Are Citizens' Assemblies a Good Strategy for Climate Activists?[1]

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ABSTRACT   In the following paper I follow Chantal Mouffe's suggestion that climate activism should not aim at using deliberation as a tool for combating changes threatening the planet, but rather refer to a radical strategy of subverting the hegemonic discourse. However, her critique of deliberative democracy is embedded in its first generation and does not take into account numerous nuanced discussion that has been ongoing since the founding texts of Rawls and Habermas were published. A detailed analysis of philosophical and practical (political) aspects of deliberation reveals that while her intuitions to conceive a rational deliberation as a practice that conserves rather than challenges the *status quo* remain valid. Deliberative practices might be useful as tactics in a more radical strategy of climate movements. Nonetheless, it requires a vivid rethinking of how democracy, reason and politics are understood by activists.

KEYWORDS   Climate activism, Citizens' Assemblies, deliberative democracy, radical democracy

Ever since the idea of deliberative democracy emerged in the early 1980s, its popularity among activists, politicians and scholars has fluctuated. Since the first formulations of the deliberative ideal, the theory has gone through several breakthrough developments that delivered a plethora of new tools and application ideas that brought it closer to the practical possibility.[2] It seems that now, during the widespread crisis of liberal models of governing, the idea is once again gaining increased attention, being promoted as a participatory tool on multiple levels from local municipalities to the European Union. Alongside this trend a relevant role is played by the climate activist groups Extinction Rebellion (XR), which strongly advocate organizing local and national Citizens' Assemblies as a means of a democratic implementation of mitigation and adaptation policies amid the global threat of climate change.[3] In fact, 'going beyond politics' and organizing Climate Assemblies is one of XR's three demands, with the other two being far less tangible: 'tell the truth' and 'act now'.

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[2] John S. Dryzek, *Foundations and Frontiers of Deliberative Governance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Stephen Elstub, Selen Ercan, and Ricardo Fabrino Mendonça, 'Editorial Introduction: The Fourth Generation of Deliberative Democracy', *Critical Policy Studies* 10, no. 2 (2 April 2016): 139–51.

[3] Extinction Rebellion Citizens' Assemblies Working Group, *The Extinction Rebelion Guide to Citizen's Assemblies* (Extinction Rebelion, 2019).

It is not surprising that grassroots movements are likely to reach out to deliberative tools in their struggle for policy change. Deliberation—strongly connected to the desire of 'flat' and 'leaderless' organizational structure and disenchantment with traditional party politics[4]—is a characteristic mark of most left-wing, emancipatory protests of 2010s, beginning from the Occupy movement, including XR. Indeed, the new climate movements resemble the Occupy not only in their organizational structure, but also in strategy and aesthetics of their performative actions. After all, the promise of deliberation bridges the democratic—hence independent from corrupted or despicable politicians—and rational ideals of (non-)politics, which is apparently exactly what is needed now if humanity is to prepare for the challenges of the climate change, or slow them down. On the other hand, some more radical left-wing scholars and public figures such as Chantal Mouffe[5] warn activists against such an idyllic conception of deliberation (and politics in general) and urge them to focus on direct subversive actions and on building green, populist coalitions.

Mouffe's objections to deliberation are well known and have been discussed by her—and later reproduced by numerous academics[6]—in many books and papers. Ever since the 1990s she has been one of the most vocal critics of Habermas and Rawls, exposing the vulnerability of their concepts both in terms of its undemocratic core and ultimately hegemonic nature. Those remarks did not go unnoticed by deliberative democrats, and some of leading theoreticians of deliberation even aimed at developing it from a radical, agonistic perspective.[7] In fact, it is under this pressure that the theory has undergone its first major transformation: from an idealistically oriented type I

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[4] Marianna Fotaki and Hamid Foroughi, 'Extinction Rebellion: Green Activism and the Fantasy of Leaderlessness in a Decentralized Movement', *Leadership*, 27 April 2021; Joshua Virasami, 'The Rise of Black Lives Matter and Extinction Rebellion', *IPPR Progressive Review* 28, no. 1 (June 2021): 17–23.

[5] I refer in particular to a keynote address delivered by Mouffe on the 18th January 2021 during a *Democracy and Populism: Equality, Truth and Disagreement In The Age of Covid* conference organised by CAPPE at the University of Brighton. However, I see Mouffe's argumentation against the deliberative approach of Extinction Rebellion and related activists as an extension of her criticism of post-political underpinning of the Occupy movement that omit the radically negative dimension of politics. See: Chantal Mouffe, *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically* (London ; New York: Verso, 2013).

[6] Among many great works inspired by Mouffe, I would like to turn my attention here mainly to the works of Thomas Decreus, engaging her agonistic perspective in reinterpretations of Occupy and other social movements, and scholars like Mathias Lievens and Amanda Machin, who specifically engage with the topic of ecology, citizenship climate activism and democratic 'green' strategies. See: Amanda Machin, 'Decisions, Disagreement and Responsibility: Towards an Agonistic Green Citizenship', *Environmental Politics* 21, no. 6 (November 2012): 847–63; Thomas Decreus, Matthias Lievens, and Antoon Braeckman, 'Building Collective Identities: How New Social Movements Try to Overcome Post-Politics', *Parallax* 20, no. 2 (3 April 2014): 136–48.

[7] Iris Marion Young, 'Communicaton and the Other: Beyond Deliberative Democracy', in *Democracy and Difference. Contesting the Boundaries of the Political.*, ed. Seyla Benhabib (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 120–36; Iris Marion Young, *Inclusion and Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

deliberation towards more practically oriented type II deliberation[8], which later sparked its consecutive turns and next generations[9], bringing it to where it is today.

The theory of deliberative democracy is no longer a mere ideal type that has been so vividly criticized by Mouffe. Debates surrounding its most pertinent topics are constantly engaging both its defenders and sceptics. It became much more nuanced, quietly outdating some critical claims that had been recognized. It does not, by any means, imply that deliberation was able to surpass its own deficits and limitations, while maintaining the same democratic and rational capacity that it promises. On the contrary, its assertions are becoming more complex, inharmonious and even contradictory. Given the raising popularity of new deliberative techniques for policy-making, the need for a thorough critique is perhaps larger than ever before.

In this intervention I would like to start with highlighting a few points to elucidate the current state of theoretical debate on deliberative democracy and examine why it is still—and even more than ever—an attractive idea, drawing in climate activists. I will later move towards recapturing some of the radical-left criticism of deliberative democracy, crafting the argument in a manner that fits the most current iteration of this theory. In the second part of this essay, I will move towards a more practical—let us call them 'political'—arguments about why Citizens' Assemblies might not be a strategically good idea for climate activists. However, it seems that the 'deliberative momentum' is far from being over and deliberative tools are embedded into the liberal democratic imaginary as we know it. Therefore, I will end this paper with an attempt to examine whether—given the scrutiny of philosophical and political critiques—it can be of any strategic use, albeit with much more restricted ambitions and, perhaps, with the use of different deliberative techniques that emerge from literature or political practice.

Why does deliberation remain such a tempting idea?

The emergence of the idea of deliberative democracy in the works of Habermas, Cohen and Rawls completely transformed the world of (liberal) democratic theory. Before long it has become the most discussed concept in the academic world of political theorists and—due to being obviously an ultimately unreachable ideal—the one that has been developed into more applicable forms. Formal prerequisites of deliberation—adherence to purely logical, rational argumentation, leaving the category of self-interest behind and a close focus on reaching a consensus—initially concerned its philosophical adversaries or sceptics. This put a transformative pressure this theory from the outside. Moreover, the perfect deliberation—engaging all citizens, uncovering all knowledge on the topic, and leading to a comprehensive consideration of every argument—would require an infinite

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[8] Andre Bachtiger et al., 'Disentangling Diversity in Deliberative Democracy: Competing Theories, Their Blind Spots and Complementarities', *Journal of Political Philosophy* 18, no. 1 (March 2010): 32–63. The Authors propose the distinction between ideal versions of deliberative theory, focused on purely rational, consensus-oriented deliberative process (type I), and those versions of the theory that loosen strict requirements on the means of communication (including narratives, personal stories, use of rhetoric and emotional speech) and focuses on partial consensus as a desired outcome of deliberation (type II).
[9] Stephen Elstub, Selen Ercan, and Ricardo Fabrino Mendonça, 'Editorial Introduction: The Fourth Generation of Deliberative Democracy', *Critical Policy Studies* 10, no. 2 (2 April 2016): 139–51.

amount of time and public resources. This has initially been the biggest concern of political scientists who support the idea but seek its transformation. It is around these two concerns that deliberation has evolved in the last three decades.

The deliberative ideal quickly became recognized as not only difficult to reach, but also threatening democratic inclusion, especially considering the exclusive potentiality of consensus[10] and purely rational speech.[11] When made by radical scholars, those arguments vowed to abandon the idea of deliberation for the sake of democracy.[12] From within the theory, however, it sparked a discussion that led to 'softening' some of its strict conditions. The main theoretical input to this new model was to ensure that the 'concept stretching' of deliberation will retain its (radically)[13] democratic legitimacy. The idea of consensus has been expanded to cover all sorts of its partial, *meta-* forms,[14] where the agreement could have ended with the mutual recognition of legitimacy of conflicting claims, shared understanding of the problem without the accordance towards the proposed solution or *vice versa*, entering into integrative negotiations etc. The discussion on means of communication, initiated mainly by Iris Marion Young, led to the co-optation of additional types of communication, such as rhetoric, story-telling, narratives and greetings, as legitimate ways of supporting the logical and evidence-based argumentation for those who struggle with high demands imposed by the cultural and social preconditions of rational speech.

The refinement of the deliberative ideal encouraged practically and empirically oriented scientists to design and study decision-making tools and techniques in small groups. The argument made for the use of the so-called mini-publics[15] is that the rational discussion among a limited number of people, given proper time and grounding in facts and scientific evidence, can deliver a consensus (or a similar outcome) that is eventually scalable, i.e. maintains its democratic legitimacy for the whole population, even if initially accomplished by a small, demographically adjusted and randomly selected group of citizens. This 'institutional' turn in deliberative democracy effected in inventing popular techniques such as Deliberative Poll, Citizen Initiative Review, or Citizens' Assemblies. To complement the list with more practical tools and a material for empirical analysis, some techniques developed previously—such as Citizens' Juries, Planning Cells or Technological Panels—are now also considered deliberative.

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[10] E.g. Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson, *Democracy and Disagreement* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1996).

[11] Young, *Inclusion and Democracy*.

[12] Adrian Little, *Democratic Piety: Complexity, Conflict and Violence* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 2008); Chantal Mouffe, 'Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism?', *Social Research* 66, no. 3 (1999): 745–58.

[13] For Habermas, although he did not agree with Mouffe, his project was radically democratic, though in a different sense. Radical democratic legitimacy of deliberative consensus was based on the Rousseauean idea that every citizen affected by the deliberatively conceived law, approves of it as if it was his own proposal. On the contrary, agonistic model of radical democracy stresses the importance of differences and disagreements that constitute the fulcrum of democratic society—therefore a consensus is exactly what eradicates the possibility of democracy.

[14] Simon Niemeyer and John S. Dryzek, 'The Ends of Deliberation: Meta-Consensus and Inter-Subjective Rationality as Ideal Outcomes', *Swiss Political Science Review* 13, no. 4 (December 2007): 497–526; Jane Mansbridge et al., 'The Place of Self-Interest and the Role of Power in Deliberative Democracy', *Journal of Political Philosophy* 18, no. 1 (March 2010): 64–100.

[15] Archon Fung, 'Minipublics: Deliberative Designs and Their Consequences', in *Deliberation, Participation and Democracy*, ed. Shawn W. Rosenberg (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2007), 159–83.

Downscaling the size of the deliberating public leads to questioning the general democratic impact of those new techniques. To answer this question, deliberative scholars proposed a 'systemic' turn in the theory, which treats the political system as a whole, but with different elements (institutions, actors, mechanisms, resources) taking part in a 'division of labour'.[16] This approach stresses the need for situating deliberation into well-crafted, carefully recognized places in this system where it can have the biggest impact on the decision-making process or can surpass democratic deficiencies. Focusing on the complexity of the system reveals that even essentially non-democratic (in a liberal democratic sense) actors or institutions can foster deliberation, e.g. when it is organized or supported by private sector, media or academic experts. On the other hand, this approach also implies a further conceptual stretching when it comes to features and requirements of the deliberative process, as it invites a rethinking of the coercive, yet irremovable role of emotions, self-interest and expert knowledge in deliberation.[17]

The aforementioned transformations were accompanied by a growing number of academic and social experiments with deliberative tools, which led to a growing popularity of those techniques among activists and some more progressively oriented politicians and public officers, especially on the municipal level. Both upward and downward pressure from grassroots movements and large EU research and social projects champion deliberation as an almost miraculous solution to problems of populism, authoritarian tendencies of politicians, and the democratic deficit in the EU. The ideal, on the one hand, is in tune with the hegemonic, liberal democratic assumptions of civic society and the figure of a rational, responsible citizen. It is, *nota bene* by Habermas himself, viewed as a synthesis of republican and liberal models of democracy,[18] which allows for surpassing their respective limitations while delivering their promise. On the other hand, with more down-to-earth deliberative tools being employed and widely promoted, it no longer seems so difficult to achieve this promise. Given those two factors, it is easy to imagine why deliberative democracy appears as a logical evolution of its liberal and representative model, and the one that will finally lead to realizing its full potential.

This brief description of the genealogy of the theory of deliberative democracy reveals that occurring changes should be credited to a philosophical and political critique. The first one demanded that the essence of deliberation was more inclusive and wary of the dangers of purely rational speech and consensus. The latter pointed to the several difficulties of an actual deliberation, which is an engaging and costly endeavour. These shifts were potentially limited by ensuring that the promise of deliberation remains untouched and, despite all concessions, it will still remain a way of ensuring democratic and rational policies. A constant growth of popularity of this theory both in academia and in practice would suggest that this have been a successful undertaking. Yet, in spite of

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[16] Jane Mansbridge et al., 'A Systemic Approach to Deliberative Democracy', in *Deliberative Systems*, ed. John Parkinson and Jane Mansbridge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 1–3.

[17] Michał Zabdyr-Jamróz, *Wszechstronniczość: o deliberacji w polityce zdrowotnej z uwzględnieniem emocji, interesów własnych i wiedzy eksperckiej* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2020).

[18] Jürgen Habermas, 'Three Normative Models of Democracy', *Constellations* 1, no. 1 (December 1994): 1–10.

the aim of this essay, two questions remain worthy of reiteration: Did the evolution of deliberative theory provide a satisfying answer to the concerns of radical democrats? And did it make deliberation a feasible tool for democratic policy-making?

Why could deliberation not answer its critiques?

The anti-deliberative argument of Mouffe is straightforward and stems from her understanding of politics and culture in terms of hegemonic domination. Rational consensus is perhaps one of its best exemplifications, as it consists of its two constitutive elements. Rationality means that the outcome of deliberation is based upon hegemonic norms of what is factually true and normatively proper within the dominant spectrum of politics. The fact of consensus legitimizes discourse universality, fortifying its hegemonic position.

As have been mentioned in the previous section, deliberative democrats were aware of this critique and argued for a shift in a strict understanding of deliberative communication as based solely on reason and logics. Other means of communication—rhetoric, story-telling, emotional speech— proposed by Young or Dryzek,[19] were almost unanimously accepted as solving the problem of deliberative exclusion, while retaining its rational core.[20] Yet, in every case the use of those additional means of communication is justified by its eventual support of rationality: hence rhetoric or narratives should be allowed only as long as they shed new perspectives that help argumentation within the spectrum of reason. This approach can help in recognizing some excluded positions by allowing them to be reshaped towards a comprehensibility within the hegemonic terms; perhaps to some extent it can even slightly broaden the acceptable discursive spectrum. But it would not see non-rational discourses as they are, i.e. with their own understanding of what is 'reasonable', 'normal' and 'true'. It is precisely those elements that are filtered by the requirement of rationality, even in the 'soft' approach of type II deliberations. However, deliberative democrats do not recognize those propositions as flawed, or not inclusive enough[21].

Such a genealogical reading of the formulation and development of the deliberative model of democracy reveals its core mechanism, that is not only defended, but even fortified in this process.

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[19] Dryzek, *Foundations and Frontiers of Deliberative Governance*.

[20] Some internal debates recently appeared under the so-called 'epistemic' turn. Its authors see expansion of the deliberation beyond pure reason as a threat to its epistemic potential, which in turn constitutes the democratic value of deliberative democracy. See: Hélène Landemore, 'Beyond the Fact of Disagreement? The Epistemic Turn in Deliberative Democracy', *Social Epistemology* 31, no. 3 (4 May 2017): 277–95. There are, however, no substantial critiques suggesting that deliberative language need to go even further from rationality to reduce its exclusive potential.

[21] In fact, they reject poststructuralist concern that every act of inclusion is necessarily exclusive (see: Lasse Thomassen, 'In/Exclusions: Towards a Radical Democratic Approach to Exclusion', in *Radical Democracy: Politics between Abundance and Lack*, ed. Lars Tønder and Lasse Thomassen, Reappraising the Political (Manchester ; New York: Manchester University Press, 2005), 103–19; Joanna Bednarek, *Polityka Poza Formą: Ontologiczne Uwarunkowania Poststrukturalistycznej Filozofii Polityki* (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Poznańskie, 2012)). Instead, deliberative democrats, especially Habermas in his book *The Inclusion of the Other*, recognize discourse ethics as the only universally inclusive strategy, based on certain rational and linguistic competences ascribed to every human being, such as ability to communicate, listen and respond to arguments. However, they keep on neglecting the cultural dimension—even origin—of these competences, leaving deliberative theory blind towards numerous aspects of social injustice.

It is the ideal of intersubjective rationality which treats rational language as a neutral vehicle that democratically legitimizes and universalizes arguments by lifting them from an individual to inter-subjective, community level. The neutrality of rational argumentation (*the* meta-language game that allows for justifying legitimacy claims of other language games) and expert knowledge is another problem, being at odds with post-structuralist and post-foundational critique. It only further ensures the embedding of deliberation within the hegemonic structures of power, rather than as a democratic tool of overthrowing them.

A similar inner process of transformation within the deliberative theory occurred in terms of softening the requirement for consensus. While in this case the discussion was mainly motivated by the practical impossibility of consensus, some authors argued that it also yields—in some cases—an exclusive potential. Those concerns referred especially to the need for the protection of a plurality of values, providing space for freedom of belief and practicing of faith.[22] In practical applications of deliberation the requirement of consensus is even lower, with techniques such as Citizens' Assembly which suggests an 80% support for recommendations as being sufficient,[23] or even with deliberation being seen as an indicator for change of perspectives, which is measured by the Deliberative Poll.[24] This is seen as a good enough deliberative input, which has a democratic and meritocratic effect on the institutions of the liberal state.

To achieve that goal without compromising the legitimizing effect of the consensus, deliberative democrats started to look into its partial forms, e.g. mutual justification of the existing difference or agreeing only on some aspects, such as proposed solutions to the problem without the shared understanding of its causes and effects. This also led them to indicate other positive effects of deliberation that go beyond the democratic legitimacy of law: possible conflict resolution, institutional inclusion of some previously unheard voices or strengthening civic competences and bonds.

Many of those latter discussions resemble Mouffe's solo works, where she proposes a radical and plural model of democracy (in its imperfect implementation) that transforms the political conflict from antagonism into agonism, creating 'friendly enemies', i.e. 'persons who are friends because they share a common symbolic space but also enemies because they want to organize this common symbolic space in a different way'.[25] This is akin to a 'workable disagreement' proposed by Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson or to John Dryzek's *meta*-consensus. In those terms it seems that deliberative democracy wants to be—and can be—'agonistic' in the sense that it can have a transformative effect on social tensions. But this argumentation applies only to selected variants of deliberation, where the subject of disagreement lies in religious or moral values and ethical

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[22] E.g. Gutmann and Thompson, *Democracy and Disagreement*. It is quite unsurprising that deliberative democrats were primarily focusing on the recognition of conservative values that allow for a certain level of cultural domination over other sexes, races, classes etc.

[23] Marcin Gerwin, *Citizen's Assemblies. Guide to Democracy That Works* (Kraków: Open Plan Foundation, 2018).

[24] James Fishkin and Robert Luskin, 'Experimenting with a Democratic Ideal: Deliberative Polling and Public Opinion', *Acta Politica* 40 (2005): 284–98.

[25] Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (New York: Verso, 2000), 13.

principles. To strengthen this argument, Amanda Machin and Graham Smith state that a consensus-oriented procedure—especially the one which is, as in climate movements, not subjected to disagreement itself—leaves only accidental, but no intentional space for a substantial plurality (hence difference) in values that ecologists themselves appeal.[26] A 'workable disagreement' remains for the theory only as a side-effect that appears while trying to get beyond the distinction between friends and enemies.

Hence the main difference between radical and deliberative models of democracy in their more applicable forms lies in their understanding of politics and the political. While the agonistic proposition of Mouffe recognizes the inevitability of the latter, that is a constant and exclusive presence of the political within a struggle that organizes antagonised discourses in a somehow appeased manner, deliberative democrats treat this kind of democracy as apolitical. The roots of this approach can be found in the core ontology of deliberation's 'founding fathers'—Habermas and Rawls—who draw from the ideas of the Enlightenment.[27] This approach also prevails in the science of public policy and governance, although it has been thoroughly criticized already in the 1980s and 1990s, with authors of the 'argumentative turn' deconstructing professional policy-making process as deeply embedded within political goals of actors and institutions that emanate not only on the self-interest of all engaged politicians and experts, but also on the level of discourse within which they operate.[28] However, deliberation defends itself by presenting the citizen-based process as free from the political bias of directly involved officers or elected representatives.[29] But if we recognize poststructuralist critiques of language and reason, the possibility of their neutrality becomes a naïve myth. While deliberating citizens might differ in their goals from politicians or public officers, they all operate within the same imaginary, defined by the hegemonic structure of the discourse.

The conclusion of this analysis is that, in principle, the argument of radical democrats against deliberation still stands. As long as deliberative democracy is founded on the rational and consensual ideal type, even as a regulative ideal, its democratic potential will be limited by the discursive 'pull' from the hegemonic centre. However, with more nuanced debates trying to answer the philosophical and political critique of deliberation, some new potential applications emerge. A positive impact on the civil society with a limited potential for local inclusion, conflict resolution and policy decisions that are simply better suited for actual problems—those are the new ambitions of deliberative democracy. It should be noted, though, that this comes with a compromise on the possibility of

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[26] Amanda Machin and Graham Smith, 'Ends, Means, Beginnings', *Ethical Perspectives*, no. 1 (2014): 58, https://doi.org/10.2143/EP.21.1.3017286.

[27] Derek Barker, *Tragedy and Citizenship: Conflict, Reconciliation, and Democracy from Haemon to Hegel* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009). In this book, the author argues that ideas of Rawls and Habermas are similarly embedded in the search for a political order that is capable of solving the 'tragedy of conflict' within modern societies by finding their common, universal foundations through reason.

[28] Deborah Stone, *Policy Paradox: The Art of Political Decision Making*, 3rd ed (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 2012); Frank Fischer and John Forester, eds., *The Argumentative Turn in Policy Analysis and Planning* (Durham, N.C: Duke University Press Books, 1993).

[29] John S. Dryzek and Carolyn M Hendriks, 'Fostering Deliberation in the Forum and Beyond', in *The Argumentative Turn Revisited: Public Policy as Communicative Practice*, ed. Frank Fischer and Herbert Gottweis (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2012), 31–57.

reaching the democratic and epistemic ideal of this model, however obscured it remains in non-philosophical public discourse, policy brochures or leaflets issued by the activists. For the purpose of this essay the best example of the latter can be found in NYC Extinction Rebellions' guidebook to Citizens' Assemblies, where they explicitly juxtapose it to 'politics' and write that this is 'the most democratic, impartial, and effective way to create a comprehensive plan...to address the climate emergency with meaningful consideration'.[30]

The philosophical argument of radical democrats should be enough to raise scepticism about the effectiveness of Citizens' Assemblies, especially after understanding that the process of climate change is not a matter of slight misalignments with human civilization, but it is deeply rooted within the anthropocene and capitalism, two major ideologies that have, for centuries, dominated the hegemonic discourse of (not only) Western societies. Still, deliberative practices continue to be employed, and there is a rapid growth in their usages. It allows for a more detailed political analysis, that takes into consideration some particular aspects of Citizens' Assemblies and the current shape and strategies of the liberal institutions in which they take place. A careful look at these arguments can complement the theoretical concern by examining whether, in practice, deliberation can be of any use when dealing with issues concerning climate change.

The charm and problems of Citizens' Assemblies

Among all commonly discussed and implemented deliberative techniques based on mini-publics, Citizens' Assemblies are by far the most popular. Their appeal comes from the fact that they resemble the deliberative ideal more than other practices. They gather the most participants—usually at least 50 or 75 but depending on the specific case this number can go up to even 200—and provide them with the most time to learn from experts, reflect on the topic, and deliberate about final recommendations. Citizens' Assemblies usually last for a few days spread over the course of a month or longer. While this time is not enough to ensure a full consensus, the requirement of 80% of support to determine the recommendation as obligatory is a well-established practice.

At a first glance, a well-designed and representative (i.e. randomly selected sample of citizens based on demographic and other relevant criteria) group, given this amount of time and access to expert knowledge seems to be capable of making reasonable, well-balanced decisions that will be supported by the majority of the society. It is, in the end, a centuries-long promise of liberal democracy that could have never been delivered through representative models. But even in the light of the radical critique of democracy and rationality in this style of governance, from a pragmatic point of view, the Citizens' Assemblies might still appeal to a broad public as a viable tool for a policy change. It is therefore in this way—'pragmatic' or 'political' as opposed to 'philosophical' analysis—that some more pitfalls of the Citizens' Assemblies as a tool for fighting a climate change should be unveiled.

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[30] Extinction Rebellion NYC Citizens' Assembly Working Group, 'Trust the People. The Case for a Citywide Citizens' Assembly on Climate & Ecological Justice.' (New York, 2020).

First of all, even under the liberal approach, deliberation is not itself a guarantee of a democratic policy legitimation. While it is often assumed that when citizens themselves decide they can be free from political bias, it is important to remember that politicians and public administration exert constant influence on the process. Ultimately, it is their decision to delegate some legislative competences to deliberating citizens and they have a decisive say on some boundaries of deliberation: its topic, formula, the selection of experts and moderators etc. Elected politicians and their administrative subordinates will be reluctant to the idea of organising an event of a large critical potential that might be detrimental to their further political careers. Therefore, when politicians agree to organize events such as the Citizens' Assembly, its form is likely to be moulded in such a way that will eventually raise the incumbents' chances for a re-election. Or the recommendations of such an Assembly can simply be ignored.[31]

A severe bias coming from various forms of self-interest can also be found outside the scope of institutions and actors most typical of political analysis. It refers to the discursive gravity of the hegemonic centre that also influences media- and academia-based production of knowledge and opinion. Those are the actors that have probably the largest impact on the outcome of deliberation, and while experts are recognized as a part of Citizens' Assemblies—and, in fact, the scientific consensus on the climate change is nowadays radically far from the hegemonic political and policy norms—media, both traditional and social, are not. In this space the logic of capital (or, in the case of public media, politics) comes into play and drawing the attention of the reader/user becomes more important than delivering fair and balanced facts or reasons on the topic of the climate change. Moreover, many of an Assembly's participants might already be under the influence of fake-news or conspiracy theories that will determine their attitude as at least sceptical, if not hostile, towards experts' and other participants arguments. It does not mean that deliberation is not capable of overcoming these shortcomings, as lengthy, calm and especially face-to-face discussions seem to be helpful in getting out of one's filter bubbles.[32] But that solves just one, small part of the issue.

This reveals several problems for practical deliberation. First of all, its discourses are not independent, but strongly determined by the existence and operation of all types of media. The 'anti-climate conspiracy theorist' is just an extreme example, but in the end all participants of the Assembly will have their own biased opinions, reasons and experiences that will determine to what extent will they be able to listen and talk to others. Therefore, even an empathetic deliberation should be viewed as a negotiation of already limited and strongly determined 'language games'. The argument of breaking the social bubbles depicts nothing more than bringing extreme positions into more acceptable, hegemonic frames. Media (and academic experts) should therefore be viewed as

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[31] As in France, where President Macron ignored almost all recommendations worked out by the most comprehensive (and expensive) Climate Assembly ever organized.

[32] William W. Sokoloff, 'Empathy and Democracy: Feeling, Thinking and Deliberation', *Contemporary Political Theory* 11, no. 4 (November 2012): e5–e7; Kaisa Herne, Olli Lappalainen, and Elina Kestilä-Kekkonen, 'Experimental Comparison of Direct, General, and Indirect Reciprocity', *The Journal of Socio-Economics* 45 (August 2013): 38–46; Genevieve Fuji Johnson, Michael E. Morrell, and Laura W. Black, 'Emotions and Deliberation in the Citizens' Initiative Review', *Social Science Quarterly*, (August 2019).

another impactful actors in the course of deliberation, not as the means of overcoming a political bias or delivering neutral knowledge.

The problem of expert knowledge is also linked to another issue with Citizens' Assemblies, that is connected to their dual nature: meritocratic on the rational side, and people-centred on the democratic one. As an effect, it becomes neither. Especially, with extremely complex and multi-level issues such as the climate change, a few days given to listen to experts, to conduct discussions in large groups, and to come up with recommendations that are supported by the large majority of participants is not enough to grasp the issue in the necessary breadth and depth. The empirical evidence suggest that Citizens' Assemblies do not deliver breakthrough ideas, but are rather in line with previously adapted policies.[33] For solving such a complex issue, not a single Assembly, but a series of them on different aspects of mitigation and adaptation to forthcoming changes would be needed, which further expands the necessary cost. Otherwise, it is not capable of delivering advanced, nuanced and well-crafted solutions. Given the time constraints and usually a broad range of topics and recommendations, they tend to be either very general or too specific, but never systemically thought through. Taking into account the numerous possible reasons enumerated above— the influence of politicians, the media bias, but also the hegemonizing impact of rational debate—it is difficult to imagine that these practical shortcomings can be easily overcome during deliberation on an issue that requires a complex and radical change not only in public policies, but first and foremost on the level of social and political imagination.

For activists, fighting for and organizing Citizens' Assemblies is also exhausting, distracting their focus from resistance, street performances and online pressure. Theoretical arguments provided by radical democrats extend to the realm of politics by stressing the role of such subversive practices, which—unlike consensus-oriented deliberation—have a potential for transforming the core ideas of the hegemonic discourse. A radical perspective should also be conceived as a constant reminder to be suspicious of any form of institutionalized power as a vehicle of conservation of the *status quo* with its relations of domination and exclusion. Instead, involvement with Citizens' Assemblies is creating a mirage of a cooperation with the government or local authorities, while being merely a form of legitimization of the current institutional systems of power and their potential scope and pace of transformation towards more ecological forms of life.

At this point it is necessary to come back to the already-hinted-at difficulty and cost of organization of Citizen's Assemblies, which is another practical problem with this deliberative technique. While it might be understood as a fair cost of democracy that the society should be ready to bear, it remains a serious constraint within the very limited resources of both politicians and

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[33] This argument is based on some forthcoming publications, including my own observations on the Citizens' Assembly on public transportation in Wrocław, Poland, but also on an analysis of deliberative initiatives directly connected to the issue of climate change, see: Rebecca Wells, Candice Howarth, and Lina I. Brand Correa, 'Are Citizen Juries and Assemblies on Climate Change Driving Democratic Climate Policymaking? An Exploration of Two Case Studies in the United Kingdom', *Climatic Change*, 168, issue 3-4 (October 2021).

activists. The large budget[34] and a lot of extracurricular administrative work will always be viewed by the administration as a hurdle and as long as it does not bring a substantial amount of added policy or political value, they are less likely to adapt this form of deliberation on a large scale which is required to reach meaningful results. A large cost and effects that are far from impressive would indicate that this form of democracy is less likely to be adapted on a large scale and regular basis, in a similar manner to participatory budgeting, which within a few years has become a fixed element of the institutional design in hundreds of cities across Europe. And even if it was, there is a plethora of topics and issues to which it might be more suited, and therefore more attractive for the officials to focus on.

For climate activists, who operate in the civic sphere of politics, financial and administrative matters are not of utmost importance. Their most vital resource is the constant, long-term engagement of their members. To keep motivation level high, the goal of activism needs to be 'reasonable' not only in its ethical value (saving the ecological habitat of human and non-human beings), but also in terms of achievability and quick deliverance of effects, which create the internal sense of agency and empowerment. This feeling has been acknowledged both as a factor that can fuel engagement,[35] and one whose lack is a cause of retreat from civic participation.[36] From this perspective the role of Citizens' Assemblies in climate activism is ambiguous. On the one hand, it proved to be working as a motivation in the initial phase of forming and expanding climate movements. From the perspective of citizens socialized in the liberal democratic imaginary it seems to be a concrete and simple solution to secure both effective and democratic policy change to save the climate. However, with the practical realisation of the intrinsic political character of policy-making and less than optimal effects achieved by Citizens' Assemblies, it reveals the hopelessness of this path, which causes activists to burnout and retreat from organised, collective struggle.

Those three issues depict major political ways in which deliberation and climate activism are at odds. However it does not exhaust the catalogue of possible problems that can be envisaged. For example, local authorities committing to organising an Assembly can also become an excuse to stop investing more good will, effort and expertise in further actions demanded by activists. Authorities can simply 'tick the box' of climate movements as groups whose demands have been met and need no more attention. Also, most activists focus on local politics of their respective cities, while there are changes needed on regional, national and global level as well. The broader the scale, however, the more actors should be included in the dispute and the Assembly will necessarily be under the pressure of actors whose prime interest is to oppose radical actions to combat climate change.

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[34] For example, The Oxford Citizens' Assembly on Climate Change estimated cost was over £200,000, see: Ingrid Koehler, 'Oxford's Citizens' Assembly on Climate Change', *Local Government Information Unit*, August 2019, https://lgiu.org/oxfords-citizens-assembly-on-climate-change/.

[35] Martijn van Zomeren, Tamar Saguy, and Fabian M. H. Schellhaas, 'Believing in "Making a Difference" to Collective Efforts: Participative Efficacy Beliefs as a Unique Predictor of Collective Action', *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations* 16, no. 5 (September 2013): 618–34.

[36] Anna Wlodarczyk et al., 'Hope and Anger as Mediators between Collective Action Frames and Participation in Collective Mobilization: The Case of 15-M', *Journal of Social and Political Psychology* 5, no. 1 (2 May 2017): 200–223.

Deliberation does not account for a contingent, yet necessary distinction between 'Us' and 'Them', and is not designed as a tool of resistance against hostile actors. It is rather founded on the belief in the universal possibility of the inclusion of the 'Other', recognizing everyone as equal and rational. Therefore, as a technocratic measure, it will not aim at a radical change in policy, but rather defend the *status quo*, or, at best, negotiate the price of its transformation.

Conclusions: can deliberation be re-established for climate activism?

There is no doubt that any climate activist strategy based solely on organising Citizens' Assemblies is flawed, and there are many theoretical and practical reasons to support that claim. From a general standpoint of radical democracy, Chantal Mouffe argues that the long-term goal of activist movements should focus on constructing green populist coalitions that will use a plethora of tactics to challenge the multi-level hegemony of capital, its institutions and the global logic of production/consumption. The way to do this must start with the internal re-politicization of their struggle. Aside from disruptive, subversive performative actions that constitute the main body of left-wing protest movements, there seems to be a space for engagement with other, more traditional means of liberal politics. Machin suggest that instead of deliberation, environmental activists should focus on state politics and its institutions in an attempt to restructure them into more agonistic ones, i.e. articulating the existing differences, acknowledging civic responsibility that comes from acting on these differences, and making creative use of tensions that resonate from them.[37]

However, despite serious philosophical and political concerns, deliberation—especially in the form of Citizens' Assemblies—will most probably remain an official goal of the new wave of climate activists, as well as a popular political tool for implementing policies aimed at mitigation and adaptation to the effects of climate change. But with debates on deliberation getting more nuanced, and the political realm being resistant to philosophical arguments against it, perhaps there is a way of rethinking deliberative practices to turn them into strategically useful tools.

One such example has already been presented in this essay, namely the mobilizing factor of Citizens' Assemblies as a seemingly tangible, short-term goal. However, it is based on a belief in deliberation as an ultimately democratic and rational technique. There is more than enough evidence, both theoretical and empirical, that this is a false mirage that can not only end in disappointment, but also in wasting precious time, energy and the political momentum of climate movements. The systemic approach to deliberative democracy seems to at least partly recognize these problems, but it also suggests that placing well-crafted deliberative design in a proper space of the political system can have a desired impact on other, even non-democratic institutions. Another guiding principle of the endeavour of operationalizing deliberation for left-wing environmental struggle can be inspired by Machin's urge to agonize already existing liberal political institutions. The same act can be casted upon deliberative mini-publics, especially when deliberative tools other than Citizens' Assemblies are considered. To think of deliberation in that way, questions of 'what'

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[37] Amanda Machin, 'Democracy, Disagreement, Disruption: Agonism and the Environmental State', *Environmental Politics* 29, no. 1 (2 January 2020): 167–69, https://doi.org/10.1080/09644016.2019.1684739.

and 'how' need to be readdressed by going beyond 'democracy' and 'rationality' as self-explanatory solutions to the climate problem and finding other, perhaps less ambitious goals of deliberation.

In a world where a fundamental change of the material and symbolic orders of the society is needed, every tool disrupting the hegemonic worldview or offering an alternative can be useful. Citizens' Assemblies are getting more popular—even fashionable—but they are still far from being well understood and situated within traditional forms of liberal democracy. Especially now, at the beginning of experimenting with deliberative solutions to climate change, they might become areas of articulating actual differences, also within environmental movements. It requires rejecting the liberal idea of deliberation itself as a political end-goal, and as such might serve as a platform for mutual recognition of differences in values and motivations, but also spreading awareness, expert knowledge and ideas related to the topic of climate change mitigation and adaptation towards the general public. A transparent process of public deliberation is capable of drawing attention to experts and activists who would otherwise operate on the margins of the public discourse, with lesser impact on shifting the hegemonic discourse. In contrast to protests, blockades or disturbing public performances, the liberal form of deliberative events can be an asset from the perspective of publicity, as they are presented with more generosity and good will by the public media. Even if the policy outcomes of Citizens' Assemblies are less than satisfying in terms of real needs and expectations, climatic concerns and internal tensions can be at least publicly voiced and used for other strategic goals, such as paving the way for the long-term transformation of the hegemonic discourse or reaching out to new audience, and thus, broadening a green, populist front.

To reach the abovementioned goals, ideals of (deliberative) democracy and rationality of deliberation are at least partly forfeited. What follows from this is the question of feasibility of Citizens' Assemblies as a deliberative technique of choice for tackling climate-related issues. As I have mentioned above, the appeal of this form of deliberation comes from its relative resemblance of the deliberative ideal of democracy. However, it comes at a cost of large financial and administrative resources, and is time-consuming for participants, organizers, moderators etc. Also, with a large group of participants and a long learning process, a substantial discussion will either be very narrow or superficial, hence the less-than-desirable effects observed in empirical research.

Those dilemmas are rooted in a belief that this process can be—and therefore must be— democratically representative, accordingly bringing a relatively large number of participants (initially mini-publics were designed to consist of maximum 25 members to allow everyone to be able to have similar chances of partaking in a meaningful conversation; Citizens' Assemblies multiply this number by a factor of two or usually even more). A radical approach to democracy allows a political strategy to go beyond this normative ideal of representation and focus on possible outcomes of deliberation. For the opportunities described above, other forms of deliberation seem to be more appropriate, both in terms of delivering expected effects, and reducing the final cost of this endeavour.

For example, Technological Panels (also conceptualized as consensus conferences) bring together a carefully selected group of experts and community leaders with different backgrounds

and perspectives related to the specific issue. They allow for a meaningful and transparent debate without the necessity of the lengthy (and fallacious) process of learning from experts and activists. Thus, policy advice established in that way is more likely to go beyond (though perhaps not against) the hegemonic framework conducted by local media and governments. At the same time this process is less likely to lack transparency and publicity typical of the traditional process of policy expertise.

On the other hand, there are deliberative techniques that engage fewer citizens, albeit for a longer time (for example Citizens' Juries), ideally as constantly deliberating bodies. There are also tools such as the Deliberative Poll which hosts more people and resembles in-depth deliberation, but acts rather as a measure of the direction towards which a deliberation can lead. Especially in the latter case, the expected epistemic outcome of deliberation is less concrete and detailed than in the Citizens' Assemblies and especially the Technological Panels, but they can be equally effective when it comes to spreading climate awareness as they create platforms for voicing serious concerns, anti-hegemonic arguments and disturbance in the discursive *status quo*.

However, with the expected effects of deliberation being far less promising than deliberative democrats would suggest, the whole strategy of the new environmental movements such as XR needs reorientation. The acknowledgement of the deeply political nature of their struggle must conclude with the rejection of the Citizens' Assemblies—or any other 'apolitical' delusion—as it is not the ubiquitous solution to political, social, economic and technological problems that cause or sustain the climate change. The urge to rethink deliberation leaves some space for its usage, albeit in a much more moderated and pragmatic way. This requires a radical transformation in understanding of the very notions of 'democracy' and 'rationality', but if the climate activism demands such a discursive shift on a macro-level of hegemonic ideas guiding our societies, it is hopefully not too much to expect it to start from itself.

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