

From Participation
to Deliberation
A Critical Genealogy
of Deliberative Democracy

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Dans une nation libre, il est souvent indifférent que les particuliers raisonnent bien ou mal, il suffit qu'ils raisonnent : de là sort la liberté qui garantit des effets de ces mêmes raisonnements. De même, dans un gouvernement despotique, il est également pernicieux qu'on raisonne bien ou mal; il suffit qu'on raisonne pour que le principe du gouvernement soit choqué.

Montesquieu, *De l'esprit des lois*, XIX, 27

Introduction

In a passage of his 2006 book, published during the beginning of the campaign that would lead him to the White House, Illinois Senator Barack Obama wrote:

What the framework of our constitution can do is organize the way in which we argue about our future. All of its elaborate machinery – its separation of powers and checks and balances and Federalist principles and Bill of Rights – are designed to force us into a conversation, a ‘deliberative democracy’ in which all citizens are required to engage in a process of testing their ideas against an external reality, persuading others of their point of view, and building shifting alliances of consent.¹

This excerpt comes from a chapter in which Obama explains his view of the American constitution and the ideal of democracy embodied by US institutions. This paragraph could perhaps be regarded as a milestone: the notion of ‘deliberative democracy’ here appears for the first time in the public discourse of a key figure of international politics. Yet the idea of deliberative democracy expressed by Obama’s words might seem unusual or surprising in the light of the prevailing image of deliberative democracy today.

In this book, I will try to reconstruct the theoretical genesis of this deliberative idea of democracy and the steps that have led to a fully formed *theoretical field*, characterised both by common assumptions and a growing internal articulation. In this reconstruction, a key role will be played by a comparison of deliberative democracy with another notion: that of *participatory democracy*.

The present work therefore aims to be an essay in the ‘history of ideas’, that is, an attempt to understand deliberative democracy starting from its *theoretical genealogy*: its first theoretical formulations, the reasons behind its elaboration, and

1. Barack Obama (2006: 92). In Chapter Three I will outline the roots of political culture and the intellectual affiliation that may help elucidate Obama’s words.

the conceptual (but also historical and political) core that can be found throughout its development and further articulation. My analysis will focus on the comparison with the idea (and practice) of participatory democracy for two reasons: first, to achieve a more complete critical and historical reconstruction; second, and above all, to contribute to an ongoing theoretical and political debate on these two adjectives (*participatory* and *deliberative*) that are frequently used to describe democracy and yet often left indeterminate or, worse, mistaken for one another.

I must warn the reader: I am not aiming for a systematic reconstruction of these two models of democracy, nor will I be able to offer an exhaustive critical review of the massive literature on the subject. It is not my goal to offer here a comprehensive presentation of what deliberative democracy means *today*. My purpose is more limited: to unearth the origins of this theoretical model and to reconstruct the phases of its development, hoping to offer a useful contribution to the contemporary theoretical and political debate on these topics. At the same time, a genealogical reconstruction of this model may help bring out its conceptual core better than a (rather difficult) systematic presentation of it. I shall only devote the final chapter to the analysis of the most recent developments in deliberative theory, outlining a possible ‘map’ of its current configuration.

Thus, my choice has been to offer a *historical-genetic* presentation rather than a *logical-systematic* one. In this regard I must make another preliminary clarification: usually the thinkers taken to be the ‘fathers’ of deliberative democracy are Jürgen Habermas and John Rawls. The choice of a systematic presentation would have implied starting from the analysis of the theoretical foundations on which these two authors built their different views of deliberative democracy. Instead, however, I have chosen to reconstruct the many steps through which the idea of deliberative democracy has come to be, with reference to various intellectual traditions and disciplinary approaches. I have decided to see how the authors engaged with this notion have drawn on Habermas and Rawls, dedicating Part III of this work to the analysis of the way in which these two prominent philosophers directly defined deliberative democracy in the early 90s.

Therefore, what the terms deliberative (and participatory) democracy mean will gradually emerge throughout the present book – a preliminary definition is not needed here. However, I wish to clarify why I chose to propose this sort of ‘parallel history’: why is the critical comparison with participatory democracy so important to understanding the deliberative model?

The studies devoted to deliberative democracy often claim that we can distinguish between an initial phase (in which a theoretical and an ideal model are defined), and a later phase (in which specific operative and methodological proposals are made, or specific institutions are conceived with the aim of testing the strict normative theoretical assumptions in practice). I think it is impossible to separate these two moments sharply, because – as we shall see – the first phase also entailed an experimental dimension. However, we can still roughly distinguish these two steps, particularly because in this evolution some misunderstandings happened. In fact, deliberative democracy has sometimes been simply identified with a series of institutions or methodologies (Deliberative Polling®, citizen

juries, or the several models proposed and tested over the last twenty years). At other times, the idea of deliberative democracy has been overlapped with the complex set of theoretical and practical views related to the idea of participatory democracy; finally, it has sometimes been understood as a variation or a subset of the latter.

These are surely inappropriate views but there has undoubtedly been an objective reason for them: the new deliberative practices presented themselves – and could be taken also as – *participatory practices*. In other words, they proposed new models through which to promote citizens' participation in a more inclusive or effective way compared to the past. Nevertheless, the overlapping of deliberative and participatory democracy is also a *reductive* definition, because it overshadows the specific nature of the former as a *deliberative theory of democracy* (and not only as a *theory of democratic deliberation*). I wish to show that this distinction is, in fact, also crucial to a better understanding of the internal articulation of the 'deliberative constellation': that is, to comprehend how it can be taken as a *theoretical paradigm* which can be extended and adapted to a wide range of phenomena and thematic/disciplinary fields, as I will illustrate in the final chapter of this work.

The theoretical development of deliberative democracy has gone hand in hand with the growth and diffusion of new forms and institutions of democratic participation, as well as new models of *participatory governance* – the latter is the object of vast critical literature and is generally interpreted as a symptom or an effect of the so-called 'crisis' of democracy. It would be a mistake to emphasise the role of these new forms of participation, given the continuing importance of traditional mechanisms of government and, mainly, given other (very different and opposed) tendencies characterising contemporary democracies – I shall talk about this in the Conclusion of this book. It would also be a mistake to find a direct causal connection between what happened in theory and practical developments. As Bernard Manin (2002: 41–2) has noted, the spread of new participatory practices should be interpreted not only as an effect of the related theories: rather, these are new social and institutional practices, which need new theoretical paradigms to be understood. Therefore, there are theories seeking a practical translation as well as practices seeking a theoretical explanation.

However, if it would be wrong to overestimate the role of these new practices and models of participation, it would also be wrong to underrate it, even just as a sign of potential directions that contemporary democracies might take. Also for this reason, it is necessary to provide a rigorous definition of the theoretical assumptions behind the practices and models. Therefore, as we shall see, I think it is more correct to speak of *participatory models of the deliberative matrix* (or, more precisely, of the forms and means of participation inspired by a theoretical model of democratic deliberation). Such a definition makes it possible to consider many other participatory forms and practices that may rest on different normative assumptions; it also allows us to grasp the relationship between these different sources of inspiration.

The very diffusion of these new forms of participatory and/or deliberative governance has brought (and still brings) our attention to the relationship between

such practices and the political sphere in a dual sense: both as a sphere of public policies and as a sphere of politics. I will not be able to address this topic directly or in depth here, as this would involve an analysis of all that *today* constitutes the theoretical field of deliberative democracy and its relation to one or more models of participatory democracy. It would also imply extending the timeframe of the analysis so as to include everything that has been produced over the past twenty years. A task of this magnitude is beyond the scope this book but I think the present critical reconstruction of the theoretical genealogy of these two paradigms may act as a basis for further analysis of the various approaches available today: that is, of how the ideas and practices of deliberative democracy can also help us to rethink the models of contemporary policy-making and the possible forms of democratic governance in our age.

As we shall see in Part I, the origins of participatory democracy can be found in the 1960s in the United States: it is then that a model of participatory democracy was born, drawing on the youth uprisings, the struggles for civil rights, the feminist movement and the protests of that decade; it was then given a theoretical synthesis in various texts by authors I shall analyse. At the same time, this wave drew on a revival of some topics and attitudes that had their roots in the Progressive Era. The constitutive traits of this model included the radical rejection of representation, or at least a sharp distinction or opposition between participation and representation (even though some authors argue for their potential coexistence): this rejection rested on the fact that representation was seen as mere *delegation*, which leads to the atrophying of people's political agency as well as to apathy and passivity. As an antidote to all that, participatory democracy exalted the potential virtues of active citizenship that should and could be educated and nourished with direct forms of empowerment: the (even partial) exercise of direct responsibility and the practice of autonomy and self-rule. This core of political culture, inspired by the social movements of the 1960s, would ignite the following attempt to translate these principles into institutions and all the aspects of social life (from families, to school, up to the workplace). This theoretical and political approach weakened around the mid 1970s and disappeared entirely in the 1980s and 1990s. However, it left a deep impression on the ideas of democracy to come, especially as it connects to feminist theoretical culture. Overall, 1960s participatory democracy has left a legacy of ideas and values that still inspires, or at least affects, contemporary democratic theory.

The term 'participatory democracy' came back into popularity in the early 2000s: part of Chapters Seven and Eight and Chapter Thirteen are devoted to how this return took place and the modes of its (sometimes problematic) encounter with the deliberative approach. Suffice it to say here that participatory democracy is today generally a very broad reference term indicating a set of practices embedding the *active* involvement of citizens *within* institutional decision-making processes. In this sense, 'participatory democracy' evokes a conception of democracy that stresses, valorises and (normatively) 'wishes for' processes of political decision-making *directly* involving citizens. On the one hand, this view implies or aims for some form of sovereignty to be directly exercised by the citizens; on the other,

it privileges the active education of citizens that is provided by participatory practices. From this perspective, participation is the tool through which citizens gain critical awareness of their condition and regain control over the decisions affecting their lives.

Deliberative democracy tells us another story: it certainly has ancient roots and several antecedents but the idea first properly took shape in the early 1980s, developing from some specific intellectual traditions and disciplinary fields. This idea soon expanded and became a theoretical field with a variety of interpretations, especially with the decisive contributions of Jürgen Habermas and John Rawls in the early 1990s. Thus deliberative democracy has come to constitute an *ideal* but also a *theoretical model* of democracy and, finally, an actual *paradigm*, able to influence many spheres of knowledge and to inspire new social and institutional practices.

Ideal; theoretical model; paradigm: these are all different ways of understanding deliberative democracy and, in what follows, I will look at how these different definitions have been elaborated and developed. For now, though, it might be worth answering the question: what do we mean exactly by ‘deliberation’ (and therefore by ‘deliberative’ democracy)? In order to avoid some common misunderstandings, let me point out that the term (which is often fully assimilated to that of ‘decision’ in languages like French and Italian) should be understood in the light of its etymology, which, in English, has retained its original and separate meaning.

‘To deliberate’ originally means to weigh the pros and cons of the potential solutions to a problem, finding and supporting the reasons for a practical choice while criticising unconvincing ones, acknowledging persuasive arguments and rejecting those that are not. To ‘deliberate’ is to acquire a considered judgment on what is ‘right’ or ‘wrong’, ‘good’ or ‘bad’; but *not* on what is ‘true’ or ‘false’. A deliberation leads to ‘being convinced’ of something, not to ‘demonstrating’ something. It can take place in an individual’s *inner forum*, but it also has a more or less *public* dimension through an exchange of ideas and arguments (the latter case is of greater interest, of course, when speaking of democracy). *Public deliberation* rests on the assumption that our opinions and judgments are not given and unchangeable but are formed and transformed in dialogue and communication, by listening to other people’s views and assessing them. Finally, *public* deliberation is also *democratic* if it is configured as an *inclusive* process of the *discursive* formation of citizens’ ideas, opinions, judgments and wills – provided that the citizens are *free* and *equal*. In other words, deliberation is democratic if it *includes* (directly or indirectly, through some form of representation) all those that have ‘something to say’ on a public matter and the right to say it.

This first synthetic definition – which I will discuss in the light of all the authors that have contributed to shaping it – allows us to identify immediately what deliberative democracy is set *against*: that is, all the views that, in one way or another, imply a *rejection of mediation*. A deliberative conception of democracy therefore opposes *both* the idea of *direct* democracy (which can be practised without ‘deliberation’) *and* any *plebiscitary* idea or practice of democracy (which,

too, is direct and immediate). It also opposes any ‘technocratic’ view in which there is no space for choice and dialogue and there are just ‘obligatory’, technically ‘correct’ choices that only require the ‘right’ or ‘most competent’ person to make them. However, this idea of deliberative democracy is also different from versions of participatory democracy in which citizens are ‘directly’ given decision-making ‘power’. This is one of the decisive points that will emerge in this book.

To clarify these issues, I thought it would be helpful to start from a reconstruction of what in the 1960s (for participatory democracy) and 1980s (for deliberative democracy) has become the theoretical structure of these two models of democratic thought. My analysis will show, first of all, that these are *two different histories*, starting in different times and based on profoundly different theoretical and political reasons. These paths have *some points of intersection* but these crossroads should not cause us to overlook the deep differences between the two.

However, I’ll anticipate here on what ground there has been some overlap between participatory and deliberative democracy. ‘Participation’ is a very broad term, more indeterminate than ‘deliberation’. Participation means ‘taking part’ in something, but also ‘being part’ of something in regard to many possible phenomena: participation can be differentiated according to the *sphere* (political, social, economic and so forth) in which it takes place and the *forms* it assumes. Ideally, such forms can be placed on a continuum that has conflictual social and political practices on the one side and social co-operation (through which people solve collective problems and deal with the common good, in a dimension related to the principle of *subsidiarity*) on the other. In between those two poles there is a very varied series of potential forms of participation: protest, denunciation, advocacy, claim, negotiation and so forth – there can also be, of course, hybrids and overlapping forms. Within these potential participatory expressions there can also be *a deliberative dimension*. Therefore, not all forms of participation are deliberative; not all forms of deliberation imply participation; and not all forms of deliberation are democratic: forms of *public and democratic deliberation* can be seen as *specific* forms of participation.

It is on this ground that the theoretical paths of deliberative and participatory democracy have crossed – but not without misunderstandings and problems. Often when we talk of participatory democracy (as we shall see), it is not only or not so much to various practices in which political and social participation find expression that we refer but rather to a properly *decisional* dimension: it is believed that participation is the specifically *democratic* mode of decision-making. This is its main point of difference from deliberative democracy. Participatory democracy is based on the *direct* action of citizens, who exercise decisional power; deliberative democracy, on the other hand, mainly points to the argumentative exchange and the public discussion *preceding* decision, regarding deliberation as a *phase* of a process of dialogic construction of decisions pertaining to legitimate democratic institutions. Of course, any private association or a group of people can make their decisions through deliberative procedures. However, when the sphere of *political* decisions comes into play, deliberation is a *phase* or a *dimension* of a process legitimated by institutional democratic procedures.

At this point, the crucial issue (which, as we'll see, has been tackled by many authors) becomes *public and inclusive deliberation as a source of democratic legitimacy*. Also, as Habermas put it with his idea of deliberative politics, there is the issue of the *double source of legitimacy* that may ground a democratic decision. The first is the *discursive* one produced in the public sphere, based on citizens' ability or potential to express a *communicative power* – that is, the potential power of *influence* the deliberative practice has over the political and decisional process. Next to it, there is another source of legitimacy that cannot be ignored: that of the institutional dimension that is proper to a democratic rule-of-law state, regulated by democratic procedures based on a constitution. Between these two levels there can be convergence and mutual strengthening but also – and often – tension and conflict. The theme of the forms and modes of democratic legitimation is one of the main threads of my analysis. In the Conclusion of this book I will try to show that this is the area in which deliberative democracy can offer valid solutions to the crisis and the transformation of contemporary democracies.

The book is divided into four Parts and a Conclusion. Part I is dedicated to participatory democracy in the 1960s and 1970s as well as to the related debate that took place in the early 1980s. In Chapter One, I will reconstruct the origins of this idea of democracy, which had its peak in the 1960s and 1970s: a very particular historical climate, marked by struggles for human rights and student movements born in the US. I will look at some of the first documents testifying to early approaches to the idea of participatory democracy; my analytical focus will be on how this idea was theoretically elaborated in those two decades by authors – such as Pateman, Macpherson and Arnstein, among others – who are still well known today as well as by others who are now less frequently recalled.

In Chapter Two, I will focus on a sort of 'transitional phase'. I will analyse two 1980s texts that go beyond participatory democracy: Jane Mansbridge's *Beyond Adversary Democracy* (1980) and Benjamin Barber's *Strong Democracy* (1984). These works were very much still tied to the discussion on participatory democracy but, at the same time, they helped move the debate on to the next phase. They (and Mansbridge's in particular) were the first texts to point to a possible passage to a deliberative view of democracy, even though the latter isn't yet explicitly referred to.

In the second part I will tell another story, one that begins and continues in full independence from the former: in the 1980s there were the first elaborations of a *theoretical model* (or, in other versions, an *ideal*) of deliberative democracy. The third chapter is devoted to an essay by Joseph M. Bessette, 'Deliberative democracy: the majority principle in republican government' (1980), which is today unanimously considered the birthplace of the term. I will then look at some works by constitutionalist and philosopher of law Cass R. Sunstein: such works are less often cited in this perspective but offered many suggestions for later and more complete elaborations of the deliberative model. Another constitutionalist and philosopher of law who contributed crucially to the first phase of deliberative democracy is Frank I. Michelman: I will deal with his work in Chapter Nine, through Habermas's discussion of his theses. When talking about Fishkin

(section 7.3), I will also address the positions of another great scholar of American constitutionalism, whose views are different from Sunstein's and Michelman's: Bruce Ackerman. As we shall see, his work contributed to a particular line of evolution of the new theoretical field of deliberative democracy. Bessette's, Sunstein's, Michelman's and Ackerman's texts belong to a context that at first might seem very far from that of deliberative democracy as it is understood today: they tackle diverging interpretations of the idea of democracy embodied by the American constitution – a debate that was then very much alive in the US, also because of its approaching bicentennial anniversary.

My reconstruction of the genealogy of the new model will then dwell on some of the contributions in this area that appeared in the second half of the 1980s: Jon Elster's works (*Sour Grapes*, 1983; 'The market and the forum: three varieties of political theory', 1986) in Chapter Four; an essay by Bernard Manin, 'On legitimacy and political deliberation' (1987) in Chapter Five and, finally, a work by Joshua Cohen, 'Deliberation and democratic legitimacy' (1989) in Chapter Six. These texts represent a crucial moment in the development of the new deliberative theoretical field: as they start outlining it they also show the first areas of tension inherent to it.

Chapter Seven makes things more complicated, showing the *intersections*, *confluences* and *new developments* that define and enrich the deliberative constellation between the 1980s and the early 1990s, expanding towards new disciplines and overlapping with the tradition of participatory democracy. As a particularly relevant example of this phase, I will analyse the development of the theories and practices of *planning* (urban and regional planning and, more generally, public-policy planning), taking as an example the work of John Forester. I will also look at the work of John S. Dryzek, as an example of a 'critical-radical' approach to deliberative democracy, which will be relevant to the future development of the new model.

In particular, I will analyse the contributions made by political science and political theory: in 1991, James S. Fishkin published *Democracy and Deliberation: New directions for democratic reforms*, in which he formulated for the first time the proposal of Deliberative Polling®. This paved the way for another line of development in deliberative democracy: a focus on the places, methods and conditions that favour deliberation understood as the formation of informed opinions. This is a central strand in deliberative democracy that is sometimes mistakenly considered to be the only one; however, it is but one of the many strands in the development of the deliberative model between the 1980s and 1990s.

Overall, my reconstruction aims to show how, within a few years, authors coming from many different perspectives and disciplines first defined the 'critical' frontiers of the new paradigm and then consolidated its content. These authors acted independently at first but then started to exchange views and elaborate their ideas in different directions. In Chapter Eight, I will provide a general assessment of the 'constitutive phase' of deliberative democracy, also trying to answer some questions about the new model as it was developed and the tradition of participatory democracy: can the relationship between them be described in terms of *continuity* (as some claim), *contiguity* or *break*?

In the background of this first phase (and *only* in the background) are two figures that have deeply marked the political philosophy of our time: John Rawls and Jürgen Habermas. In different ways, all the authors mentioned thus far (apart from Fishkin, who mainly draws on the work of Robert Dahl) take some essential elements from Habermas and Rawls – especially Cohen, who should be considered fully Rawls’s pupil – and discuss their theses. However, as we will see, they mostly look at the works Rawls and Habermas had produced *till then*: Rawls’s first edition of *Theory of Justice* (1971)² and a series of 1970s works by Habermas, only partly considering his later *Theory of Communicative Action* (1981) and *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action* (1983).

When reconstructing a history of ideas, *dates matter*; and the story of deliberative democracy shows a singular overturning of perspectives. Rawls and Habermas, who are today regarded as the forerunners of this new version of democracy, have certainly been essential theoretical references for those who first tried to elaborate it (as we shall see, this sometimes involved both criticisms and misunderstandings). However, only *after* the term ‘deliberative democracy’ had been introduced did they strengthen its theoretical and philosophical grounds with their 1990s works: *Between Facts and Norms* by Habermas (1992); *Political Liberalism* by Rawls (1993). With their different approaches, these two major works opened the door to different lines of development and theoretical elaboration. In a way, the circle was thus closed and, since then, deliberative democracy can be considered fully as a *theoretical, critical and normative model* on the one hand and as an *ideal model* on the other. Both types of model are still very influential on today’s democratic thought, producing a massive number of contributions to the literature and operating as a *paradigm* within many disciplines and social practices (both new and old).

Part III of the book is therefore devoted to Habermas and Rawls and a description of the theoretical foundations of deliberative democracy they proposed. Chapter Nine is focused on Habermas and his notion of ‘deliberative politics’ (and not ‘deliberative democracy’ – a crucial distinction, as we shall see). Such a notion is proposed in *Between Facts and Norms*: I will especially focus on the pages in which Habermas engages in critical dialogue with the very authors I discuss in the previous chapters (Michelman, Sunstein, Ackerman, Elster, Cohen, Manin), who had outlined the early theoretical field of deliberative democracy. Here, Habermas also addresses the views of Robert Dahl, who proposed his own normative theory of democracy and indirectly influenced the definition of the new model.

In Chapter Ten I will complete my analysis of Habermas, focusing on the relations between deliberative politics and the public sphere, civil society and the state. In this regard I will look at Habermas’s criticism of Joshua Cohen and the latter’s response, in which he proposes (together with Charles Sabel) a model of deliberative governance and democratic experimentalism. I believe this

2. As we shall see, in Cohen’s case, also Rawls’s Tanner Lecture ‘The basic liberties and their priority’ (1982), which was then published and revised as Lecture VIII of *Political Liberalism* (1993).

critical exchange brings out one of the fundamental conflicts within the theoretical field of deliberative democracy, which is also one of its most promising lines of development.

Chapter Eleven will be dedicated to Rawls and especially his idea of ‘public reason’. Rawls comes to talk about deliberative democracy explicitly rather late: he addresses it with (relative) breadth mainly in ‘The idea of public reason revisited’ (1997). However, the originality of his contribution is such that it significantly affected the developments of the deliberative theoretical field. In retrospect, many elements of his earlier theoretical path can be reread in a deliberative light: thus it has become usual practice to speak of a ‘Rawlsian approach’ within the intellectual community that deals with deliberative democracy (in the same way, there has been talk of a ‘Habermasian approach’). Chapter Twelve is devoted to the direct dialogue between Rawls and Habermas in 1995: this exchange – which is regarded as one of the peaks of the philosophical debate of the past few decades – naturally touches on a wide range of issues that appear in their work; here, though, I will try to grasp the implications that mainly affect their way of understanding a deliberative conception of democracy.

My reconstruction stops at the end of the 1990s: I will not analyse what happened afterwards. Nevertheless, in the concluding chapter, I will propose a few hypotheses on how we might make a possible ‘map’ of today’s complex deliberative field. I will look at some of its branches, noting how they cannot be only traced back to Rawls and Habermas; I will also investigate the so-called *empirical turn* of deliberative democracy, proposing to complete this notion with the expression ‘*policy-oriented turn*’.

I have tried to reconstruct the internal logic of the various positions analysed as well as the debate between them, trying to avoid (as much as possible) imposing critical judgments that might appear biased. However, in the last section of Chapter Thirteen, I will present what was recently described as a ‘systemic approach’ to deliberative democracy, illustrating why I believe that such an approach is the most promising and convincing for the future of this democratic model. In the Conclusion I will try to *explain* the affirmation and diffusion of deliberative democracy as a democratic ideal and as a theoretical model. I will mainly focus on the historical and political factors that, in my view, make such a model *credible* as an answer to the transformations and tensions affecting the very idea of democracy today.

To conclude, I wish to make a few more personal remarks. This work is rooted not only in my theoretical interest but also in my first-hand experience. In the past few years, I happened to hold an administrative position that has allowed me to follow one of the most significant trials of the above-mentioned participatory practices: a law of the Tuscany Region on participation that, in the view of many external observers, can be considered one of the first attempts to institutionalise a deliberative *and* participatory view of *policy-making*.³ Throughout this experience,

3. See, for instance, Jürg Steiner 2012: 26–31, 249. I have analysed the successes and failures of the Tuscan experiment elsewhere (Florida 2008, 2012, 2013). On the Tuscan law, see also Lewanski 2013.

I have confirmed and strengthened a specific viewpoint: models of political theory are not vague ideas belonging to the empyrean of concepts but are very often *implicit* in political and institutional practices as well as in the related political culture. These ideas can guide and inspire such practices; practices, in turn, test the concepts that interpret them.

In my work I have had firsthand experience with deliberative and participatory democracy. My job experience has entailed daily discussions with politicians, administrators, exponents of civic associations, experts and professionals in the field, researchers and scholars, and the most active as well as the most disillusioned citizens. I was a privileged witness and an external observer of, but also an active participant in, the public discourse in Tuscany (and in other Italian regions and cities). This experience made me aware that there was *some idea of democracy* affecting (sometimes spontaneously and unreflectively) the social, intellectual, political and institutional *practices*. And these *ideas*, these forms of political culture, these elements of ‘normative self-understanding’ (as Habermas would put it) have consequences: political discourse, the words it uses, the ideas and concepts it expresses are also *actions* intervening in reality, born out of *intentions* and following *goals*. ‘Jeffersonian and Hamiltonian political ideas’ – which John Dewey mentioned as an example in the introduction of his *The Public and its Problems* (1927) – ‘are not merely theories dwelling in the human mind remote from facts of American political behaviour’: they are ‘forces which have shaped those facts and which are still contending to shape them in the future this way and that’. So, more generally,

... there is more than a speculative difference between a theory of the state which regards it as an instrument in protecting individuals in the rights they already have, and one which conceives its function to be the effecting of a more equitable distribution of rights among individuals. For the theories are held and applied by legislators in Congress and by judges on the bench and make a difference in the subsequent facts themselves (Dewey 1984: 240–1).

The ideas presented and discussed in this book are not, so to speak, mere ‘academic exercises’. Reconstructing the genealogy and structure of a theoretical model means not only retracing its origins and links to earlier ideas and understanding the meaning that a given author grants it in dialogue or polemic with others. It also means understanding the historical reasons behind the emergence of an idea and, especially, the real processes that are self-understood through such an idea.

Such ideas (and the languages by which they are expressed) act in a given historical context – we *do things* with them and through them we think of politics in its very making (Austin 1962; Searle 1969; Skinner 1969, 1972). Nevertheless, they are also core concepts that can *transcend* their origins and can be used, modified and elaborated in order to understand and orientate different contexts of action. The history of the ‘highest’ peaks of political thought, and the study of the texts in which these ideas find their most refined expression, cannot avoid the task of

interpreting the meaning they acquire as steps of a historical process in which different perspectives clash. We must not forget that these ideas are interpretations of reality *in fieri* as well as discourses on *possible* reality. Nevertheless, the non-contingent power of these peaks can best be measured precisely when they also manage to speak outside the context from which they emerged.

In the first chapters of this work I will try to show how, in the 1960s and 1970s, the idea of participatory democracy emerged from a historical period of intense change and turmoil, as the conscience of that time and as a tool of interpretation that itself tried to favour historical change. In the Conclusion – after reconstructing its origin and contents – I will try to understand why *a deliberative idea of democracy* has emerged over the past thirty years; why it seems to be plausible to many thinkers; how it constitutes (or may aspire to be) an effective way to understand the ways in which contemporary democracy could, potentially, be transformed; and how these ideas can serve as an alternative to currently dominant democratic ideas, practices and trends.