Confronting the demands of a deliberative public sphere with media constraints

Daniela Kleinschmit *

SLU, Department of Forest Products, P.O. Box 7008, SE-75007 Uppsala, Sweden

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

The main aim of this paper is to investigate and discuss the applicability of a normative meta-theory on empirical research. This is done by confronting the demands of a deliberative public sphere with assumptions resulting from media theory and discussing it on the basis of exemplary cases from environmental and forest policy cases. A core concept of this paper is Jürgen Habermas' notion of a deliberative discourse in the public sphere, where the essential elements for a democratic ideal are openness to speakers from the periphery of the political system, a discursive communication flow and a public consensus or a result supported by the majority. Since today's political public sphere mostly comprises the media public these elements are confronted with the constraints of the media. Theoretical approaches of media studies as well as empirical examples of debates on forest, agricultural and environmental policies in the media corroborates that the media lacks the function of deliberation. Nevertheless, normative demands allow empirical findings to be interpreted relative to expectations. Applying the theoretical concept of a deliberative democracy to the empirical cases of forest, agriculture or environmental policy already serves as a first step toward awareness of deliberation in public communication. It not only can exemplify the gap between normative ideals and the empirical approach but it highlights the degree of "grey" between the static poles of black or white used in entitling processes as deliberative or not deliberative.

© 2010 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

"Setbacks in trying to realize the ideal do not prove that the ideal is at fault." Dag Hammarskjöld

1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to investigate and discuss the applicability of a normative meta-theory on empirical research on environmental and forest policy. For this reason this paper tries to bring together normative political theory and empirical findings from research on the public sphere as well as from research on forest and environmental policy by subjecting the normative demands of a deliberative public sphere to assumptions resulting from media theory and applying them to forest policy.

The theoretical model of deliberative democracy as the basis for deliberative discourse is enriched with normative expectations regarding the function of the public sphere (Habermas, 1996). Nowadays, this public sphere is in most cases provided by the media, but the media is not just a room or a platform where communication takes place. The media itself is a political actor following its own rules by selecting and shaping information

(Kleinschmit and Krott, 2008). Linking these media constraints with the demands of a deliberative public sphere demonstrates the feasibility problems of a model laden with prerequisites. Referring to the citation of Dag Hammarskjöld at the beginning of this paper, the idea is to discuss the limits of the normative ideal with regard to the empirical findings rather than to refute it.

In environmental and natural resource policy, the rising debate about governance processes as a 'new' type of political regulation is intimately connected with the debate about involving public, private and societal actors in political decision making. This participatory approach, like discourse in a deliberative democracy, has its roots in the idea of a collaborative decision making process led by argumentation and accommodation. Additionally, the theories of deliberative democracy offer an adequate solution to the rising questions about the legitimacy of new governance processes and results. This is done by linking the communicative power of the "lifeworld" to administrative deliberative democracy, which ranks rationality above legitimacy (Abromeit, 2002) and is rooted in democratic opinion and will formation leading to a consensus based on the best arguments.

In the following section, the author briefly describes the theoretical concept of deliberative democracy in general before focusing in particular on Habermas' theory, its societal background, its scientific classification within political theories and its use within environmental and forest policy studies. In Section 3, following the work of Marx Ferree et al. (2002), the Habermasian concept of a deliberative public sphere

* Tel.: +46 18 67 24 93.
E-mail address: daniela.kleinschmit@sprod.slu.se.

will be filtered for its normative demands. In the following section these demands will be confronted with assumptions from media theories (Section 4). Results from different empirical analyses of media articles reporting on forest, agricultural and environmental issues will indicate to what extent the media public achieve the expected requirements of the deliberative model of public discourse (Section 5). The implications of these results for an ambitious model enriched with idealization like the deliberative democracy model will be discussed in the final section.

2. Theoretical framework

The economic and pluralist models that assume politics is about bargaining between competing groups with conflicting interests have been increasingly questioned in recent decades. Counterbalancing these dominant interest-driven theories in political science and rational choice, respectively, is the increasingly popular concept of deliberative democracy (Bohman and Rehg, 1997a, p. XII; Fischer, 2004, p. 22). Chambers takes the idea one step further and describes the theory of deliberative democracy as the "dominant project" of the last decade in the broad field of political theory (Chambers, 2005, p. 619). The theory, its different schools, and its basic assumptions are described well in the literature; see, e.g., Bohman and Rehg (1997b) and Elster (1998).

A common element for the different scholars of deliberative democracy theory is an emphasis on the epistemic functions of discourse and negotiation, instead of on rational choice. Bohmann and Rehg state that "*deliberative democracy* refers to the idea that legitimate lawmaking issues from the public deliberation of citizens" (1997a, p. IX). John Stuart Mill, John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas are regarded as the "forebears" who have provided the basis of the theory of deliberative democracy (Saward, 2002, p. 112). Rawls' early concept of public reason (Rawls, 1997) has been referred to as an essential brick in the idea of deliberative democracy. The underlying normative assumption of the concept is that people are not just acting because of their own interests. Instead, it is assumed that through reflection one's own actions and the interests of others, preferences can be changed and developed in public discussion. From this willingness to collaborate with others in order to achieve common interests comes the normative aim to increase and intensify participation in political opinion and will formation processes. As Cohen (1997), p. 72), a scholar of Rawls, puts it: "The notion of a deliberative democracy is rooted in the intuitive ideal of a democratic association in which justification of the terms and conditions of association proceeds through public argument and reasoning among equal citizens."

2.1. Habermas theory of deliberative democracy

This article deals with one of the most popular concepts of deliberative democracy provided by Jürgen Habermas. His theoretical, normative, ideal model of a deliberative democracy is strongly linked to his discourse theory (Habermas, 1996, p. 287). Habermas' discourse ethic is one of the three main strands of discourses. He understands discourses as a communicative process oriented towards particular rules of argumentation. The other two strands are the linguistic and the poststructuralist strand. In the former discourses are broadly understand as text or talk. The latter concept is mainly associated with Michel Foucault. Foucault analyzed discourses in a complex way as the systematic construction of subjects.

The following will focus on Habermas' notion on discourses and its interrelation with the deliberative democracy concept. The core of the concept is a normative form of the public sphere. The argumentation taking place in this public sphere should be free from particular interests and led by rationality in order to reach a fair and adequate solution to political conflicts (Buchstein, 2003, p. 56). Habermas differentiates between center actors, who are mainly members of the political administrative system, and actors from the periphery. In his ideal version, center actors communicate strategically to safeguard and strengthen their positions. On the other hand, actors from the periphery are expected to communicate in an "autonomous" way. The periphery is mainly characterized by civil society actors, defined as "those nongovernmental and noneconomic connections and voluntary associations that anchor the communication structures of the public sphere in the society component of the lifeworld" (Habermas, 1996, p. 366). In Habermas' conception the lifeworld is a precondition for an understanding to be formed amongst participants by sharing a common background. He expects the civil society to have a greater "sensitivity in detecting and identifying new problem situations" (Habermas, 1996, 381).[1] Therefore, Habermas assumes that the participation of actors from the periphery is also essential for a deliberative public as they are acting communicatively. According to Peters "sluice model" (Peters, 1993), Habermas designed a process starting with a deliberative discourse at the periphery and then passing "… through the sluices of democratic and constitutional procedures situated at the entrance to the parliamentary complex or the courts …" (Habermas, 1996, p. 356). Through these "sluices," an interchange between the formal political system and the informal public sphere takes place by transforming communicative power into administrative power that claims a rational legitimacy. Habermas is aware that this is not feasible in the political daily routine, but he emphasizes its importance in the case of crisis to foster new ideas, interpretation and arguments deriving from the lifeworld (Habermas, 1996, p. 357). The chances for change are in the case of crises or conflicts better on the one hand because the routine of politics is in this kind of situation already disturbed and on the other hand because the increase of public attention supports the periphery not only in perceiving the problems but as well in presenting them in an attention catching way (Habermas, 1996, 356).

2.2. Classification of Habermas theory within the scheme of political theory

Jürgen Habermas represents the second generation of the Frankfurter Schule (following prominent representatives like Horkheimer, Adorno and Marcuse), where the basic concept of critical theory has been defined. The theory of deliberative democracy as a grand theory also belongs to the larger concept of critical theory and was developed by student movements in the late sixties rooted in a Hegelian–Marxian dialectic. The special social situation in West Germany at that time has brought attention to the life situation (Lebenswelt) of certain groups. In contrast to the work of Horkheimer and other representatives of the earlier Frankfurter Schule as well as Habermas' (1984, 1987) own earlier work, the tone has become more optimistic, proposing that a transformation into a "real democracy" might be possible (Buchstein, 2003, p. 259). Even though critiques about missing practical intentions, which are necessary for critical social theory, have become loud (Roderick, 1986, p. 166), the theory of deliberative democracy, composed out of philosophical, sociological and political approaches among others, stipulates orientational knowledge. The normative demands of deliberation behind the orientation should serve as a basis for a transformation towards democratic processes. Thus, Habermas argues for a category of science that is beyond the dichotomy developed in the 1960s from the "Methodenstreit". The "Methodenstreit" concentrated on "verstehen" in the sense of interpretative understanding versus "erklären" in the sense of looking for explanations in terms of laws. Habermas' theory of deliberative democracy, with the

---

[1] At this point it should be mentioned that Habermas argues that modernity started with the decoupling of lifeworld and the system which have differentiated in the following period. Nevertheless, this doesn't mean that two independent spheres have evolved. Instead the relation between system and lifeworld is more complex. Habermas assumes that the system is embedded in the lifeworld (Habermas 1978 cited by Jäger and Baltes-Schmitt, 2003, p.26).