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RESEARCH ARTICLE

NEITHER COMPLETELY POLITICAL NOR COMPLETELY UNPOLITICAL

The Third Way of Deliberative Arenas

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ABSTRACT: Sometimes governments choose to include ordinary people at some stage of the policy making process by setting up temporary and structured arenas where participants are put in a position whereby they can deliberate on public issues and make decisions or propose suggestions. Do such deliberative arenas depoliticize democracy, as a vast amount of literature suggests? This article is aimed at challenging this point of view, by giving a close look at two cases of democratic experimentation. An analysis of what actually happens in those venues shows that such arenas appear to display, at the same time, both unpolitical and political features. On one hand, they are non-majoritarian bodies, just like other depoliticized venues, but on the other, they deal with conflicts and discuss goals, and thus perform typical political activities. It is possible to say that they are neither completely political nor completely unpolitical. They instead have a hybrid nature that can counteract the continuous fluctuations between (hyper)politicization and (hyper)depoliticization that are so typical of our times. This implies a revision of the standard theory of politicization/depoliticization that does not consider the possibility of gray areas. Overcoming the rigid opposition between the two terms of the dichotomy can lead to the discovery of some interesting possibilities that often tend to be overlooked.

KEYWORDS: deliberative arenas, deliberative democracy, depoliticization, minipublics, public debate.

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1. Introduction

Sometimes, though not very often, governments choose to include ordinary people at some stage of the policy making process. They do it by setting up temporary and structured arenas where participants are put in a position whereby they can deliberate on public issues and make decisions or propose suggestions. Situations of this kind can be found in a great variety of arrangements: mini-publics (citizens' juries, citizens' assemblies, deliberative polls, consensus conferences, etc.) (Grönlund *et al.* 2014), participatory budgets (Sintomer *et al.* 2010), French *débats publics* on infrastructures (Revel *et al.* 2007; Marshall 2016), and the like. These forms of citizens' involvement can be labeled as «deliberative arenas» (Bobbio 2003). With this expression, we can encompass all the participatory arrangements in which ordinary citizens (rather than stakeholders) interact through deliberation (rather than through negotiation or voting, as in referenda) in a structured and temporary way (rather than informally through media, social networks or in the public sphere) and are entrusted with consultations or decisions regarding a public policy.

Such arrangements are often referred to in the literature as cases of depoliticization: the governments that decide to delegate some tasks to such arenas take a policy issue from the world of politics and move it to a non-majoritarian arena, where unelected people tackle it with non-political criteria. It is surprising that this point of view is shared both by those who appreciate deliberative arenas and those who are wary of them. The former support them because they «depoliticize democracy» (Pettit 2004), i.e. they establish a space that has been freed from the bad influence of politics. The latter mistrust deliberative arenas exactly for the same reason (Urbinati 2014), i.e. because of their depoliticization, even though they do not praise them but blame them for being erroneous endeavors undertaken to reach illusory policy solutions in an artificial space, safe from social conflicts and political struggles.

While the depoliticization of deliberative arenas is taken for granted in much of the current literature, in this article I will try to challenge this point of view. I will suggest that, at a closer look, such arenas appear to display, at the same time, both political and unpolitical features. They are neither completely political nor completely unpolitical. They have a rather hybrid nature that can counteract the continuous fluctuations between (hyper)politicization and (hyper)depoliticization that are so typical of our times. And this implies, as I shall show, a revision of the standard theory of (de)politicization that does not allow for gray areas in this dichotomy.

I will proceed as follows. In the first section, a survey is presented of the arguments that have been put forward to assert the unpolitical nature of deliberative arenas, ei-

ther for blaming them or praising them. This article is aimed at criticizing these claims. It does so by analyzing whether and how such a depoliticization effect came into play in two cases of deliberative arenas. The stories of the two cases are presented in section two, while sections four and five analyze, respectively, the political and the unpolitical features that characterized them. The final section discusses how the theory of (de)politicization should be reconsidered in order to acknowledge such hybrid configurations. Overcoming the rigid opposition between the two terms of the dichotomy could lead us to discover some interesting possibilities which often tend to be overlooked.

2. Unpolitical practices?

Are deliberative arenas unpolitical practices? Among the advocates of citizens' deliberation, the author who has moved furthest in this direction is Philip Pettit (2004) in an article entitled, far from reticently, "Depoliticizing Democracy". For Pettit, the creation of specific forums devoted to deliberation among citizens is the fundamental remedy for overcoming the shortcomings of politics. Politicians, in an elective and representative democracy, tend to make erroneous or distorted decisions, because they are prompted to pursue immediate consensus and are therefore forced to, for example, unreasonably increase the penalties necessary to satisfy the needs of citizens' safety or to take drastic but unacceptable measures against prostitution to support "people's aspirational morality" (p. 55), as the "electoral interests are likely to militate against the deliberative quality of democratic decision-making, depriving considerations of the common good" (p. 53). "The only hope – Pettit went on to say – would seem to lie in depoliticization" (p. 55) i.e., in the creation of deliberative forums – made up of citizens or experts – who are able to reason on the merits of problems, irrespective of short-term consensus. As Pettit concluded: "democracy—deliberative democracy—is too important to be left in the hands of the politicians. No democratization without depoliticization." (p. 64). Similar positions can be traced back, albeit less explicitly, to many advocates of deliberative arenas. For example, Olsen and Trenz argued that the random selection of participants "is not only seen by supporters as the more accurate procedure to represent 'lay publics', it also potentially depoliticises the setting through the aim of avoiding conflict, does not create majorities and minorities, and *thus guarantees high degrees of acceptance by citizens*" (2014, p. 126, *Italics added*).

The idea of deliberation as a rational antidote to the irrationality of politics is closely linked to a conception that has appeared, although not always explicitly, in many ac-

counts of deliberative democracy. This is the idea that deliberation has an epistemic property, i.e. it allows some form of truth to be reached or choices to be generated that are wiser than those that could be obtained through other processes. The epistemic effect of deliberation can reside in the use of reason, which recognizes the forceless force of the better argument (Habermas 1996), in the comparison of a plurality of points of view that overcome the bounded rationality of each participant (Elster 1998), or in the collective intelligence that emerges from the rule of many (Landemore 2013). Psychological experimentation has shown that a great number of people are more likely to find the right solution to a mathematical or geometric problem than one solver alone (Mercier and Landemore 2012). And, even though the notion of a right solution is inapplicable to policy problems, it can be assumed that here too, by analogy, some epistemic progress can be attained, and that there is a greater likelihood of reaching, in this way, decisions that approach the general interest (Martí 2006). But, for many authors, this supposed epistemic effect makes the deliberative democracy more similar to expertise than to politics. Citizens that are involved in a deliberative arena end up playing the role of an oracle; they express the *vox populi* (the people's voice) which can be equated to the *vox Dei* (the God's voice). They appear more like jurors who pronounce a verdict than members of a city council who make a decision. It is not by chance that one of the most popular deliberative devices is that of "citizens' juries", where a group of people, drawn by lot, discusses a recommendation on an issue of public interest after having listened to witnesses and experts. Here, they reproduce the role of the jury in a criminal trial, i.e. that of establishing the truth about a controversial matter.

This epistemic conception is one of the main targets of those who criticize deliberative arenas as being unpolitical. Nadia Urbinati (2010), replying to Pettit, observed that "the strategic use of deliberation [is] an antidote against democratic politics itself", that leads to "the dissolution of political judgment within a model of judgment that is tailored around justice" (p. 68). This unpolitical democracy "entails relocating public action outside the places in which political decisions are to be made according to democratic procedures [...]. It suggests that politics is a cognitive practice for reaching true outcomes, solving problems" (p. 74). It is grounded on a "disengaged judgment" (p. 82) of irresponsible citizens-judges and thus ends up by striking a hard blow against democracy, here understood as the free confrontation of positions in the fire of political struggle. In a more recent work, Urbinati (2014) has analyzed three conceptions that tend to disfigure democracy. One of these disfigurements, which she calls "unpolitical democracy", is the result of "epistemic and unpolitical twists of deliberation" (p. 2). The deliberative arenas (or in Urbinati's words "deliberative committees") "do contrib-

ute in devaluing the work of democratic institutions” (p. 112). In fact: they “reflect the idea that representative bodies are mainly partisan and hence irrational or incapable of judging the public good” (ivi), they falsely claim they represent the existing but latent preferences of citizens, they “may encourage elitism, impersonating citizens’ engagement while actually encouraging passivity” (p. 114), and they “are made up of *tutored citizens*: spectator-judges who apply rules and procedures that others have devised and come to judge on facts they did not contribute in choosing” (p. 115, italics in the text).

A vast amount of literature has come to not very dissimilar conclusions, starting from antagonistic or agonistic (Mouffe 2005) premises, for which politics (or rather “the political”) is the reign of conflict, and thus deliberative arenas are practices that are completely opposed to politics. For the advocates of a radical democracy, based on antagonistic pluralism, “deliberative democracy is a deeply unpolitical normative project” (Cini 2012, p. 184), as it aims at avoiding or stifling conflict and pushes contenders toward improbable (and unacceptable) agreements through a “participatory depoliticization” (Abram 2007). This view is shared in a growing body of literature (Bobbio and Melé 2015), in which deliberation, which occurs in top-down structured arenas, is deemed to “exhaust conflicts” (Joly and Marris 2003, p. 196), “calm the wild dynamics” (Mermet 2007, p.374), “anesthetize the dissent” (Algotino 2008, p. 242), turn “the values of radical democrats into technocratic solutions” (Bevir 2010, p. 119) and “soften and thus reduce conflicts” (Gourgues *et al.* 2013, p. 13). In addition, deliberative experiences lend themselves to the unscrupulous actions of politicians who can use this false democratic openness to legitimize themselves in the face of citizens without running any risk, since deliberative arenas can easily be manipulated (Freschi and Mete 2009). Their aim is to take some important issues from the political game and to entrust them to a sort of neutral judge, thus upholding the alleged objectivity of the neoliberal order (Moini 2011, Walker *et al.* 2015). This view has been summarized well by Baiocchi and Ganuza, when they write that, according to agonists,

participation [...] is seen as an alternative to conflictive mobilization and disruption [...] it becomes part of a set of strategies that depoliticize conflict, and thus pave the way for even more aggressive neoliberal reforms of the state (Baiocchi and Ganuza 2015, p. 187).

In a review of the objections that have been made against deliberative democracy, Luigi Pellizzoni (2013) showed that the advocates of agonistic democracy and the Foucauldian critics of neoliberal governmentality deem that deliberative forums “tend to depoliticize the issues, favoring the established interests” (p. 96) and that “this depoliticization is also achieved through a strong formalization and technicization of the pro-

cesses” (ivi). In this perspective, “deliberative democracy easily becomes a means to mask the hegemonic aims of certain actors and to foster a post-political drift” (p. 100). The random selection of ordinary people (so frequent in such devices) can be seen as a depoliticizing means in itself, because ordinary people “are not political” (Clarke 2010, p. 642) and “recruiting ordinary people for their a-political ‘common sense’ appears as a device for de-politicization, or for ‘taking the politics out of things’” (p. 647).

3. Two cases

Despite this broad consensus on the unpolitical nature of deliberative arenas, it is possible to wonder whether these practices are really so antithetical to politics. Do involved citizens really behave like judges? Or like experts? Or like epistemic authorities? Are conflicts really avoided or stifled? Are rationales other than the political one at work? The only way to respond to such questions is to give a close look at what actually happens in some deliberative arenas. In this article, I have chosen to discuss two very dissimilar (yet somewhat opposite) cases: the British Columbia Citizens' Assembly on the electoral reform that took place in Vancouver in 2004, and the public debate on the new urban highway that was held in Genoa in 2009. As the former case is internationally well known, few words will suffice to present it. Instead, for the latter one some more lines will be needed, since the device on which it is based, the French *débat public*, is not very much familiar in the international literature. My sources for the Canadian case are the various researches gathered in Warren and Pearson 2008; my account of the Italian one will be based on my personal experience (I was the president of the commission that ran the public debate) and on some studies (Bobbio 2010, Pucci 2010, Pomatto 2011).

The British Columbia Citizens' Assembly

The liberal party of the British Columbia, after having been defeated in the 1996 elections, although they had won more votes than their competitor, deemed that the first-past-the-post electoral system in force in that province had to be replaced. Returning to the government with a large majority, after the 2001 elections, the liberal party and its leader, the premier Gordon Campbell, encouraged the provincial Legislative Assembly to entrust the choice of a new electoral system to an assembly of randomly selected citizens. The choice made by the Citizens' Assembly would then be submitted to a referendum, where the new electoral system would have been adopted, if it had been agreed upon by 60 percent of the voters and by half of the 79 con-

stituencies. A random sample of 15,800 electors (100 men and 100 women for each constituency) was drawn and each of them was requested to participate. Of the 964 voters who had agreed to participate and had attended the meetings organized in various parts of the province, 158 members of the assembly (one man and one woman for each electoral district) were drawn by lot. Since no representative of the aboriginal communities was extracted, two members of the First Nations, drawn from the same list, were added.

The 160 members of the Citizen's Assembly on Electoral Reform were installed in January 2004 and worked for almost one year, at a rate of about one weekend every two weeks. The first phase (January-March 2004) was devoted to examining information provided by experts of electoral systems. The second phase (May-June 2004) was devoted to public meetings, which were run in the province by the assembly members. The third and most challenging stage (September-November 2004) was devoted to deliberation. The members of the assembly, gathered in small groups, first elaborated the criteria in order to choose the electoral system. They then decided to narrow the examination to three of the systems: the existing first-past-the-post system, and two proportional systems, that is, the German one and the Irish single transferable vote system. After discussing the three systems at length, two final votes were made in a plenary meeting. In the first vote, the proposal to abandon the current system prevailed. In the second, the single transferable vote system won over the German one. The final report, entitled *Making every vote count*, was published in December 2004. A few months later, in May 2005, a referendum was held. The Citizens' Assembly proposal was approved by the majority of the voters (58 percent), but this was not enough to surpass the expected threshold of 60 percent. Given the outcome of the vote, the premier insisted on repeating the referendum, which was replicated four years later in May 2009, but on that occasion 61 percent of the voters opted to keep the old electoral system in place.

The public debate on an urban highway in Genoa

The project to double the jammed coastal highway between Genoa-center and Genoa-Voltri on an uphill tract (20 km, in an urban area, within the municipality of Genoa), while deemed necessary by many, had been at an impasse for decades. The 1980 project had been blocked by an administrative judge in 1990, as a result of the firm opposition of the inhabitants of the Polcevera valley (in the city of Genoa), where the introduction of the highway would have led to the demolition of many private houses (Ieraci 1994). Two decades later, in 2008, a project for the new highway had been proposed again, and five different alternatives for crossing the valley had been designed (Figure

1). All of them would have had an invasive impact on the urban fabric and on some industrial activities, but to different extents: the downhill alternatives (nos. 4 and 5) appeared preferable for transportation reasons, but on the other hand had a greater impact on the dwellings; the uphill alternatives (nos. 1, 2 and 3) entailed a smaller number of demolitions, but appeared to be less rational solutions for improving the traffic. A conflict arose between the Regional Government of Liguria, which was more preoccupied about the transportation aspects, and thus preferred the downhill alternatives, and the Municipal Government of Genoa, which was more worried about the consensus of the citizens in the affected neighborhoods, and thus favored the uphill alternatives.

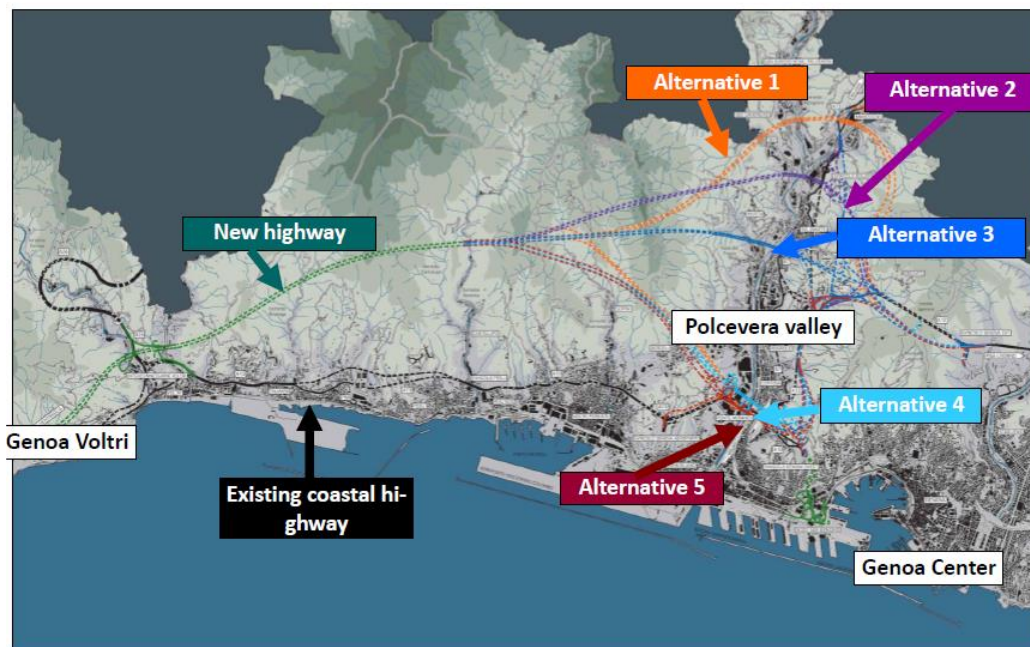


Figure 1 – Genoa 2008, the five alternative routes for the new highway

At this point, the mayor of Genoa, Marta Vincenzi, believed that it would not be possible for a small number of insiders to make a decision (with the risk of falling into a similar impasse to that of twenty years before) and proposed to open a public debate on the choice of the layout. A model to refer to already existed: the *débat public* on infrastructures that had been introduced in France by a law in 1995, after the strong opposition that had emerged among the affected population about the high speed rail-

way line project between Lyon and Marseille in the early 1990s (Lolive 1999) and which, at those times, had been resorted to in that country in about forty cases (Fourniau 2001, Revel *et al.* 2007, Mashall 2016). The mayor therefore chose to informally follow the footsteps of the *débat public*. A private company, Autostrade per l'Italia (ASPI), which was managing the highway on behalf of the Italian state, and which had to implement the new project, accepted this unusual procedure, as they were interested in attempting an innovative (and more open) way of making decisions on large infrastructures.

The first step – based on the French model – was the appointment, by the municipality, of an independent commission, entrusted with handling the process, and ensuring the dissemination of information among citizens and equal access to the debate. The choice fell upon four experts, all from outside Genoa (its president was the author of this article), who were endowed with a staff and with resources, 30 percent of which were made available by the City of Genoa while the rest was made available by the private company ASPI. After a brief but intensive inquiry (some inspections and about 60 interviews), the commission announced the opening of the public debate on February 6th 2009. At the same time, a version of the project, drafted by ASPI in non-technical language, was published, and a brochure was made available to the public through the newspapers kiosks all throughout the city, together with a map of the alternative layouts and the dates of the public hearings. The debate had to last 3 months and end on April 30th, 2009. During this period, 14 public and open meetings were held, mainly in the neighborhoods most affected by the project: 6 general meetings for the presentation of the project, 7 thematic meetings on specific features (such as transportation issues, health and environment, house demolitions, etc.) with the participation of experts, often external to the Genoese context, and 1 concluding meeting.

These meetings ended up being very crowded and turbulent. The opening of the debate had the - not unexpected - effect of soliciting the mobilization of the opponents. A growing number of citizens' committees, claiming to represent specific neighborhoods, organized demonstrations against the new highway project and attended the public meetings in great numbers. If the mandate received from the commission consisted solely in a discussion on the route alternatives, the necessity of the new motorway was often contested. The debate then led to a reflection on the mobility flows in the metropolitan area and prompted the search for alternative ways (ordinary roads, railway) to cope with congestion.

The public meetings were clearly dominated by opponents. However, the French public debate provides other forms of information and discussion. In the Genoa case, a website supplied the citizens with extensive documentation (even cartographic), meet-

ing minutes and videos, and a discussion forum. The citizens were encouraged to write down their contributions to the debate, which were then published as 'actors notebooks' with a common graphic design. Forty five of them, sent by institutions, political parties, unions, associations, committees and individual citizens, were published. Some of these 'notebooks' proposed alternative layouts, which were carefully discussed by ASPI together with their authors. Closer meetings, representing all of the involved parties, discussed the data on the traffic flows and made some propositions on how to grant local control over the future layout activities.

The French public debate does not make any decisions. It ends with a report, drawn up by the independent commission, which outlines the arguments raised during the debate and leaves the proponent firm free to decide which arguments to embrace and which ones to reject. In the case of Genoa, the commission published its report fifteen days after the end of the debate, and ASPI presented the new version of the project within the next fortnight, after having chosen one of the five original alternatives (alternative number two), but with considerable variations that had been discussed with the citizens during the debate. All the changes were directed at minimizing the impact of the infrastructure on dwellings. This solution was then adopted by the Municipality. In the subsequent years, ASPI worked on this basis for the final executive project, under the constant control of a citizens' committee that had been elected in 2010 in the neighborhoods affected by the highway, according to the suggestions that arose during the public debate.

Safe havens vs. stormy seas

According to the definition I gave above, both cases fall within the concept of deliberative arena. Both are based on the involvement of ordinary citizens. In both cases, the deliberative process takes place in a highly structured manner and for a predetermined period of time (the Canadian assembly lasted one year, the Genoese debate three months). Both attach great importance to the neutral management of the process that is entrusted to facilitators or mediators that are above the parties. In both cases, the role of experts is very important, and participants are invited to propose arguments.

However, the two cases implemented the idea of democratic deliberation in two completely different ways, and this is why they have been selected for this article. The difference does not only (or mainly) concern the nature of the issue under deliberation: a constitutional regulatory policy in Vancouver vs. the layout of a specific highway infrastructure in Genoa. The two cases in fact belong to two different (if not opposite) clusters of deliberative practices. The Canadian Citizens' Assembly is part of the wide-

spread strand of deliberative experiences based on the random selection of participants, where people are induced to discuss and to make decisions, after listening to the opinion of stakeholders and experts. Citizens' juries and deliberative polls also belong to this thread, and are often referred to as mini-publics (Fung 2003). At the heart of these arenas, is a group of citizens who, thanks to a random sampling, are considered to be a statistically representative microcosm of the universe. The Genoa case instead belongs to the French model of public debate, which takes place through open public meetings, where each citizen and each group has the opportunity to step in, and to propose topics and arguments.

Therefore, the fundamental difference consists of the way in which the deliberative arena is formed and how the participants are selected. In the first case, participants are chosen by means of random selection, in the second case through self-selection, i.e. through the principle of the 'open door' (Bobbio forthcoming). The two models offer contrasting advantages and disadvantages: the first tends to sub-represent minorities, the second to over-represent them. For example, in the Canadian case, no members of indigenous communities had been extracted (and therefore were then added). In the Genoese case, in the same way as in all *débats publics* in France, the public meetings, since they were based on free access, were mainly formed by opponents, as these citizens were endowed with more intense preferences. The people in favor of the new highway (presumably most of the Genoese car drivers) did not show up at the meetings (however, the device of public debate provides some mechanisms to offset, at least in part, this imbalance).

One consequence of the different compositions of the deliberative arenas is that, in the Canadian case, the deliberation was mainly cold (Fung 2003): this arrangement is in fact intended to subdue the fire of passions (and factions) and to allow for a rational exchange among participants in a protected space - a «safe haven» (Chambers 2004) - where deliberators, who were not previously involved in the issue to any great extent, feel free from pressures and are able to engage in dispassionate deliberation. In the case of Genoa's public debate, the deliberation was predominantly hot: the purpose of the device was to bring out all the relevant arguments and thus to make the latent conflicts explicit. This arrangement, which is preferred by participatory democrats, and also, of course, by stakeholders, consists of forums in which partisan positions are admitted, where hot deliberation prevails over the cold one, and a stormy (but real) sea is preferred to a safe (but artificial) haven (Bobbio forthcoming).

The conclusion of the two processes was also completely different. In the Canadian case, the participating citizens were given a mandate to make a decision (i.e. to choose an electoral system) that would then be submitted to a referendum. In the case of

Genoa - as in other cases of *débats publics* on infrastructures – the aim of the debate was that of pointing out all the possible arguments, objections, and suggestions, but the final decision was entrusted to the promoter (in this case, the private company AS-PI) who had to choose whether and how to take into account the arguments raised during the debate and summarized in the final report of the independent commission that had run the process. However, in the case of the Genoa highway, some important changes in the layout had been accepted.

4. Unpolitical arenas ...

It is interesting to notice that the two cases, in spite of implementing the principles of deliberative democracy in such different ways, do not display very dissimilar features when analyzed from the politicization – depoliticization dichotomy point of view. Both experiences can first be interpreted as unpolitical processes, or more precisely, as special arenas that replace - at least in part - ordinary political arenas, and rely on other actors and other rationales. The choice of setting up *ad hoc* (and anomalous) processes was made in both cases by politicians with high levels of responsibility in the executive branches of their institutions: the cabinet's premier in the Canadian case and the mayor of Genoa in the Italian one. They both started by acknowledging that the ordinary political process had failed, or was about to fail, in tackling a specific issue, and as a result they felt it was necessary to look elsewhere.

In the Canadian case, the premier of British Columbia was faced with the classic paradox of electoral system reform. The paradox stems from the fact that the decision is generally entrusted to MPs and political parties that have short term interests and who know (or, which is the same, they believe they know) what the advantages and risks that each electoral system can entail for the likelihood of their reelection are. In this scenario, the outcomes that are likely to prevail are either a deadlock, elicited by the widespread veto powers, or the rise of a winning coalition that dictates its interests, at the expense of the minority. How is it possible to emerge from these undesirable outcomes and introduce a reform that reflects the general and long-term interests of the citizens, thus breaking the vicious circle for which MPs are, at the same time, both universalist policy makers and particularistic policy takers? The premier, who deemed the existing electoral system no longer acceptable, decided to circumvent the obstacle by entrusting the choice to an *ad hoc* and unprecedented citizens' assembly. The willingness to remove this important issue from the boundary of politics is very apparent.

The choice of the mayor of Genoa is also the consequence of a perceived political failure. She recalled when the project had come to a standstill twenty years earlier after the strong opposition of the inhabitants of the Polcevera valley, where – by the way – she had her constituency; and she feared that an uprising would again take place against the new project, as it entailed similar impacts on the dwellings. Moreover, she was also facing a conflict with the regional government, that could have led to a paralysis of the decision making process, as the latter was in favor of those layout alternatives that had a greater impact on the residents' lives. The mayor then thought that 'politics as usual' would lead to a stalemate or to a risky social conflict, and thus she decided to change the game and to open an (at least in Italy) unprecedented public debate. The mandate entrusted to the new arena was not as wide as in the Canadian case: the public debate neither made decisions nor formulated recommendations; it only served to publicly raise all the possible arguments concerning the infrastructural project. However, again in this case, the politics encountered some spoliation: the public debate was run by an independent commission beyond the full control of elected politicians, and it was based on inclusion and transparency, and therefore constituted an arena in which a completely different game was played. A game of deliberation among citizens (even the angriest ones) thus replaced the games grounded on political exchange, secret bargaining and majority voting, so much so that the media were upset by the mayor's move and accused her (with astonishing unanimity) of performing a demagogic and dilatory act (a charge that turned out to be completely unfounded)

In both cases, with the opening of the deliberative process, the nature of the game changed. The deliberation on the merits took precedence over the other decision-making mechanisms; there was a venue outside the world of politics to which the solution had been delegated, at least partially, albeit to a different extent in the two cases.

5. ... but not completely unpolitical

If the reconstruction of the two cases were to cease at this point, we could confirm the views of Philip Pettit, Nadia Urbinati, and of the advocates of agonistic democracy, who consider deliberative arenas unpolitical venues, as being somewhat similar to a court, a committee of experts, or a central bank. But this is just one half of the story. In fact, if we give a closer look at the inner dynamics that have unfolded among the participants in the two cases, it is possible to note that these processes were far from technical or dispassionate.

Let us take the Canadian case first. If the choice of the electoral system had been entrusted to a committee of experts, the parliament would have specified the goals to be achieved, and the experts would have worked to establish the electoral system that appeared most suitable to meet such criteria. The Citizens' Assembly worked in a totally different way: they developed their own criteria, thus playing a typical political role. It was a complex process that took months of discussion in small groups and in plenary meetings. Since the assembly had an inclusive nature (consisting of one man and one woman for each electoral district), the discussion reflected the territorial conflicts present in the overall population of the province: the main cleavage that emerged was that between the less populated northern districts and the urban districts of the south. This entailed a controversial debate on the type of representation the electoral system would have favored. From this point of view, the Citizens' Assembly acted as a political entity: they set, with full autonomy, the goals that had to be achieved, they found the way of solving the conflicts among the representatives of different territories, and identified the solution (i.e. the new electoral system) that appeared preferable to them in light of the criteria they themselves had chosen. This 'unpolitical' venue accomplished a political task that the traditional political arenas would have not been able to do. In fact, the electoral reform would likely have been obstructed in parliament, due to the opposing positions of each party. The Citizens' Assembly had the function of replacing or substituting the politics, but they achieved this through political rather than technical activities. They did not claim to find the truth, nor *the* right solution, but they offered their fellow citizens an electoral system that - in the opinion of the participants - would have solved the shortcomings of the previous one and would have made "every vote count".

The Genoese case is quite different, but here too the non-technical nature of the activities that took place during the public debate is apparent (perhaps even more apparent). As the problem was that of defining the layout of a new highway, it is easy to imagine a technical structure being entrusted with this task. In fact, such decisions are normally made in technical venues, sheltered from external eyes, on the basis of technical parameters, unknown by the general public and often also by the politicians themselves. Opening a public debate meant, on the contrary, politicizing the issue. The new Genova highway could have simply been a technical artifact in the hands of engineers and transportation experts; or the object of an inter-governmental dispute between the Municipality and the Region for strategic reasons of political rivalry that were not necessarily pertinent to the substance of the matter. With the introduction of the public debate, the highway ceased to be a topic for just a few specialists and/or politicians, and it became an issue in which the perceptions, the desires, the fears and

the reasons of thousands of citizens with different visions and interests were brought in. Deliberative democracy was, in this case, a form of re-politicization, as it brought to light the conflicts that would have been hidden beneath the technical choices, and it led the citizens themselves to tackle them. This is why the debate was polarized and turbulent. But it also allowed the participants to focus on issues that experts would have found it difficult to consider. As a result of the debate, the proponent company, ASPI, discovered the existence of some problems that they had previously been unaware of. And, thanks to this discovery, they had an opportunity to change the layout at some points, especially in the area of Voltri and on the left side of the Polcevera valley. Moreover, the debate was not limited to the definition of the highway layout. Much of it was devoted to the advisability of the new infrastructure: alternative proposals for a more sustainable mobility were put forward, such as the development of transport on rail and the improvement of the standard roads. None of these alternative solutions were taken into account at the end of the process (which instead confirmed the choice for a highway), but the debate served to open up a critical discussion on the proposed solution. In the end, the idea of alternative mobility did not prevail in that context, but - thanks to the public debate - it received a great deal of emphasis that may be helpful in future occasions.

5. The hybrid nature of the deliberative arenas and the theories of (de)politicization

It is obviously not possible to infer, from only two cases, that all deliberative arenas always display, at the same time, political and unpolitical features, and not even that they are “innately *political*” (Olsen and Trenz 2014, p. 117). We can just say that such arenas are not necessarily completely depoliticized, as many authors claim, but that there is the possibility that they also play a political role (and may even on occasion contribute to the re-politicizing of depoliticized issues, as the Genoese case shows).

This assertion appears to be at odds with most of the literature that depicts (de)politicization as a clear-cut dichotomy, where gray zones are assumed to be non-existent (see, among others: Burnham 2001, Flinders and Buller 2006, Hay 2007, Jenkins 2011, Jessop 2014, Wood and Flinders 2014). Instead, the here examined cases, the deliberative arenas are somehow situated in a sort of no man’s land between the two poles of the dichotomy.

The problem is that the studies on the processes of (de)politicization do not clearly distinguish two different dimensions, which we can define – using the terms employed

by Greta Krippner (2011, p. 146) – as the institutional *location* of decisions and their *content*. From the location point of view, i.e. *where* decisions are made and by *whom*, a process of depoliticization occurs when politicians “*attempt to move to an indirect governing relationship and/or seek to persuade the demos that they can no longer be reasonably held responsible for a certain issue, policy field or specific decision*” (Flinders and Buller 2006, p. 295-6, italics in the text). In this case, politicians withdraw from the direct control of a certain number of functions. Issues are moved from political arenas to non-majoritarian bodies, according to “the politics of ABC (agencies, boards and commissions)” (Wood and Flinders 2014, p. 158). (De)politicization is the consequence of arena-shifting.

However (de)politicization can also be observed through another dimension, i.e. the *content* of the decision making activity. According to Hay (2007), a human activity can be considered as political when it satisfies four conditions: choice, capacity for agency, deliberation and social interaction. Politics, thus, “relies on the capacity for things to be different” (ivi, p. 65), while “fatalism and resignation are the antithesis of politics” (ivi, p. 67): “a depoliticised polity is also a ‘choice-less democracy’” (Wood and Flinders 2014, p.160). Politics also implies conflict (Jenkins 2011), or ‘friend-enemy relations’, as in the famous Schmittian definition (Flinders and Wood 2014, Hay 2014).

The reason why the *location* and the *content* of (de)politicization are not clearly distinguished in this literature derives from the fact that the two dimensions are believed to move together in the same direction. When an issue is displaced to a non-majoritarian body, it is inevitably processed through non-political activities and vice versa. It is interesting to notice that Colin Hay (2007), after having devoted a great deal of effort to precisely defining the *content* of political activity, when he comes to analyzing the dynamic aspect, i.e. the process of displacement from politics to non-politics and vice versa, he refers exclusively to changes in the *locations*, which are represented in figure 2. There are four spheres (the governmental sphere, the public sphere, the private sphere and the realm of necessity), and the transfer of an issue from one to another means that a step toward (de)politicization has been taken. Hay assumes that a change in the location entails a change in the content or that an unpolitical sphere or venue cannot help but generate unpolitical decisions.

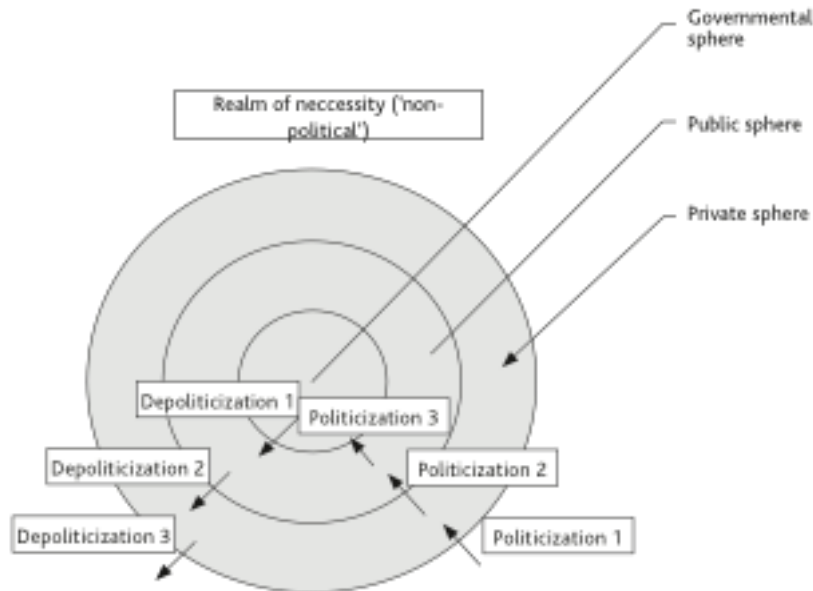


Figure 2 – Politicization and depoliticization. Source: Hay 2007, p. 79.

This assumption is likely to be well-founded in most cases, but not in the case of the deliberative experiments that I have just analyzed. Their *location* is clearly unpolitical, but the *content* of their activity displays some apparent political features.

First, these deliberative arenas are non-majoritarian bodies that are not made up of elected politicians, and they behave quite differently from political venues: a different game is played by other actors and through other rules. Participants tend not to be divided along partisan lines, as happens in other non-political arenas. This allows them to escape from the shortcomings of partisanship that even its advocates cannot help but notice (White and Ypi 2011). The discussion among the involved citizens within such arenas is concentrated on the merits of problems (as in committees of experts), while the strategic orientations, which are so common in partisan arenas, are unlikely to emerge. In fact, deliberative arenas are *ad hoc* and temporary venues formed by ordinary citizens who are interested in dealing with the specific issue at stake, but do not expect to continue the discussion of other issues and are therefore not interested in linking this game to other future ones. Each issue is dealt with independently from others. Professional politicians, on the contrary, cannot separate their preferences on the merits of the problem from their preferences on power games, future alliances and

friend-enemy relationships. In other words, deliberative arenas break the power connection between the issues: each one is dealt with on its own considering the specific merit or demerit it displays. This is the unpolitical side.

Nevertheless, the *content* of their decision making activity cannot be defined just as unpolitical. At the core of any deliberation among citizens, there is a discussion on conflicting points of view and interests, and in this sense they tend to politicize issues that otherwise would be treated by experts or through secret bargains. Deliberative arenas discuss goals and tackle choices through conflicts, and they do not claim to reach some objective truth, according to parameters like science, law or the market. For this reason, criticisms that accuse deliberative arenas of avoiding or concealing conflicts do not appear well grounded: in many cases (such as the Genoese one), the opening up of deliberation among citizens had the effect of raising conflicts, favoring the mobilization of the opponents and offering them a forum they might otherwise have found hard to attain. Social conflict is not always crushed by participation, as many critics have stated, it is in fact often fed by it (Bobbio and Melé 2015), and it may help it (Polletta 2015).

Moreover, most deliberative experiments have the aim of establishing inclusive arenas that give a voice to all the affected people. They always do this in a imperfect manner, through random selection or self-selection; they may under- or over-represent minorities, they may suffer from a lack of legitimacy, as the participants do not receive any authorization from the affected fellow citizens (Parkinson 2006), but they are still able raise problems and foster solutions that otherwise might not easily emerge. There is a third hybrid way somewhere between politicization and depoliticization, which is neither completely political nor completely unpolitical.

6. Conclusion

In contemporary democracies, we witness frequent oscillations between politicization and depoliticization, between the principle of majority and the principle of truth, between government by politicians and government by experts. Against the inefficiency of politics, its tendency for low-level compromises, its short-sightedness and its low credibility, a growing role of non-majoritarian bodies is often invoked and implemented (Majone 2001, Pettit 2004). In extreme cases, even technocratic governments have replaced political ones to cope with highly critical situations, as has recently happened in Italy, in Greece and in a few other European countries (McDonnell and Valbruzzi 2014). But, as Matthew Flinders and Matt Wood (2015) have pointed out, depoliticiza-

tion or, in their terms, hyper-depoliticization “feeds, rather than balances, the intensification of individualized political demands in liberal democratic societies” (p. 364), thus pushing toward an opposite pole that they call hyper-democratization, i.e. “a process in which elite groups including corporate lobbyists and media cartels increasingly pressurize political institutions to implement individual demands” (*ivi*). A cyclical process (or a vicious circle) is put in motion: “[t]he rise of hyper-democracy [fuels] the rise of hyper-depoliticization [...]. The rise of hyper-depoliticization, however, [fuels] the rise of hyper-democracy” (*ivi*). But, it is possible to add that hyper-democracy also entails hyper-politicization, i.e. a process in which elected politicians have a say in a growing number of even minor issues. If politics is linked to agency (Hay 2007), hyper-politicization consists of a sort of super-agency in which politicians claim to be almighty and able to easily solve the most complex problems, as happens with populist movements. Hyper-depoliticization is seen as a remedy to hyper-politicization and vice versa. In contemporary democracy, we are steadily navigating between the Scylla of neo-liberal hyper-depoliticization and the Charybdis of populist hyper-politicization.

The analysis carried out in this article shows that a possible way out of this polarization, or this vicious circle, consists in practices inspired by the principles of deliberative democracy. They form a third way between politics and expertise, consensus and truth, politicization and depoliticization. And hence they can avoid the shortcomings of both poles. They can play an extremely useful role in all those situations in which neither the experts nor the politicians are able to cope with complex problems. I am not advocating to replace political arenas with deliberative ones, or elective and representative democracy with deliberative democracy. I am not moving in an ‘either-or’ logic, but I am rather opting to placing both arenas side by side, in an ‘and-and’ logic, as suggested by the advocates of ‘deliberative system’ (Parkinson and Mansbridge 2012), who try to imagine how to connect deliberative mini-publics to representative decision making (Hendricks 2016, Setälä 2017).

Deliberative arenas should not be seen as an alternative to representative institutions and to politics, but rather as a complement to them. For many issues, such as choosing an electoral system or a highway layout, and for many others, it may be advisable to set up a deliberative and inclusive venue that could counteract the opposite shortcomings of hyper-politicization and hyper-depoliticization.

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