

Towards a Critical Sociology of Democracy: The Potential of the Capability Approach

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to lay down the foundations of a critical sociology of democracy and participation. Based on Amartya Sen's capability approach, we identify four major pitfalls of classical theories on justice and deliberative democracy: 1) an excessive emphasis on the procedural dimension of democracy at the expense of its substantial value; 2) an ideal of deliberation that does not sufficiently account for the inequalities that characterize actual participative practices; 3) an ideal approach to rationality which is inconsistent with the plurality of reasons to value and arguments that can be observed in social reality; and 4) a focus on official or institutionalized forms of deliberation that does not pay due attention to the many forms and dynamics of participation. We contend that, by contrast, Sen's epistemology may be fruitful for the development of a critical sociology of democracy and suggest an agenda for empirical research on participation and deliberative practices.

Keywords

capability approach, democracy, participation, deliberation, inequalities, critical theory

Introduction

Democracy, i.e. citizens' participation in deliberative and decision-making processes, is often presented as the prerequisite for the setting up of a more equitable and just society. It is claimed

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that citizen involvement will improve the legitimacy of policies, increase the amount of information taken into account when making collective decisions (and thus the quality of such decisions) and enhance the efficacy of policies via guaranteeing citizens' approval. In such a perspective, widely shared by the defenders of deliberative democracy and by many policy-making bodies, democracy is interpreted as a necessary (and, in the most optimistic versions, also sufficient) condition for social justice to flourish. However, this emphasis on democracy should not occlude the difficulties to implement genuine participation for all stakeholders. Arnstein's classical ladder of citizen participation (1969) showed that if participation may in certain cases allow citizens to voice their concerns and have an effective say in decision-making processes, in many cases the rhetorical call for participation may result in manipulation and instrumentalism, where the actual purpose of participation is to persuade the 'participants' rather than to take their voice seriously and give them a genuine opportunity to weigh in on the outcome of a collective debate. In other cases, participation may remain purely formal even though there seems to be, at first sight, a more substantial involvement of the 'participants'; such is the case when citizens (or any group of relevant stakeholders) need to be formally consulted but their views are then discarded when decisions are reached. Thus, in many cases, the call for participation boils down to rhetoric and its actual impact is very limited.

Hence, empirical analysis is needed to assess the extent to which the call for participation and democracy effectively results in more participation and to identify the factors that impede genuine participation from being implemented. Such investigation is also needed to better grasp and understand the connection between democracy and social justice and the conditions to be met for democracy to be effective, on the one hand, and to contribute to the emergence of more equitable societies, on the other hand. Our contention in this article is that a critical sociology of democracy has an important role to play in this respect. Along with Berger and De Munck (2015) or Bifulco (2013), we consider here that democracy and social justice are not only issues for philosophers and political theorists, but that they call for a thorough empirical sociological investigation, highlighting their contextual and social dimensions. We contend that Amartya Sen's capability approach (CA) has much to offer towards developing such a critical sociology of democracy.

Despite the fact that Sen is not a sociologist, we will show in this article how and why his epistemology may be fruitful for the development of a critical sociology of participation and deliberative practices. In our view, it reveals at least four major pitfalls of classical theories on justice and deliberative democracy that can be summarized as follows:

First, classical theories of deliberative democracy, in the line of Habermas or Apel, put an excessive emphasis on the procedural dimension of participation at the expense of its substantial value. In such views, fair processes necessarily lead to fair outcomes. By contrast, Sen's focus on substantial outcomes of democracy (opportunity freedom, in his words) and on procedural aspects (process freedom) paves the way towards a more balanced view of social justice and its connection to democracy, including both dimensions and giving them their due place.

Second, the ideal of deliberation does not sufficiently account for the inequalities that characterize actual participative practices. Sen's notion of 'conversion' is especially important here as it allows identifying all parameters and factors that facilitate (or impede) the conversion of formal rights to participate into real rights to participate. These factors can relate to individual capacities, social norms, political institutions, economic opportunities, etc. In our specific case, the CA framework provides the tools to investigate the conversion (or obstruction) factors intervening between formal rights of participation (e.g. the right to vote, to express one's viewpoint, etc.) and real or effective rights to participate. It thus integrates the Marxian critique showing how rights may remain abstract or formal if they are not rooted in concrete social realities.

Third, deliberative theorists tend to rely on an ideal definition of rationality that does not take account of the diversity of reasons and arguments that can be observed in social reality. Thus an ideal epistemology is tentatively imposed on social reality, thereby discarding the plurality of reasons invoked by real people in actual daily life. Sen's notion of 'reason to value' allows going beyond this idealistic and supposedly universalistic conception of rationality.

Finally, the analytical scope of many such studies is generally restricted to official or institutionalized forms of deliberation, thereby preventing a broader analysis on participation, its many forms and dynamics. Placing the focus on parliamentary arenas leads to restricting the topics that can be submitted to public discussion, as well as the actors that can participate in such debates and the modalities according to which public deliberation ought to take place. The official framing of deliberation, in specific places, with specific actors and according to specific rules, leads to exclusionary outcomes. Sen's notion of 'incompleteness' calls for a more inclusive and less parochial view of democracy and public debate.

The following sections successively tackle each of these issues and show how the CA provides conceptual tools that may lead towards a better understanding of participation and deliberative practices. This article takes Sen's CA, especially its epistemology, as a departure point to move beyond Sen himself, towards developing an analytical and normative framework for the empirical and critical sociological analysis of democratic and participative processes. This framework is briefly synthesized in the fifth section, while the conclusion summarizes the main teachings of the article.

Reconciling the Procedural and Substantial Dimensions of Participation and Justice

Sen (e.g. 1999a, 2009) developed an original conception of democracy and participation that will be briefly summarized in the next paragraphs. For him democracy does not boil down to regular elections where the majority rule applies. Rather, referring among others to Mill and Rawls, Sen defines democracy as 'government by discussion' and as 'public reasoning', involving widespread 'political participation, dialogue and public interaction' (2009: 326). In this perspective democracy 'has to be judged not just by the institutions that formally exist, but by the extent to which different voices from diverse sections of the people can actually be heard' (Sen, 2009: xiii). In particular, Sen argues that democracy is valuable for three different reasons: intrinsic, instrumental and constructive (2009; see also Crocker, 2006).

First, participation in collective decisions is intrinsically valuable because – in line with the importance attributed to human agency and to the act of choosing, in Sen's approach – not only outcomes are important but also the processes leading to such outcomes: processes that respect human autonomy are superior even when the outcomes are the same. In short, democracy is intrinsically valuable – independently of its consequences – because it provides a fair procedure for collective choices, respecting the equal worth of each individual.

Second, democracy is valued instrumentally because it permits those who participate to better defend their positions and claims. This is especially relevant for the victims of injustice who are thus able to fight for more justice. Sen (1981, 2009) takes the example of famines and how democracy and a free press may help prevent them. On the one hand, democracy may inform policy-makers about the existence of injustice or make it more difficult for them to ignore it. On the other hand, it may provide incentives to tackle such situations, due to the fear of electoral sanctions. From this perspective, democracy is not only valued for intrinsic reasons, but also as instrumental for the promotion of social justice.

Finally, democracy is central in the formation of social values and political priorities as well as in the construction of public knowledge and of social reality. Indeed, social reality can be described from different viewpoints so that even the most basic description of a social phenomenon involves a political choice, namely the selection of the relevant 'informational basis' to describe and assess that phenomenon. For instance, inequality can be described very differently, and with different policy implications, if emphasis is put on incomes, rights, freedoms or utility (Sen, 1992). From this perspective, participation is of fundamental importance in order to gain a pluralistic and as complete as possible account of social reality, reflecting its complexities and inherent contradictions. Indeed if reality is considered as a social construction, as in Berger and Luckmann's famous account (1966), then democracy requires that all stakeholders are equally entitled to take part in this constructive process.

This multidimensional and complex way of considering and emphasizing the value of democracy (Sen, 1999b) allows us to overcome the problems linked with two opposite views that dominate political philosophy, namely a more substantial conception of justice where the instrumental role of democracy is emphasized and a more procedural conception of justice in which this instrumental role tends to be overlooked. Sen's original contribution to the debate on democracy and social justice will be presented against the background of the debate between Rawls and Habermas in the mid-1990s.

In his critique of Rawls' theory of justice, Habermas (1995) argues that the philosopher cannot define by himself the content of justice, which should rather emerge from a *real* deliberation among citizens. Instead of relegating deliberation on the principles of justice to an imagined 'original position', deliberative democracy should take place in reality. In other words, social justice cannot be derived from a thought-experiment but rather it should emerge from democratic deliberation actually taking place, whereby ideas of justice are debated and citizens form their conception of what is just and unjust through the deliberative process. Hence, Habermas notes that the form of political autonomy granted to the participants in Rawls' original position is then denied for the real members of his justly constituted society, who 'find themselves subject to principles and norms that have been anticipated in theory and have already become institutionalized beyond their control' (1995: 128). In this way, Rawls relegates 'the democratic process to an inferior status' (Habermas, 1995: 128), which appears instrumental to the two principles of justice identified by Rawls. To some extent, one could say that the intrinsic and constructive values of democracy seem to be denied in Rawls' conception.

Habermas' approach to social justice demarcates itself from Rawls' insofar as it 'focuses exclusively on the procedural aspects of the public use of reason' (1995: 131). In this way, it 'can leave more questions open because it entrusts more to the *process* of rational opinion and will formation' (Habermas, 1995: 131). Thus, for Habermas philosophy cannot elaborate the substantial idea of a just society but should 'limit itself to the clarification of ... the procedure of democratic legitimation' and 'to the analysis of the conditions of rational discourses and negotiations'. In this more modest role, 'philosophy ... leaves substantial questions ... to the ... engagements of participants' (1995: 131).

Habermas' procedural perspective implies that deliberative democracy is a matter of due process: whatever the outcome of these processes, it is to be considered as fair and legitimate. This clearly runs the risk of narrowly focusing on formal aspects, overlooking the consequences for people's lives. Thus, while Rawls risks excessively focusing on the substantive dimension of justice and discarding the constructive and intrinsic value of democracy, Habermas runs the opposite risk, namely a transcendental proceduralism that insists mainly on procedural issues and leaves substantial aspects apart to a large extent. Indeed, the work of Habermas and of those scholars who further developed his approach resulted in a strong theoretical proceduralization of the issue of

democracy and social justice. The Discourse Quality Index (DQI) developed by Steenbergen et al. (2003), used by many scholars to objectively qualify deliberation, is an example of such a focus on the procedural dimension of deliberation inspired by Habermas' ideal speech situation.

In contrast to both positions, Sen suggests an alternative view capable of including both the procedural and substantial dimensions. On the one hand, he shares with Habermas a concern for real deliberative democracy, thus remaining deeply sceptical of the possibility of defining justice without debate between different positions (Sen, 2009). Indeed, Sen values democracy not only for instrumental reasons, but also for intrinsic motives. On the other hand, Sen insists that democracy and participation involve not only a procedural dimension but also a substantive one (see also Bohman, 1997; Knight and Johnson, 1997). In fact, the CA focuses both on the process aspect of freedom – which involves the freedom to access and be involved in fair processes – and on the opportunity aspect of freedom – which relates to the extension of the capability set, that is, the range of valuable options that are made available to an individual (Sen, 1999a). Therefore, apparently fair processes having no impact on the development of capabilities cannot be considered as contributing to social justice. In Sen's eyes, democracy is not only an end in itself but also a means to achieve human development, defined as the expansion of human capabilities (1999a).

From this viewpoint, the CA aims at identifying the conditions and prerequisites to promote a virtuous circle between real democracy and enhanced social justice. In Sen's perspective, silence is the worst enemy of social justice (Drèze and Sen, 2002) and social injustice or social inequalities are the main obstacles on the road to real democracy (Srinivasan, 2007). Hence, there is no priority of one dimension – substantial or procedural – over the other. Thus, the CA strives to reconcile the procedural and substantive dimensions of participation and social justice.

In short, from the CA perspective, democratic processes should be investigated along both their procedural and substantial dimensions. To use Crocker's words, we should 'criticize democratic processes both when they fail to be sufficiently democratic and when they fail to deliver on their promise of justice' (2007: 448). The relationship between social justice and democracy is conceptualized as a circular one, potentially leading to virtuous or vicious circles (see also Fraser, 2003). Indeed, political equality and social and economic situations have a significant impact on each other (Bohman, 1996, 1998), as the next section illustrates.

Democracy in a World of Inequalities

In contrast to Habermas and Rawls, Sen stresses the need to start from the fact of injustice and inequalities in the real world. He criticizes some of the most influential theories of justice in political philosophy for being far removed from reality and incapable of orienting policies to reduce injustice in the world. He stresses that a theory of justice should help promote justice in the real world rather than describing an inaccessible perfectly just society. Sen sees the most important task for a theory of justice in helping to answer questions such as 'how is it possible to promote justice?' rather than 'identifying perfectly just societal arrangements' (2006: 216). In this way, Sen differentiates himself from the philosophical tradition – which in his view includes both Rawls and Habermas, among others – that aims at defining a 'transcendental theory of justice' focused on a description of the perfectly just institutions or the perfectly just form of democratic deliberation.

Real social life is characterized by social inequalities and power asymmetries. How should we include this brute fact in a theory of justice? Rawls develops an imagined 'original position' in which actual inequalities could be neutralized because all citizens situated behind the 'veil of ignorance' ignore their future positions in society. Similarly, Habermas theorizes the public sphere as an arena in which 'interlocutors would set aside such characteristics as differences in birth and fortune and speak to one another as if they were social and economic peers' (Fraser, 1997: 77). In

contrast to this tendency to ignore or put aside inequalities, undertaking deliberation *as if* participants were not unequal, another strategy would be that of explicitly recognizing the existing inequalities within the public sphere (Fraser, 1997). Real citizens are unequal and these inequalities have an impact on participative and democratic processes. Thought-experiments such as the veil of ignorance or the ideal speech situation do not take this sufficiently into account. As Fraser argues, there are ‘informal impediments to participatory parity that can persist even after everyone is formally and legally licensed to participate’ (1997: 78). Indeed, in contrast to the liberal theory that assumes the autonomy of the political sphere from other social spheres (i.e. social inequalities would not impact on the ability to participate), it seems that large social inequalities – structured by a variety of factors – imply large political inequalities and unequal participation. Hence, ‘it is a necessary condition for participatory parity that systemic social inequalities be eliminated. ... *Pace* liberalism, then, political democracy requires substantive social equality’ (Fraser, 1997: 80).

It thus comes as no surprise that Sen (2006, 2009) considers both Rawls and Habermas as representatives of so-called ‘transcendental’ theories of justice, which are inconsistent with the reality of social interactions and social inequalities. For this reason, their conceptions have not by themselves the power to transform social reality in the desired direction, but are rather impeded by existing social inequalities. In Sen’s eyes, such theories cannot help promote justice in the real world. The problem is not only that transcendental approaches do not pay sufficient attention to the forms of inequalities that interfere with deliberative practices; it is also that by ignoring existing inequalities they risk making deliberative models elitist, thus reinforcing inequalities or producing new ones (e.g. based on deliberative inequalities). Thus, ‘deliberative conceptions of democracy must have demanding requirements of political equality, if they are not to favor the more virtuous, the better educated, or simply the better off’ – which implies shifting the focus from the ‘equal opportunity to influence political decisions’ to the ‘capacity to make effective use of such opportunities’ (Bohman and Rehg, 1997: xxiv). This requires identifying all factors that promote or obstruct the conversion of formal equality of opportunity into real and effective opportunity to participate.

A similar critique to deliberative theories comes from the feminist literature, which shows that during deliberations, men tend to interrupt women more than women interrupt men; men speak more often and longer than women and women’s interventions are more often ignored than men’s (Fraser, 1997: 78). This also applies, with equal relevance, to other kinds of social inequalities based on class, race, nationality, education, etc. What is at stake is the ability of less prestigious groups to voice their concerns and make them count in the course of deliberative processes. Material and symbolic frontiers are at work here (Lamont and Molnár, 2002). Not only do these groups enjoy worse material conditions that make their possibility to participate quite difficult – participation is costly and exigent in terms of time required (most often not remunerated) – but they also tend to be stigmatized and their viewpoints are less readily taken into account (which underlines the importance for effective participation of an audience ready to consider all individuals’ arguments in an egalitarian manner). For instance, intersectional studies (Crenshaw, 1991) clearly emphasize the potential cumulative disadvantages that such a combination of material and symbolic barriers may entail. Indeed, socio-economic inequalities are often translated into symbolic boundaries that prevent equal participation, thus leading to self-reproducing vicious circles between poverty, stigmatization and non- (or non-effective) participation.

Moreover, as Charles (2012) notes, asking people to take part in participative processes requires that they have specific communicative and rhetorical skills that are not equally shared among the population. For this reason, the call for participation puts certain people to a severe test and places a heavy burden on their shoulders, which explains why they are not always willing to participate. Indeed, the capacity to participate in deliberative processes cannot be considered as a universal and equally distributed competence. Knight and Johnson (1997) identify

three politically relevant capacities that people are called to master in order to have political influence: the basic cognitive abilities and skills (including access to information and to the decision-making process, but also the ability to define the agenda or the frame of collective decision-making processes or to design one's own information or knowledge on a specific issue); the capacity to formulate one's true preferences – by contrast with adaptive preferences (Elster, 1983) or illusions deriving from false consciousness; and the capacity to make effective use of recognized cultural resources (this is especially problematic when minorities are required to express their views in the language of dominant groups). These three competences are unequally distributed, and this calls into question the apparent inclusiveness of deliberative processes even where it is formally recognized. Indeed, the integration of people on an equal footing demands that they can make an effective use of the opportunities to participate. If this requires competences that they do not have to the same extent as other participants, then their participation cannot be considered as effective. Elsewhere, we argued that if effective participation relies on the possession and mastering of specific competences that are unequally distributed among the participants, then people who are disadvantaged with regard to these competences should be guaranteed the right not to participate without incurring unbearable penalties; or, alternatively, they should be encouraged to build collectives that would be able to represent their viewpoints more efficiently (Bonvin, 2013). This issue of representation is, however, very complex, as it can be affected by two main problems: first, the issue of who is being represented when leaders of such collectives speak for their communities, i.e. to what extent do these representatives really speak for all members of their groups; second, people have diverse affiliations, they belong to many groups, which makes especially problematic the representation of their viewpoints by a single group. Indeed, singular affiliations may violate a person's multiple identities. Hence, representation of disadvantaged people cannot per se be considered as the panacea for their effective participation in deliberative and decision-making processes.

With regard to all these issues, however, Sen's conception is not particularly original and its added value does not stand out strikingly when compared with feminist or intersectional accounts of socio-economic and political inequalities (see Hobson in this issue). In our view, Sen's most significant contribution to this whole debate on the effectiveness of democratic participation in a world of inequalities lies in his epistemology, which will be presented in more extensive detail in the next section.

An Epistemology Oriented Towards the Recognition of Pluralism

Sen's approach does not only pay attention to socio-economic and political inequalities but it also assumes that such unequal situations translate into different cognitive and normative worldviews. As a matter of fact, inequalities have deep-seated epistemological implications, which are aptly captured by Sen's notion of 'positional objectivity' (2002). With that notion, he stresses how the same social reality can be described or assessed differently according to the viewpoint from which this description or assessment takes place. For instance, youth violence will be depicted in different ways by policy-makers, old people, teachers, social workers or young people themselves. In Sen's view, all these descriptions 'have some claim to being objective within their own terms' (2002: 471), that is, they include an objective, though partial, description of the phenomenon concerned. Thus, 'positional objectivity' is both objective and relative to the position of the observer. When people describe the same physical item from different positions they give divergent pictures of it, and yet all accounts remain equally objective. Similarly, people's descriptions of social phenomena will be different according to their specific social position (socio-economic status, life trajectory, etc.) while still holding some objective truth.

Against this epistemological background, Sen (1992) claims that the description of social realities includes a moment of choice between the various available positional objectivities, what he designates as the selection of the relevant informational basis. In 'Description as Choice' (1982), Sen underlines that even in what seems to be a mere description of social reality, (political) choices are involved in the process of selecting the relevant information and discarding other pieces of information. Youth violence can be described by insisting on the damage it causes to property, on the immoral character of such behaviour, on the socio-economic factors underlying such violence or on yet other aspects. According to the selected informational basis, the description of this phenomenon, and subsequently its assessment, will be very different. In Sen's view, not only descriptions of social reality but also normative assessments and evaluations are endowed with positional objectivity. Crucially, for Sen the selection of the informational basis underlying the description and normative assessment of social phenomena is a matter of social choice or collective rationality rather than a prerogative of philosophers or social scientists acting as experts. The normative implication is that democratic processes should include as many positional objectivities as possible. Indeed, the more such viewpoints are included and considered (paying due attention to all of them), the more collective decisions will be objectively informed. In this perspective, effective democratic participation is justified on epistemological grounds, as a prerequisite to reach informed decisions. It is not based simply on the normative superiority of collective discussion or public debate over unilateral imposition, but on the epistemological necessity to include all relevant information into the collective decision-making processes.

Another major element in Sen's epistemology relates to individual preferences. In contrast to mainstream economics, which treats them as exogenous or given independently from the social context, Sen insists that people's preferences are shaped by their circumstances. For instance, a battered woman in a patriarchal context may not rebel against her situation and accept it as a 'natural' fact. Similarly, pupils from disadvantaged social backgrounds may adapt their educational aspirations to what they perceive as a realistic target, thus giving up, for instance, the ambition of tertiary education. The problem of adaptive preferences requires, according to Sen, that democratic processes, rather than functioning as mechanisms for aggregating individual preferences, be shaped in a way to allow deconstructing such preferences, thus paving the way for the emergence of new aspirations or, on the contrary, the confirmation of existing ones. Indeed, Sen's approach does not require that preferences be always deconstructed; it rather implies that they have to be submitted to a democratic debate that may lead either to their abandonment or their confirmation. This is the very rationale of the constructive dimension of democracy.

These epistemological foundations have far-reaching consequences for the theory and practice of democracy. First, this implies a departure from the view of democratic citizens as abstract participants able to expurgate themselves from their specific features, interests and circumstances. Sen's conception of democracy does not require citizens to be able to put aside their own interests or the interests of their groups, on the grounds that these would coincide with corporatist or egoistic concerns and be contrary to the overall good of the community; quite to the contrary, in this approach democracy includes citizens as they are, with their interests and aspirations, because they are envisaged as holders of 'positional objectivity'. It does not take place behind a veil of ignorance, where everyone would put aside his or her daily concerns to endorse the ideals of citizenship and disinterestedness. In Sen's view, democracy is not a matter of abstract and ideal citizens but of real and concrete human beings. The issue, then, is not to create the conditions allowing people to abstract themselves from their own interests and situations, but to give equal weight to all existing positional objectivities, which requires overcoming the material, symbolic and cognitive barriers identified in the previous section.

Second, the notion of 'positional objectivity' calls for an encompassing view of 'what is rational' or 'what it means to behave in a rational way' that goes far beyond reductionist conceptions of

rationality such as the maximization of self-interest (or rationality in the utilitarian sense) or the quest for the most efficient solution. In Sen's view, such conceptions of rationality constitute only one possibility of rational behaviour. Indeed, both individual actions and collective decisions may be inspired by different views and values, including a concern for others or political commitment. By reducing the number of criteria that can legitimately justify a 'good decision' or that can be considered as 'good reasons', reductionist approaches such as utilitarianism, or even idealist deliberation theories, deny the plurality of what people may have reason to value. In contrast, for Sen, 'there are many different conceptions of rational behaviour of the individual' (2002: 264) and all reductionist approaches to rationality

would have ... the effect of arbitrarily narrowing permissible 'reasons for choice', and this certainly can be the source of a substantial 'unfreedom' in the form of an inability to use one's reason to decide about one's values and choices. (Sen, 2002: 6)

In the capability perspective, there is a plurality of reasons to value something and none of these reasons can claim to be absolutely superior to all others to the point of becoming an external criterion or yardstick imposed on all individuals and participants to public debates. Hence, no external or a priori criterion should be used to discriminate between rational and irrational behaviours and choices. Sen's perspective calls for an immanent view of rationality that cannot be decided beforehand and imposed on all participants to a discussion. Thus, the very definition of what is 'rational' or 'reasonable' ought to emerge in the course of a public debate. Sen insists that democratic processes remain as open as possible, including as many 'reasons to value' as possible and giving them equal weight in collective decision-making processes.

Third, Sen emphasizes that reasons to value can be transformed by the public debate. In his view, a public debate does not take place with abstract citizens, who have determined their own reasons to value once and for all and defend them throughout the public debate without changing them. Rather, social interactions and collective discussion impact on individuals' values and on the content of positional objectivities, transforming them. Quoting Buchanan, Sen insists that deliberative democracy 'implies that individual values can and do change in the process of decision-making' (2002: 265). Thus, concrete human beings revise their positions when confronted with reasonable objections and the democratic debate should be framed with a view to leaving enough space for such revisability. Moreover, this revisability also applies to the way social injustices are framed. Indeed, if collective discussion may change individual values, it also contributes to the reframing of social injustices at a collective level. Via public discussion new issues that seemed to be acceptable till then can be framed as injustices. The recognition of pluralism and the possibility of revisability go hand-in-hand in such a dynamic approach to values formation and aspirations towards justice.

Fourth, the outcomes of such a conception of democracy, insisting on the inclusion of concrete human beings with their specific interests and reasons to value and on the importance of revisability, are not to be conceived in terms of 'culmination outcomes' but of 'comprehensive outcomes' (Sen, 2002). Indeed, if there is one clearly identified criterion of what is rational or what is a 'good' decision then the issue is to find a solution that maximizes the results against this yardstick (e.g. to increase the growth rate or the GDP could be envisaged as the ultimate criterion of a 'good' public action); such solutions tend towards what Sen calls the quest for culmination outcomes. If by contrast there is a debate about the decision criteria, the goals to be pursued and the means to mobilize to this purpose, then the issue is much more complex since no one knows beforehand what (if anything) needs to be maximized; Sen designates this alternative view as the quest for 'comprehensive outcomes', which incorporate *inter alia* the processes through which outcomes are reached

(Sen, 2002). According to him, real democracy is about comprehensive outcomes and not about culmination outcomes. As a consequence, Sen privileges both a comparative and contextualized approach to social justice, which does not aim at finding one single principle of justice governing the just society –also because of the difficulty of finding an agreement about such issues – but allows for the coexistence of conflicting principles. Thus, instead of a definitive and universal solution to the issue of social justice, this alternative perspective involves an ongoing deliberative process. Plurality is not conceived as a problem to be erased via the quest for consensus, but as something valuable (since all viewpoints contain positional objectivity) that needs to be recognized and included in the democratic practice. Hence, Sen's comparative approach to justice is based on non-definitive judgments, it remains incomplete and open to debate, admitting partial solutions and compromises between conflicting principles.

From Epistemological Foundations to Democratic Institutions

The epistemological foundations of the CA outlined above pave the way for a critical sociological investigation of democratic or participative processes in three main respects. First, to what extent do these processes allow the plurality of positional objectivities to be taken into account, in terms of comprehensive outcomes rather than culmination outcomes? Second, do democratic or participative processes take account of the plurality of conceptions of individual rationality, beyond the utilitarianism of rational fools (Sen, 1977) or the ideal communicative rationality of some deliberation theorists? Third, to what extent does participation make space for revising one's reasons to value, i.e. go beyond mere persuasion to allow constructive democracy to take place, thereby reducing the problem of adaptive preferences?

This view does not question democracy according to an ideal or transcendental view of rationality or of what people should have reason to value; rather, it departs from the people's actual reasons to value and investigates to what extent democratic or participative processes take them seriously. Thus, it privileges one specific view of critical theory or critical sociology (Bohman, 1996; Zimmermann, this issue), where critique is not developed from an external or ideal viewpoint, but from an immanent perspective calling into question the degree of capability for voice left to all stakeholders. By the same token, it calls for a thorough empirical analysis of existing democratic institutions and their impact in terms of social justice.

From this perspective, democratic institutions should include both the recognition of a plurality of viewpoints and the possibility to de-construct and revise individual preferences. A key issue in this twofold respect relates to the identification of the places where democratic processes take place. In other words: what is the place or the locus of democracy within society? Is it confined in formal political institutions or does it include all forms of collective decision-making processes and pervade all spheres of society: the public administration, firms, associations, the family, etc.? Sen's idea of constructive democracy clearly points to the second option, thereby contrasting with most of the literature on deliberative democracy that is generally dedicated to the analysis of practices within political arenas (like parliaments) or within participatory experiments (Steiner et al., 2004; Steiner 2012). Such a focus on formalized and institutionalized contexts of deliberation implies that other arenas, less formalized and institutionalized, receive less attention. The risk, then, is that democracy and participation are interpreted as issues concerning exclusively political institutions such as parliaments, governments or official committees. The most skilful and influential participants are to be found in such arenas and all other people are confined to smaller and less recognized spaces, where, although they are allowed to voice their concerns, these are not taken seriously at upper levels. To frame the issue of democracy in this way is in itself a denial of the democratic capacity of most real citizens.

As a matter of fact, the focus on institutionalized arenas of deliberation does not allow paying due attention to the multiple forms that individual voices may take. Beyond official structures of deliberation, people express their voices in many different ways, including contestation, marches and other modes of action or resistance. These are also forms of participation and political engagement, even if they do not take place in the formal arenas or times of public discussion and do not abide by their standards. However, as Bohman states, ‘deliberative democrats have become increasingly interested in the problems of institutionalization, of making institutions such as voting and majority rule, representation, courts and constitutional law more deliberative rather than rejecting them for more direct democracy’ (1998: 401). In terms of public arenas and opportunities for deliberation, the issue is twofold then: is there a variety of public spaces where all kinds of reasons to value and voices can be expressed and taken seriously (e.g. beyond formal consultation)? If such a variety is available, to what extent does it leave equal space and influence to all voices expressed? More precisely, to what extent are there bridges between the various public spheres and not strict hierarchies dividing the work between the most prestigious actors and the topics they choose to address on the one hand, and the others and their supposedly less important issues on the other hand?

In Sen’s view, majority ballot is not enough to guarantee effective democracy and participation: it is not because people vote that decisions made by an elected body can be considered as democratic. Hence, democracy does not boil down to a formal procedure or vote taking place once every four or five years; such a process is not enough to implement the constructive dimension of democracy. In the same line, Mansbridge and Parkinson advocate for a ‘systemic approach to deliberative democracy’ (2012: 2) in order to envisage jointly the various bodies and institutions of deliberation as complementary parts of a genuinely democratic state. However, Sen himself does not draw all the consequences of his views. It is therefore the task of critical sociology to go beyond Sen and develop appropriate analytical tools for an empirical investigation of actual democratic practices.

In our view, the CA calls for a threefold extension of the way deliberative and participative practices are usually framed. First, beyond formal arenas. As a matter of fact, the CA requires that empirical analysis be not confined to official and political forms of deliberation but also take into account ‘what is not yet considered political ... as well as those areas of social life that are commonly considered as non-political, such as the family, culture and the economy’ (Berger and De Munck, 2015: 4, our translation). This need to go beyond formal institutions is particularly crucial in the case of global justice. Indeed, some prominent political philosophers have denied the possibility to discuss ‘global justice’ because of the lack of what they see as the most fundamental precondition of justice, namely the presence of a worldwide government capable of establishing just institutions. In contrast, Sen contends that it is possible to promote justice at a global level even in the absence of such a global government and that it is only the narrow focus on formal institutions that impedes admitting this (see also De Munck in this issue). Sen then allows for other forms of implementation of human rights than those achieved by national government or elected bodies.

Second, beyond usual actors involved in formal deliberative arenas. Adopting a Senian reading of deliberation implies that legitimacy in formulating ideas and producing knowledge and information is not a prerogative of policy-makers, experts or scientists. Thus, deliberation requires the inclusion of other actors, actually of all those affected by the decision-making process. Indeed, according to the notion of positional objectivity, all such viewpoints are to some extent objective and thus have relevance in a public debate. In the capability perspective, deliberative practices should take on board non-experts’ voices, thus reducing inequalities in the access to decision-making processes. The CA calls for re-politicizing the production of knowledge – in contrast to contemporary tendencies that reduce the process of policy formulation to a technical matter based on scientific ‘evidence’ (Bonvin and Rosenstein, 2009; see also Borghi in this issue). In a similar

way, Sen emphasizes the importance of countervailing powers, media, and every other source of information that may nourish what he calls ‘public agitation’ (2009: 351). As he puts it,

it is not hard to see why a free, energetic and efficient media can facilitate the needed discursive process significantly. The media is important not only for democracy but for the pursuit of justice in general. ‘Discussionless justice’ can be an incarcerating idea. (Sen, 2009: 337)

Indeed, inclusive discussion is the basis for both the recognition of plurality and the possibility to de-construct adaptive preferences and aspirations; as such, it is a prerequisite for the development of all people’s capability to aspire (Appadurai, 2004).

Third, this requires an extension beyond usual frames of public deliberation in order to expand the possibility for non-experts to take part in the deliberative process. As Young (1996) and Sanders (1997) argue, deliberative models tend to be overly cognitivist or rationalistic and thus insufficiently egalitarian. The narrow focus on the rational argument marginalizes other forms of expression and less conventional ways of making one’s own voice count, such as protest and the use of arts. Such marginalization is not politically neutral because it mainly concerns low-status social groups who do not possess the skills required for public deliberation. By contrast, other ways of expressing oneself, via emotions or the use of daily language, should be included and given due weight in deliberative practices. This implies involving all people who get relevant knowledge from their experiences and daily lives in collective decision-making processes (De Leonadis, 2009).¹ For instance, unemployed people should be involved in the formulation of policies addressing unemployment because, on the basis of their experience, they possess a knowledge that policy-makers or experts ignore. ‘Nothing about us without us’, as the disabled movement phrased it some decades ago. This demands taking people’s views seriously, both in knowledge production and in policy-making, which in turn implies that their ways of expressing themselves are respected and paid due attention and that public debates are framed in such a way to recognize their contribution.

Against this background, the task of a critical sociology of democracy is then to assess how far this threefold extension – beyond formal arenas, beyond usual actors and beyond formal formats of deliberation – can be observed in actual democratic practices. The next section turns to outlining what could be a prospective empirical agenda for a critical sociology of democracy and participation.

Moving Towards an Agenda for Empirical Research

Throughout the previous sections we have shown how the CA opens up new analytical and normative perspectives on democracy. In this section we focus on the question of implementation, proposing possible ways of operationalizing such normative yardstick for assessing concrete democratic or participative practices. In order to translate the four dimensions identified above into a framework for empirical analysis, we suggest that all empirical investigations of democratic processes should pay careful attention to the following sets of issues.

First, *what* is being discussed in the course of democratic debates? And, equally importantly, what objects are excluded from collective deliberation? Who defines the agenda of deliberation? This requires assessing whether the framework of collective decision-making processes is incomplete enough to welcome all kinds of topics or if, on the contrary, it is restricted to certain predefined issues. Indeed, if the frame is too narrowly defined – in terms of agenda and themes to be discussed, but also of actors enabled to choose these topics – participation can only take place under constrained conditions. Thus, the incompleteness and the openness of the deliberative setting significantly impact on the scope and influence of citizens’ participation.

Second, *who* does actually participate? What kinds of obstacles preclude participation for other groups or categories, or reduce its impact? To what extent may one talk of *real* democracy for all interested stakeholders or groups in collective decision-making processes? This raises the issue of effective access to deliberative processes, which depends on many conditions and especially on the presence of enabling ‘conversion factors’, defined as those factors (both individual and collective) that facilitate the conversion of formal rights to participate into real rights to participate. Among the preconditions of the real opportunity – ‘opportunity freedom’ in Sen’s terminology – to participate, the availability of material resources is particularly crucial. Indeed, participation is expensive in terms of energy and time and it is very rarely remunerated. Thus, without a certain degree of equality of resources (or at the very least access to a minimal threshold of resources), participation will be the privilege of the wealthy, remaining inaccessible to the most disadvantaged. The material base of deliberation is a crucial prerequisite to translate formal rights to deliberate into *real* rights. Another important issue lies in the equalization of the political capacity of participants: if everyone is allowed to participate, but with extremely differentiated political influence, then there are significant deliberative inequalities, which may result in the reinforcement of existing social and economic inequalities. For the most disadvantaged, the development of a political capacity often implies the constitution of a collective, that is an ability to organize themselves collectively and build associations. Indeed, as collective entities, disadvantaged social groups may better defend their interests, counterbalancing other forms of power asymmetries such as those resulting from socio-economic status or cognitive competencies. Thus, a sociological investigation of democratic practices ought to assess to what extent they allow or even encourage such a right to collectively organize.

Third, *how* is participation organized? Which competences and resources are required in order to participate? What means and opportunities are provided to promote the effective participation of those who are usually excluded from formal democratic arenas? This of course involves individual cognitive factors – such as the capacity to defend one’s viewpoint with convincing arguments or to formulate alternative ways of interpreting or describing a certain situation (giving more weight to one’s positional objectivity) – that require substantial investment in public education in order to enhance these critical capacities for all. However, this view focused on individual capacities is not sufficient and needs to be supplemented with an analysis of deliberative arenas and their rules. For instance: according to what rules and criteria is democracy implemented? Are there alternative public spaces for informal deliberation, allowing different and more accessible forms of participation other than the preponderant use of rational arguments? It is indeed at the crossroad between individual capacities and social opportunities (and the ways they are framed) that the quality of deliberation and participation ought to be assessed. What makes the subtle difference between a vicious circle (where social inequalities tend to reinforce deliberative ones and be reinforced by them) and a virtuous circle (where reduced social inequalities help promote real democracy and vice-versa) needs to be observed precisely at this crossroad between agency and structure (see also Hvinden in this issue).

Fourth, *where* does participation take place? Is it possible to participate in a meaningful and influential way only in formal political arenas, such as parliaments or other public bodies, or is it also possible to voice one’s concerns and make them count via informal settings? Are there bridges between the voices expressed in these various arenas or, on the contrary, are they strictly separated? This relates to the existence and political influence of informal spaces where people who do not master the competences required in conventional settings can participate in less institutionalized ways. If such bridges do not exist, then, even though everyone is allowed to take part, this risks resulting in a dual society with different weights and influences recognized for different modes of participation. A critical sociology of democracy needs to thoroughly assess to what extent actual participative practices promote bridges between such arenas or reproduce existing inequalities or dualities.

Fifth, *is participation an opportunity or a duty?* And, equally important, what are the consequences of non-participation? If very costly, then the call for participation could be perceived as an injunction or a duty rather than an opportunity. And the more restrictive the answers to the first four sets of issues developed above (what, who, how and where), the more tyrannical the injunction to participate would be. This calls into question the whole issue of the freedom to participate, which also involves the freedom not to take part. This implies that the ‘exit option’ (Hirschman, 1970), i.e. non-participation, must have a bearable cost. A critical sociology of democracy is therefore called to assess to what extent such freedom not to participate is available and at what cost.

These five sets of dimensions are clearly interdependent. For instance, if the spaces of participation are reduced to formal arenas and deliberation takes the form of exchanging rational arguments, this will impact on the kind of actors who are able (and also willing) to participate (e.g. highly educated people) and thus on the type of subjects that will be discussed. Finally, even if the limits of this article do not allow tackling this issue properly, these five dimensions also have methodological implications, insofar as participatory approaches taking seriously the views of the people involved in the research process seem to be the most suitable.

Conclusion

In this article we have argued that Sen’s CA offers some important insights for developing a critical sociology of democracy and participation – even if this requires pushing Sen’s arguments further than he himself does. These involve the reconciliation of substantive and procedural issues, paying specific attention to the reality of material and symbolic inequalities and the extent to which they may undermine democratic participation, even in the presence of formal equality to participate. Furthermore, the normative framework elaborated here stresses the plurality of ‘reasons to value’; the fact that individual preferences are not static and given once and for all but are instead adaptive and potentially transformed by deliberative processes; and the importance of different democratic institutions or places – including informal ones – in promoting both democracy and social justice. Finally, we have suggested how this normative framework could be used for the empirical investigation of the objects, participants and spaces of deliberation, as well as the way in which such deliberation is organized and the extent to which participation remains an opportunity rather than becoming a duty.

In conclusion, we believe that Sen’s CA allows posing the debate on democracy and participation in different terms, avoiding the pitfalls related to two extreme conceptions: the blind supporters of participation, ‘active citizenship’ and democracy – which, however, remain largely rhetorical and empty concepts when confronted with empirical facts – and those denouncing the tyranny of participation (Cooke and Kothari, 2001) when the means for implementing it are not given, and consequently denying all value to democracy and participation. As demonstrated in this article, Sen’s approach helps overcome this dichotomy by identifying the social, economic, epistemological and institutional prerequisites of effective democracy and real participation. The objective is not to advocate a transcendental ideal or to denounce its illusory nature, but to see how concrete societies can become more just and democratic. Such an approach also provides analytical tools for empirical investigation. We contend that these can be the basis for a critical sociology of democratic and participative practices.

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Note

1. From a sociological perspective, the cognitive or informational basis of public policies and, more generally, of any kind of collective decisions is socially constructed. Even statistical information – presented as neutral and objective – must be questioned and discussed, since it is based on definitions, classifications and selections of information that directly involve political choices and compromises, follow normative assumptions and specific ‘regimes of justification’ (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006; see also Borghi in this issue). This calls for a collective process of knowledge production in the line of Dewey’s social enquiry (Salais, 2009).

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