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Schools of democracy. How (sometimes) ordinary citizens become competent in participatory budgeting institutions

ECPR Press, Colchester, 2011.

Clearly, we cannot expect that all participatory process have individual cultural consequences on its participants. However, some of the previous literature has created too high expectations regarding this issue and Julien Talpin's book contributes to demolish part of these expectations. This first important result of the book happens even if the author chooses one particular type of process (participatory budgeting) where these effects could be expected and are not fully unrealistic: Some participants devote time, intellectual and affective energies in these processes where real decisions that affect citizen's lives are made. Cultural changes among participants occur, but only in certain circumstances, for specific groups of people and more for some attitudes (and behaviours) than for others.

Beyond this general conclusion, the book is important and innovative for several reasons. First, because of the topic. The empirical analysis of the cultural consequences of participatory processes is crucial because it has been one of the important promises of most of the deliberative and participatory democracy literature. Second, because the approach followed is new and quite well justified: most of the previous literature is based on quantitative approaches measured immediately after the participatory process has been completed¹. Talpin argues convincingly the

importance of capturing real behaviours, to analyse them once the immediate emotional reaction to the process has vanished and to capture them through participant observation that allows viewing the constant interaction between the citizen, the process and the fellow participants. The book is an excellent example of how a qualitative ethnography can provide an excellent empirical account that captures realities that surveys have trouble to cope with. Third, the book is relevant because there is no other analysis of this same topic done in a so rich and contextualised analysis, with a European focus and using a comparative approach to several cases. Previous research offered interesting quantitative insights of deliberative opinion polls or citizen juries or more qualitative ones of Brazilian experiences (Baiocchi, 2005), but we lacked a so detailed analysis of a set of European cases.

The book develops through a series of chapters that play all an important role. It starts with a well-grounded criticism of the most well-known literature on the topic that focusses on short term attitudinal changes measured through surveys. Chapter 2 discusses why institutionally driven participatory processes have appeared, with an

or Fournier et al (2011). For a critical perspective justifying the need to analyse long term effects see O'Neill (2001).

¹ Examples of this approach are Fishkin (2009)

emphasis on the role they have played in the rebuilding of the political identity of the post-1989 European left and presents the 3 cases to be analysed (participatory budgeting in Morsang, Rome and Seville). Chapter 3 presents the official and semi-official discourses that authorities and participants use about these processes, what he calls the “grammars of participation”. Chapter 4 goes clearly beyond “who participates” and makes an interesting contribution to the question of why participants get involved in these processes. Chapters 5 and 6 reach the main question of the book: do people change in these processes? Chapter 5 makes a convincing explanation of why change is so limited (limited deliberation, strong previous preferences) and about the necessary conditions for cultural change to appear. Chapter 6 focusses precisely on the core group of participants where these changes occur in some cases and traces some of the possible trajectories this people follow.

This is not only a very interesting book, but also a really convincing one. Probably, the most important limit we can point is precisely due to the richness of the book: it opens too many doors and while in some cases it shows us all the complete contents of the room in others it only allows to have a short look through the crack. I will mention one of the possible examples. The idea of the “grammars of participation” and the double inclusionary/exclusionary role it plays is quite interesting, but precisely because of that we would like to hear more about it. Each participatory process has a representation of itself and of its relationship to the wider world and participants feel compelled to adapt to it (or to leave). The need

to use arguments related to public interest or to redistribution, the attitude of listening to others or to share the idea of the Seville “besieged citadel” process, threatened by all external actors, may all be part of these grammatical rules. Clearly, many participants have adapted to most of these rules and some have left because they did not want to adapt to them. But is this grammar (as the metaphor suggests) a real package that has to be adapted globally or do many participants survive in the process without necessarily sharing all this picture? Has this grammar been created in the process or were large parts of it shared ideas of participants when they first arrived to the participatory budgeting process?

The book lacks an explicit justification of why Southern Europe is a region that deserves a common analysis of its participatory processes. However, the specific cases chosen help building this explanation: political processes led by the left, with a strong emphasis (at least in their discourses) in redistribution that distinguish them from many of the most common European processes, where the emphasis is placed on efficient management or on democratic innovation per se². This is precisely one of the very central final questions that the book raises. Some of the most common grammars of participation combine uncritically all their potential virtues and suggest they could be democratic cures for (too) many problems. Chapter 5 in Talpin’s book is a brilliant demonstration that life

² On the importance of different political goals among European processes of participatory budgeting see Sintomer, Herzberg and Röcke (2008).

is often more complicated and that the potential empowerment function of these participatory processes is quite contradictory with their role as producers of better policy-making: the process characteristics needed to produce better (critical) citizens (e.g., conflict and politicization) are not only different, but probably opposite to those needed to produce policies that better fit citizen preferences (e.g., deliberation and technical arguments).

This is not the only contradiction of traditional participation analysis that the book helps to uncover: the processes analysed illustrate quite clearly that the tendency to mix-up deliberative and participatory theory and experiences as if they were all the same is quite problematic. The 3 cases of participatory budgeting discussed in the book are clear representations of the values and practices of participatory democracy...but are quite limited in their deliberative values!. Chapters 2 and 4 show that these processes have quite limited interest in the public exchange of ideas and that they are quite closer to participatory settings typical of revolutionary processes than to the Western processes of mini-publics to which they are often compared.

Finally, the book contains several other promising ideas that I would love to see prosecuted in the author's future publications. For example, without being a central topic of the book, it contains a quite rich discussion of the potential sources of disappointment with participatory processes. A more systematic discussion of this material would be much welcomed. A similar thing happens with one idea that Talpin shares with other (quite different) American approaches: the

explanatory role of conflict aversion³ in explaining (in his case) limited deliberation and disagreement. If "political avoidance" (Eliasoph, 1998) is not only part of American settings, but develops also in the institutions built by the European left to promote redistribution and empowerment we might have to conclude that this is not part of a national culture of political avoidance but of a more general human mechanism of avoiding face-to-face conflict.

In any case, because of the questions it raises, because of those that it convincingly answers and because of the serious empirical evidence it provides, *Schools of Democracy* is a book that anyone interested in the recent debates about democracy must definitively read.

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³For example, Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2002) give also a very central role to conflict aversion in their explanation of why Americans prefer not to be personally involved in policy making.

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