main venues for deliberation. The second generation started to extend the scope of deliberation to complex civil society with the aim of institutionalisation. The third generation (the current generation) focuses on institutionalisation of practices at the levels of civil society and individual deliberation (Elstub, 2010; 2015). However, the theory is now entering a fourth generation which focuses on the idea of deliberative systems, as developed by Mansbridge and Parkinson (2012). In my view, this approach covers all three levels of deliberation: micro, mezzo and macro. While the broad range of different concepts has filtered into many discourses and debates (Chambers, 2003: 308), its primary aim remains to make politics more inclusive. The idea that individual citizens are members of civil society with a central role in democratic decision-making has also been generally accepted into current democratic theory (Goodin and Dryzek, 2006: 221; Keane, 2009). A review of the literature reveals two theoretical responses to studies on deliberative democracy: a) theorists who 'rise above' the traditional views of a particular democratic theory;¹ and b) theorists who emphasise the political system (i.e. the constitution and law) as the main venue for deliberation (Rawls, 1997).

The main aim of this article is therefore to contribute to the current understanding of successful deliberation in practice via the introduction of a holistic approach to successful deliberative democracy that gathers all contrasting concepts

¹ See for example Benhabib (1996), who puts deliberative democracy at the centre of liberal and democratic theory, or Gutmann and Thompson (1996), who see deliberative democracy as an alternative to the democratic proceduralism and liberal constitutionalism.

(theories of deliberative democracy) with a focus on three levels as venues for deliberation: micro, mezzo and macro. Given that the success of deliberative democracy consists of unconstrained dialogue and discussion, political equality is necessary since it promotes democratic decision-making, collective problem-solving and justice (Young, 2000: 6-10), as well as the inclusion of individuals (micro level), civil society organisations and associations (mezzo level), and political institutions (macro level). Thus, our main research question is this: is such an inclusive and multilevel process of deliberation possible – and if so, which theory of deliberative democracy offers the greatest potential? Most empirical research into deliberative democracy focuses on deliberation within particular types of institutions or groups, or at a particular level of deliberation. This clearly represents a problem of scale for deliberative democracy theory. I argue that the often overlooked combination and proportionate inclusion of micro, mezzo and macro spheres of deliberation (taking into account the main characteristics of the theoretical roots of deliberative democracy) is crucial for any successful deliberation in practice, and we argue that critical theory has the greatest potential.

I begin by setting out the research question and reviewing the existing data in the literature on the levels (spheres) of deliberation and the relationship between the state and civil society, and the individual. Secondly, I review the different theories of deliberative democracy. Thirdly, I draw two comparisons of deliberative theories based on: (1) their micro/mezzo/macro level orientations in relation to the state/civil society's role, using the following variables as a framework for deliberation: appropriate venue, the sources of influence and means of deliberation; and (2) the division between two aspects of civil society – interest groups versus individuals. I will conclude by discussing the main findings based on the theoretical implications of each level of deliberation.

2. Levels of Deliberation: Micro, Mezzo and Macro

In this section, I present three levels of deliberation (the micro, mezzo and macro)² as a framework for my holistic approach towards successful deliberation. Within the existing literature there is no clearly defined line between the three spheres of deliberation, however there is some indication of these levels. Studies examining the effects of different participatory, deliberative procedures in various con-

² In relation to the *micro and macro* terminology used in the literature it is necessary to distinguish between two aspects: a) the use of micro and macro approaches/models of deliberation that focus on ways in which the ideal theory of deliberative democracy can function (Parkinson, 2006; Hendriks, 2002; 2006); and b) micro, mezzo and macro levels of deliberation with a focus on a particular sphere in which ideal deliberation occurs (individuals, civil society, state institutions).

texts focus on the micro level (individual preferences), the mezzo level (interactions within deliberative groups) and the macro level (political decision-making and citizenry) (Hess et al., 2015: 5-7). In studying where deliberative interactions occur, Meadowcroft (2004) distinguishes between the constitutional level (political institutions and constitution-making), the societal and the mezzo level. The micro level therefore generally constitutes individuals (citizens) and their preferences (Hess et al., 2015: 5-7). In this context, many authors turn to *mini public*s³, in which citizens' preferences and subjective desires are translated into face-to-face deliberation between citizens (Niemeyer, 2011; Goodin and Dryzek, 2006; Lafont, 2014). Fung (as cited in Dryzek, 2005: 230) argues for designed public forums, such as citizens' juries, deliberative polls, planning cells, policy dialogues and participatory problem-solving exercises as a micro moment in the macro life of the public sphere. The macro level on the other hand is linked to a larger political system – courts, legislatures, administrative agencies (Goodin and Dryzek, 2006), and even to a broad public sphere in terms of the inclusion of citizens in the deliberation on general political issues (Lafont, 2014: 1-2). According to Lightbody (2014), the mezzo level of deliberation lacks a clear utilisation and examination. She argues for its introduction into public hearings, which creates a connection between lay citizens and experts, representatives and government officials (see also Hendriks, 2002; 2006).

We can see that in the existing literature the terminology for the micro and mezzo levels of deliberation is not clearly distinguished; the public sphere presents not only the mezzo level, but is also applied at the micro level. The macro level however is a generally accepted concept focusing on the polity (the state with its political institutions). Therefore, we group the three levels of deliberation by the level of analysis in order to clarify and explain our research question based on particular theoretical orientations towards the appropriate venues for deliberation. We apply the micro level to individuals and citizens, the mezzo level to civil society and its associations, and the macro level to the political system.

3. Civil Society and the State

In deliberative democracy, the relationship between the state and civil society (public sphere, interest groups and individual citizens) is blurred, especially when it comes to the question of whether to emphasise actions through the state or through the public sphere. The best approach, argues Dryzek (2000: 80), is a comparative

³ A mini public is a small group of people in deliberation. They are excluded from macro political decision-making or the formal institutions of government; they include deliberative polls, consensus conferences, citizens' juries, planning cells, etc. (Goodin and Dryzek, 2006: 220; Niemeyer, 2011).

and historical approach; through a comparison with the real theoretical alternatives and not by highlighting some 'ideal' type of deliberation. Some authors extend the role of the state into other crucial areas (e.g. public officials within state institutions) (Gutmann and Thompson, 1996; 2004), while others emphasise the role of civil society more profoundly in terms of communication with the state institutions in the framework of discursive democracy (Smith and Wales, 2000; Habermas, 1994; 1996; Dryzek, 2000; Hendriks, 2006; Young, 2000). Dryzek (2000) meanwhile prefers independent designs that confront state power, which ought to be created in the public sphere – at the *mezzo* level. Cohen (2003), on the other hand, argues for the creation of deliberative associative democracy as a fundamental ideal towards the supplementation of representative government, while Young (2000) sees civil society in terms of group representation and the politics of difference as the basis for deliberative democracy.

Habermas (1996) presents a two-track model in which the centre and periphery represent two important spheres for deliberation. The model assumes a strong public (opinion-formation) on the one side and the state (will-formation) on the other, while the legislature is involved in both. Habermas' idea of consolidation puts the modern nation state and its legislature at the centre of the deliberative system (Mansbridge et al., 2012: 9). Meanwhile, the latest version of the deliberative system approach, introduced by Mansbridge and Parkinson (2012), extends the scope of civil society and the state arena, and moves the focus beyond the nation state to include various non-state institutions. These two main concepts – the state and civil society – are both very much bound up with contemporary democracy. We will interpret the state⁴ as a 'set of individuals and organisations legally authorised to make binding decisions for a society' within the governmental structures (Dryzek, 2000: 82) at the macro level of deliberation. As Young (2000: 158) points out, the state refers to the 'activities and institutions of legal regulation, enforcement based on coercion, legislatively mandated co-ordination and public services'. By contrast, civil society refers to social life outside the state institutions (Chandhoke, 1992), conceptually differentiating between the relatively autonomous voluntary associations from the state and the economy (Habermas, 1996; Cohen and Arato, 1992). Indeed, much has been already written about the role of civil society and the *mezzo* sphere of deliberation, and that, regardless of its capacity to promote inclusion and express deliberative democracy, civil society cannot and should not seek to substitute the state's unique role, such as creating spaces to promote and encourage

⁴ Skocpol's idea of an autonomous state brough connecting public officials with their own collective interests and nonreducible to the dominant class interests in society seems somehow unrealistic when we consider the fact that imperatives exist irrespective of the desires and preferences of public officials – especially in the case of conflict when they override these preferences (Dryzek, 2000: 83).

deliberation within political institutions, society and underwriting institutions, as well creating monopolised binding decisions that overcome human collective action problems. In addition, while having in mind the state's important role, it therefore cannot and should not be the terminus of deliberation (Mansbridge et al., 2012: 10). If our goal remains to deepen democracy and fight injustice, strengthening both of them is essential (Young, 2000: 156).

We now continue with a review of the five theoretical roots of deliberative democracy based on their level (sphere) of orientation in relation to the state, civil society and individual citizens as important venues for successful deliberation. We follow Dryzek's (2000) division of the theory of deliberative democracy and Elstub's (2010; 2015) 'four-generational' layout: a liberal view of constitutional democracy (liberal constitutionalism) and discursive democracy based on discourse and communication (critical theory, social and rational choice theory and difference democracy).

4. Liberal Constitutionalism

The idea of deliberative democracy is rooted in liberal constitutionalism, where constitution-making is held to be an appropriate venue for deliberation. Rawls (1997: 766-772) introduces the idea of a well-ordered constitutional democracy in which public reason about basic justice (constitutional affairs and legislation) guides deliberation and is crucial for citizens' reasoning concerning constitutional matters of basic justice. In his work on public reason he emphasises the profound meaning of public reason in terms of the 'basic moral and political values that determine constitutional democratic governmental relation to its citizens and their relation to one another'. This idea applies only to the discussion of some of the questions on the public political forum, namely: the discourse of judges, government officials and candidates for public office. His focus on civil society can be seen against the 'background culture' that includes various agencies and associations, whose liberties and rights are assured by the law. From the liberalist perspective, citizens debate, develop arguments and follow public reason, while they 'instruct society's political culture and deepen their understanding of one another even when agreement cannot be reached' (Rawls, 1997: 799). Gutmann and Thompson (1996: 200) also highlight the constitutional structure and the agreements under which deliberation has to proceed, while placing three fundamental principles as ideals of deliberative democracy, namely: reciprocity, publicity and accountability. The theory however does not recognise the electoral mechanisms in terms of the transmission of public opinion from the public sphere to the state (Dryzek, 2000: 56). Its major weakness is shown in its inability to include a wide participation of the electorate, which builds a legitimate political order (Borgebund, 2010).

This theoretical ground of deliberative democracy is somehow 'limited' when it comes to questioning the legitimacy of democracy as a whole and the actual inclusion of all three levels for a successful deliberation. Deliberation itself is seen from a constitutional perspective placed within formal political institutions. But despite its direct macro level and formal deliberative orientation, the inclusion of the mezzo level can be seen through the development of research institutions (e.g. universities) (Mansbridge et al., 2012: 10-11). While it does not entirely ignore the micro sphere, the perception of citizens deliberating is more about how citizens reason about the constitutional matters of basic justice.

5. Critical Theory

The second theoretical root of deliberative democracy derives from critical theory. Although the theory has gone through some incremental changes and now concerns the relatively micro- and mezzo-oriented theoretical root of deliberative democracy, Habermas, its greatest contributor, was originally interested in what the European bourgeoisie perceived as a deliberative paradigm: the public sphere as consisting of conversations and meeting places. Some contemporary parallels with this point of view can be found today in new social movements, such as the ecological, peace and feminist movements, which are more in confrontation with the capitalist state than attempting to accommodate it. In *Between Facts and Norms* (1996), Habermas is more interested in how the communicative processes of civil society influence the legislative and policy processes of the state, where the latter are able to guarantee constitutional support and the protection of civil society (human rights law). He argues that informal public opinion-formation generates influence; influence is then transformed into communicative power through the channels of political election; the communicative power is again transformed into administrative power through legislation (*ibid.*: 28). This theory has been criticised by Dryzek (2000: 20-27) due to its inability to be a true critical theory, especially in terms of Habermas' emphasis on elections as the main source of influence and law-making. This therefore aligns it more closely with liberal constitutionalist theory than with critical theory. However, he does not explicitly refer to the state as being specifically liberal, but rather perceives this as an inevitability under the instrumental rationality and system imperatives (the state and the economy).

Critical theory in general understands the state to be an entity of emancipated individuals and organisations which are legally authorised to make binding decisions, while the whole theory is interested in citizen competence through democratic participation, which represents an important contribution to the micro level of deliberation. Seen from this point of view, Habermas' contribution to the communicative rationality based on pragmatism was to treat it as a process whereby civil society is able to influence the legislative and state policy processes. This aspect

of civil society and its members goes beyond the success of achieving predefined individual goals and moves towards the personal understanding between the members. As communicative rationality is free of coercion, deception and manipulation, it is able to develop a deliberative conception of democracy. The public sphere can also easily be linked to the concept of civil society – it refers to all social interactions which are not those of the state and economy, while the politicised aspect of civil society regards it as voluntary political associations (Habermas, 1996). Those theorists who maintain a stronger critical perspective have criticised the limited aggregative model of democracy,⁵ while proposing some alternative venues for deliberation: civil society in confrontation with the state, public spheres or workplace democracy. Understanding the Habermasian theory of discourse and the public sphere, where public opinion is produced and is able to be turned into a communicative power, can be regarded as a major *mezzo*-oriented feature of critical theory in its attempt to conceptualise or understand successful deliberation. By contrast, treating elections and legislation as the main venues for communicative power and therefore deliberation itself emphasises instead the political (macro) level.

6. Social Choice Theory

An aggregative model of democracy such as the social choice theory of group decision-making is a critique of democracy which is not concerned with the way groups make decisions, but with the way they aggregate information about the views, interests or preferences of individuals within voting systems (Dryzek and List, 2003: 1-2). However, the theory has a general macro-level orientation. The concepts of the public sphere and interest groups are accepted at the macro-level through voting (the main collective choice mechanism), although the theory emphasises the great potential of elections as aggregating mechanisms. For social choice theorists, especially Kenneth Arrow and William Riker, talk is cheap and voter-distinct opinions in the voting system are not an option. They argue that collective choice (an important feature of deliberation) produces instability and arbitrariness in the context of voting. According to Arrow's impossibility theorem, this does not create successful deliberation, but rather represents an impossible way for any voting system or collective choice mechanism to be devised more generally, and it makes deliberation highly vulnerable to dictatorships or to manipulation by actors intent on securing collective outcomes in their favour. The second reason why social choice theory can be regarded as a macro-level theory can be found in Riker's (1982) radical critique of democracy. Riker attacks any notion of authentic democracy (populism) and does not believe the will of the people should be embodied through collective

⁵ Dryzek (2000: 20-27) argued for some alternatives to elections: protests, demonstrations, boycotts, information campaigns, media events, lobbying, etc.

choice. Elections are nevertheless useful because they periodically provide voters with an opportunity to turn out the tyrants. This model represents minimal democracy. The theory is thus a radically anti-democratic political set (Dryzek, 2000: 33-50).

Despite the fact that this theoretical focus is in many ways different from deliberation between individuals, Dryzek and List (2003) made the important contribution of linking the two theories. He argues for five 'escape routes' or connections between them. The first connection is the fact that, in social choice theory, an individual's preferences and views are perceived to be truthful, thus strategic manipulation is not a cure for deliberation. The second common link derives from the preference structures in deliberation which make cyclical and strategic manipulation less possible. The third link comes from the ways in which individuals uncover or create tacit issue-dimensions in which dimension-specific aggregation becomes possible and solutions for overall problems are also opened. The fact that agreements can be produced on a set of relative alternatives renders agenda manipulation less of a threat to deliberation, which is characterised as the fourth escape route, while the fifth derives from social choice theory's ability to produce agreement on interpersonally comparable variables which are in fact based on individual interest and the decision principle having a potential for deliberation. McKelvey (as cited in Van Mill, 1996) also argues that even the slightest changes in the distribution of preferences across individuals can cause major shifts in the content of collective decisions, so social choice theory, which prefers a voting system as the means of collective choice, is thus meaningless and unstable. Dryzek (2000: 51-52), on the other hand, goes beyond 'electoral' transmission mechanisms and proposes a discursive (rhetoric) approach, whereby deliberative democracy is actually capable of working within communicative parallels to all mechanisms, even those of social choice theorists. He argues that the rhetorical skills of particular individuals can make a great difference in contested decision-making (e.g. Martin Luther King's speeches, feminist discourses and environmentalism). Despite the theory's general macro-level orientation and its non-acceptance of individual preferences and collective choice mechanisms, it perceives group decision-making as a mezzo level of deliberation, although not accepted as such within the theory.

7. Rational Choice Theory

Rational choice theory examines the strategic behaviour of individuals pursuing their goals which is unchangeable during social and political interaction. For rational theorists, the world political order in terms of political governments does not exist due to its bureaucracy and places little value in the public interest. The main concern of rational choice theory is the political world of strategically rational actors, which, according to Dryzek (2000: 33), represents the very worst aspects of developed liberal

democracies and treats preferences as invariant. From this point of view, the theory is generally micro-level oriented and does not recognise the mezzo or macro levels of deliberation since its main focus is on strategically rational actors. Deliberative democracy by contrast understands preference change as the main feature of the deliberation process. Thus, these two versions of democracy are in opposition. Nevertheless, rational choice theory does contribute towards deliberation through its rooted communicative rationality found within the literature (*ibid.*: 31-32). The concept of communicative action – developed by Habermas – was one of the first attempts to move away from strategic action. In general, this theory is primarily a theory of rationality based on the existing institutions of law and democracy (Rehg as cited in Habermas, 1996). Both however consist of actors responding to other actors' behaviour. Strategic action is based on the rules of rational choice and impacts on the decisions of rational 'opponents', while communicative action is defined by actors oriented 'not through egocentric calculations of success but through acts aiming towards reaching understanding' (Habermas, 1984: 279-286). Austen-Smith (as cited in Dryzek, 2000: 36), who is one of the rational choice theorists more oriented towards the prospects of deliberation, has analysed discussion as a form of signalling. He believes that although a speech by one actor can never change the preferences of another rational strategic actor, it can convey information which affects his strategic calculations on whether or not to believe the speaker, who may choose to manipulate or deceive while maintaining the appearance of credibility. Mackie (1998) criticises this view starting from the assumption that political interaction is a one-off affair. He argues that every actor exposed as a liar will never be believed again. For Przeworski (1998), deliberation can include individuals with false beliefs which they accept; in one extreme form, they may also accept ideology as truth; this highlights the potential danger of deliberation and collective choice, since free individuals cannot be prevented from believing in a deception (Dryzek, 2000: 37). As we see, there are two sides to understanding rational choice strategy: rational and communication actions, which both contain strong micro-level orientations (seeing individuals as actors contributing to the decision-making process). Reasoned agreement (consensus) is also an important feature of deliberative democracy and is compatible with the rationalist view.

8. The Difference Democracy Critique

Within the theory of deliberative democracy there are difference democrats⁶, mostly from a few unified schools of thought (postmodernists, poststructuralists), who sug-

⁶ The difference democrats who propose solutions to the problems of exclusion and oppression within deliberative democratic theory include: Chantal Mouffe, who proposes radical politics for a more radical and plural democracy; William Connolly and Anne Phillips, who propose the politics of presence with members of disadvantaged groups; and Lani Guinier, who focuses on ethnic and racial minorities.

gest including a variety of individuals and groups into the political sphere. Thus, successful deliberation entails the inclusion of excluded and oppressed members of society (*ibid.*: 55-58). The theoretical mezzo-level orientation as an important venue for deliberation can primarily be seen in the ideas proposed by Young (1989: 261-264). Young argues for recognition of oppressed and disadvantaged groups by the state by asserting a 'democratic public' within group representation mechanisms and activities, such as the self-organisation of group members, expressing the group's analysis of policy proposals and veto power regarding specific policies. In order to lay the ground for successful deliberation, such group representation represents the best means of promoting just outcomes in democratic decision-making processes and deliberation (within democratic procedures) in order to ensure fairness, maximise knowledge and promote practical wisdom. The idea of a 'rainbow coalition', on the other hand, expresses a heterogeneous society based on group representation made up of various autonomous publics and governmental decision-making bodies that provide for group representation. The idea highlights the need for the representation of disadvantaged groups by registering a group-based vote, offering them special rights and the possibility of public expression.

Their critique stands against liberal constitutionalism and critical theory in terms of reasonable political interaction in democratic politics which, according to difference democrats, can 'systematically exclude a variety of voices from effective participation in democratic politics' (Dryzek, 2000: 58). This critique stands in opposition to social choice theory whose advocates fear the openness of deliberative democratic practices. Difference democracy highlights group differentiation (interest-group politics) which is seen as a necessary source of discussion and therefore successful deliberation. Little space remains to focus on individuals as members of civil society; even the role of the state is reduced, since reasonable political interaction is seen as excluding participation within democratic politics.

9. Comparison

Following this brief presentation of the theoretical roots of deliberative democracy we can identify certain common characteristics in terms of the micro, mezzo and macro levels of orientation (Table 1). The main aim of our review of this literature has been to identify how these different theoretical roots of deliberative democracy attempt to include individuals and various groups within civil society, and the state into the deliberative processes. We also want to know which sphere of deliberation they accept as the most appropriate venue for successful deliberation, and which sphere they consider to have the main characteristics of successful deliberative democracy. The only theory that combines all three levels of deliberation equally is critical theory; in its essence it is concerned about the inclusion of civil society and

citizens in combination with political decision-making. The main focus of critical theory is the opposition of emancipated individuals and interest groups to oppressive political forces; actions are based on citizens' competences, reasoned argument, dialogue and understanding. Nevertheless, critical theorists connect the micro and mezzo levels of deliberation within the electoral mechanisms as the main source of influence, thereby making an important contribution to democratic decision-making, collective problem-solving, and thus successful deliberation in practice with the inclusion of all three spheres of deliberation equally. By contrast, liberals consider the only sufficient venue for deliberation to be constitutional and legal arrangements (the macro sphere), and do not take account of external constitutional actors (civil society) (Dryzek, 2000: 20-21). Since the micro level is not generally accepted as relevant to the deliberation itself, it can be seen in terms of citizens reasoning about basic justice. The theory does not accept electoral mechanisms and is thus unable to include all spheres of deliberation equally. This is particularly evident from the way it perceives deliberation – within formal political institutions and unconstrained dialogue and discussion, which is only relevant between political actors. Social choice theory by contrast is perceived as being theoretically opposed to the notions of deliberative democracy as a whole since it does not include any particular sphere of deliberation and its important characteristics. It is rather concerned with the 'logical properties and normative desirability of alternative mechanisms, such as voting systems, for aggregating individual preferences into collective decisions' (*ibid.*: 33). This behavioural aspect of individuals represents the main difference between social and rational choice theories. The latter is thus more open to the inclusion of micro-level deliberation that also reflects the theory's primary focus – individual strategic behaviour (strategic action and reasoned agreement), which, according to the deliberative process, can actually make a difference to the decision-making process. Finally, there are the difference democrats who are embedded in the mezzo sphere of deliberation, having no particular linkage to the micro or macro levels. However, compared with the other theoretical roots described above, difference democracy runs parallel with critical theory in its conception of successful deliberation. On the one hand, it is interested in new actors – disadvantaged and marginalised groups – through group representation mechanisms and group voting systems, while on the other it considers macro-level deliberation (state institutions) as a mere tool for its realisation.

Given that the state – and therefore the macro sphere of deliberation – maintains its importance within deliberative democratic decision-making, our intention is not to reduce or even suppress its role, but to place our focus rather on civil society and individuals as contemporary and prevailing venues for successful deliberation. Due to the gap in the literature between the utilisation and appropriate division of interest groups and individuals within the concept of civil society (between the

Table 1. Comparison of Deliberative Democracy Theories in Relation to the State and Civil Society

	Liberal constitutionalism	Critical theory	Rational choice theory	Social choice theory	Difference democracy
Proponents	John Rawls, Gutmann and Thompson	Habermas	David Austen-Smith, Becker	Arrow, Riker	Iris M. Young
Level of deliberation	Macro level	Macro, mezzo and micro level	Macro (and micro) level	Macro level	Mezzo and micro level
Framework for deliberation	Formal political institutions (legislatures, supreme courts)	Complex, large-scale civil society, public sphere	Existing legal institutions and democracy	Existing legal institutions and democracy	Group representation mechanisms and activities
Venue for deliberation	Constitution-making; constitutional structures	Democratic participation	Strategic action through reasoned argument (linked with Habermasian communicative theory)	Collective choice	Rainbow coalition – heterogeneous society
Main source of influence	Law, constitution	Elections, law-making, lawful administration	Rational behaviour through election	No behavioural aspect; aggregation of information through voting systems	A group-based vote and the introduction of special rights for oppressed groups
Means of deliberation	Public reason	Communicative rationality and action	Individual strategic behaviour of rational actors	Main collective choice mechanisms (voting systems)	Group representation mechanisms and the politics of difference within democratic procedures

micro and mezzo levels of deliberation), we see the need to explain these differences used within the theory of deliberative democracy in order to obtain a more holistic overview. In Table 2 we present the different aspects of the concept of civil society applied by theories of deliberative democracy. Some of them focus on groups (e.g. interest groups and associations); others apply to individuals as members of

civil society; while others still include both equally. Rational choice theorists treat individuals as the ‘new component’ of civil society and thus the micro sphere of deliberation, hence a close focus on their strategic behaviour and action as venues for deliberation. Critical theorists are partially concerned with individual competences on the one hand and interest group communicative actions and public discourse on the other, while even radical liberals argue for individual reasoning as an important venue for deliberation. Meanwhile, social choice theorists and difference democracy theorists emphasise the importance of various groups rather than individuals at the micro level.

Table 2. Comparison of Deliberative Democracy Theories in Relation to Civil Society (Interest Groups versus Individuals)

	Civil society	
	Interest groups	Individuals
Liberal constitutionalism		Individuals/citizens with basic moral and political values – a citizen’s reasoning
Critical theory	Public sphere of political associations and social movements through communicative actions, public discourse	Individual’s/citizen’s competences and personal involvement in politics
Rational choice theory		Individual strategic behaviour and strategically rational actors; individual speech and discourse analysis
Social choice theory	Deliberation of group decision within voting systems; dealing with the inclusion of the groups excluded from decision-making	
Difference democracy	Dealing with disadvantaged groups and group recognition in policy-making within a group representation mechanism	

10. Conclusion

The main aim of our article has been to examine deliberative democracy theory from a theoretical perspective and the micro, mezzo and macro levels, applying a holistic approach in order to understand successful deliberation in practice. Based on our research findings, we are able to confirm our initial hypothesis that successful deliberation requires the conjunction of all three levels equally, meaning individuals, civil society groups and political institutions. We also argue that critical theory has the greatest potential of all theories of deliberative democracy to in-

clude individuals, civil society organisations and state institutions. In order to fully understand and potentially create successful deliberation, our research findings also reveal that it is necessary to treat all theoretical implications as comprehensive and mutually reinforcing. Focusing on just one sphere of deliberation (e.g. groups) makes it difficult to lay out a holistic overview and ‘plan’ for successful deliberation. This also remains true if we were only to take into consideration liberal constitutionalism practices and venues for deliberation, while being unable to see and consider the civil society context and its important features for successful deliberation. However, even the most extreme theories – namely liberal constitutionalism and social choice theory on the one hand, and rational choice theory on the other – all accept on their particular terms the role of individuals, groups and civil society as a whole, even if they pay little concern to their meanings in terms of venues for deliberation. This is also crucial for understanding our two objectives in adopting a holistic approach. Firstly, when considering the inclusion of individuals in deliberative processes as the most important venue for successful deliberation (e.g. individual speeches, preferences and competences as influential factors towards deliberative policy-making), we are able to observe and compare these different deliberative level utilisations in deliberative democracy theory. Secondly, we are able to bridge the gap between individuals and interest groups within the concept of civil society – between the micro and mezzo levels of deliberation. In addition, we can identify the roots of the micro, mezzo and macro orientations of particular theories in the cultural-political and historical background. During the 1960s and 1970s, democracy was highly participatory in America and Europe. However, following the crisis of American political science, Dahl’s non-participatory pluralism within democratic theory came to represent an alternative approach. In the 1980s, American scientists denied the value of voting within Riker’s ‘liberalism against populism’, while in Europe Habermas’ theory of communicative action highlighted the value of discourse. This watershed period resulted in today’s complex and various deliberative democratic theories making it possible to draw a line between: (i) the American macro-level theorists who draw on the ideas of Hobbes, Kant and Rousseau and deny the value of voting while emphasising instrumental rationality – namely the liberal constitutionalism and social and rational choice theories; and (ii) the European mezzo and micro theorists who follow the Kantian and Marxist critique of capitalism and who highlight the communication and discourse within civil society and its members. As we have seen, various theorists critical of liberal politics (difference democracy and critical theory in particular) advocate the inclusion of civil society as an important sphere for deliberation. Dryzek’s (2000) theory of communicative action and rationality is thus seen as an alternative to both sides in order to recognise civil society as an important venue for deliberation.

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