JOURNAL OF DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY

Hasmath, R. (2023). Discourse, Deliberation and Difference in an Authoritarian Public Sphere. *Journal of Deliberative Democracy*, 18(2), pp. 1–10. DOI: https://doi.org/10.16997/jdd.1182

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Discourse, Deliberation and Difference in an Authoritarian Public Sphere

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This article explores how discourse, deliberation and difference functions in an authoritarian environment, with an emphasis on the experiences of contemporary China. The article articulates why authoritarian discourse and deliberation is more limited than its Western democratic counterpart. It further suggests that the incorporation of difference into authoritarian discourse and deliberation is difficult due to the inherent tensions between the 'Other' and the ruling elite in authoritarian polities. Nevertheless, these constraints do not invalidate the notion that public discourse and deliberation is theoretically possible and has a practical function in authoritarian regimes.

Keywords: discourse; deliberative process; politics of difference; public sphere; contemporary China; authoritarian regimes

1. Introduction

To create a world beyond ethno-cultural and/or religious barriers, it is necessary to have an environment that fosters meaningful discourse and deliberation in the public sphere between different groups. The underlying idea is that public discourse – understood here as the act of two or more individuals discussing a particular topic – and deliberation – defined as a careful and 'meaningful' consideration of said discussion – produce an association between groups of difference through 'public argument and reasoning among equal citizens' (Cohen 1997: 2). The ultimate goal is to produce a discourse ethics and deliberative process in which 'the unforced force of the better argument prevails' (Habermas 1990: 159).

This conceptual setup has been salient in the context of the public sphere in Western democratic societies (see e.g., Gutmann and Thompson 2004). The intention is to acknowledge and listen to the views of all members in a pluralized public sphere, with the primary aim of creating a society in which common values can be established beyond ethno-cultural and/or religious barriers.

In the general literature there is an assumption that the hierarchical and potentially restrictive nature of authoritarianism equates to an incongruency with these conceptual precepts (see e.g., Hinck et al. 2018). As Gastil (2000) suggests, in order for discourse and deliberation to flourish in the public sphere, 'active citizens' must be present. That is, citizens must meaningfully engage in governance to deliberate on justifiable positions, which may include considering alternative viewpoints that could incorporate the perspectives of the 'Other'. This reality is counter to the classic view of the authoritarian public sphere; which is characterized as a sphere that requires citizens' strict obedience, one in which a diversity of opinions – inclusive of ethno-cultural and religious groups – and thus, reasoned and critical public discourse are not fostered (see e.g., Arendt 1973).

In addition, public discourse and deliberation requires access to 'high quality' information to make informed choices and arguments (see e.g., Bowler and Donovan 2003; Gutmann and Thompson 2004). The prevailing thought is that authoritarian polities aim to restrict, and control, access to information in order to legitimize government action and decision-making (see e.g., Byman and Lind 2010).

While it should be readily acknowledged that public discourse and deliberation is more limited in an authoritarian environment than its Western democratic counterpart, this article argues that it does not invalidate the notion that public discourse and deliberation is theoretically possible and practically functionable in authoritarian polities. Irrespective of political regime type, deliberation is a communicative framework in which space is created, or at least allowed to exist at a minimum level, where potentially disagreeable positions between divergent parties can be discussed. The public sphere is generally responsible for deliberative input into policy-/law-making without final decision-making power; and at the most basic level, the political system being aware of the various degrees of the former's thoughts and positions, have the final decision-making power. Moreover, difference can be incorporated within this setup, albeit

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in a restrictive sense. The article suggests, authoritarian regimes have employed a variety of tactics to factor and manage difference and intergroup relations. Such tactics have oscillated between trying to accommodate difference, to efforts to control and/or destroy difference.

To advance these arguments, the article is divided as follows: First, I will present a theoretical framework for understanding and analyzing discourse and deliberative processes in the public sphere. Second, I will focus on the politics of difference and an examination of difference within the boundaries of a social perspective. Finally, I will examine how discourse, deliberation and difference function theoretically and empirically in authoritarian contexts, with a large emphasis on the experiences of contemporary China.

2. Discourse and Deliberative Processes in the Public Sphere

2.1. Theoretical formulation

Discourse and deliberative processes start from the theoretical assumption that problems arising from difference amongst groups are capable of being solved in a rational way.[1] This assumption implies that validity claims, by varying groups proposing competing normative truths, are in fact framed in a social-evolutionary context (Habermas 1990: 65).[2] As such, competing claims should be understood, interpreted and analyzed within the social construction framed by a group's past experiences. This suggests that discourse and deliberation in a public sphere should be placed in a normative position, without a single, overarching moral authority advocating a particular notion of truth.

On the matter, in the classic work of Jürgen Habermas he purports that various solutions to issues in a public sphere are in conflict with each other. Seemingly, when there is conflict and dissent there must be a mending mechanism that transcends the particularity of the contexts. Implicit in this understanding is the idea that there are competing concepts of the 'good life', which is defined by each individual and/or group within their own terms. For this reason, the role of a justifiable norm is emphasized by Habermas, which creates the 'free spaces' needed for a pluralism of many different 'good lives' (Habermas 1990: 65). Consequently, the conditions for a practical discourse are set forth, out of which universally valid norms may emerge that will include the participation and acceptance of all who are affected by such norms in a pluralized public sphere.

Underlying such a discourse ethics is the principle of universalization (*U*). Principle *U* is one that intends to set the conditions for impartial judgment insofar as it 'constrains all affected to adopt the perspectives of all others in the balancing of interests' (Habermas 1990: 65–66). In essence, principle *U* explains a strategy for solving conflicts in our everyday will occur via a principle of impartiality (*i*). Whereby, principle *i* must allow a formal framework for different acts of solidarity (Habermas 1989: 40).[3] More specifically, acts of solidarity involve concern for the well-being of fellow human beings, and the community-at-large (Habermas 1995: 117–118).

A working understanding of the public sphere refers to the existence of a variety of competing and often antagonistic conceptions of the 'good life' held by individuals and groups in a society (D'Entreves 1999: 3). In essence, the public sphere is responsible for the framing of input into the process of policy-/law-making (Spence 1999: 12). It is a sphere of influence without final decision-making power. Moreover, the balance between the political system and the public sphere becomes a delicate one. On the one hand, the political system must pay attention to the agenda and opinions of the public sphere without being fully restrained by populist public opinion. On the flip side, the public sphere although informal, must be forged in a fashion that fosters effective deliberation. Concurrently, it should maintain the channels of communication with the political system. Needless to say, the public sphere as a deliberative mechanism offers a power relationship that is diffuse and participatory in nature (Spence 1999: 13).

2.2. Effectiveness and Limitations

The conditions of the public sphere theorized can be suspect given the supremacy of the idea of reasoned consensus. For certain issues (e.g., abortion, capital punishment), where the belief structure of the various participants can be grossly at odds with each other, reasoned consensus will not be fully achieved. The desire to reach consensus through dialogue decided by the most persuasive argument will not be applicable in these instances. To do otherwise, would neglect the plurality of voices inherent in society.

Charles Taylor discusses this in a more liberal model of the public sphere. He argues citizens must be willing to participate in an ongoing dialogue about their conception of the 'good' with others who are not within their own 'common space'. The role of the public sphere is to relate and integrate the multiple 'common spaces' that arise in a form that is singular, but not necessarily unified.[4] The public sphere thus 'knits together a plurality of spaces' into what Taylor describes as a 'metatopical common space' where members of a society are brought together through participation in localized dialogues (Taylor 1995: 190). Notwithstanding, the skeptic will argue that this still does not universally solve the idea of reaching reasoned consensus for certain issues.

It appears that the conditions of a public sphere would be inevitably ineffective for certain issues if we use reasoned consensus as our litmus test for deliberative output. One can further assert that this move towards consensus would establish a dominant meta-narrative, a story which would claim to include all reality, but in actuality will only advocate for a particular viewpoint. Local stories, similar to ones told by a society's marginalized group, would ultimately be forced to remain silent in a final consensus, effectively excluding a minority group's opinions. From such a viewpoint, the public sphere theorized fails in one of its primary tasks to give all individuals an equal say in the discursive process. Bearing this in mind, I turn attention to the politics of difference and its potential

impact on the theorization and practical performance of public discourse and deliberation.

3. The Politics of Difference

3.1. Theoretical Formulation

The idea of difference in contemporary Western political philosophy arose out of social movements' reaction to group-based oppression in the 1960s, notably groups based on ethno-cultural and/or religious association. In the 2020s, it has taken increased salience, with the 'Me Too' and 'Black Lives Matter' movements; and, often coiled within 'privilege' literature looking at how the dominant group in society relate to the non-dominant ones (see e.g., Hasmath 2021; forthcoming). Generally, such social movements point out the mistake of universally defining an individual within humanistic qualities. Statements that sought to define the human essence in all individuals ignored the idea that resources and power were not equally distributed or accessible to all (Hasmath 2012). Certain groups had a higher degree of power, control and access than other groups (Hasmath 2011). Moreover, the dominant group of society can establish and maintain a mainstream norm that was not able to fully acknowledge non-dominant groups. In response, active movements were constructed on the basis of group differences, creating 'positive identities' for themselves (Young 1997: 389). In the process, they sought to challenge the group-based inequalities that they faced within a society constructed by the dominant group.

The noted political theorist, Iris Marion Young (1997), suggests that such 'positive identities' produce a danger in itself. A group constructed on the basis of a 'positive identity' creates an in-group/out-group mentality, whereby those within the in-group define themselves by certain essential characteristics that reaffirm group membership. Problematic to this approach, is the fact not every individual within the group will necessarily possess such essential characteristics. Furthermore, an essentialist group identity has a tendency to ignore internal group differences within and across social groups. For example, a women's rights group may rally around issues of gender, but this group can differ internally along intersectional markers, e.g., ethnic, class and/or religious associations. In short, by creating a 'positive identity' for a particular group, one falls prey to not embracing or recognizing the other multiple groups that every individual is a member of. At this juncture, Young sets up the dilemma of difference. Whereby, the process of re-affirming difference may lead to creating essentialist group identities, while denying difference exists will ignore the reality of group inequalities.

To get around the dilemma of difference requires us to separate the politics of difference from the politics of identity. Difference ought to be thought of not in terms of essential group identities, but rather, the relation the group stands to the dominant group. The group will be recognized not on its internal identity, but instead on its difference in lieu of its interaction with the dominant group of society (Young 1997: 389). The focus therefore shifts to structural relations between the dominant groups and the marginalized groups that lead to inequality. In Young's typology, by looking at the structural relations between dominant and marginalize groups, we are able to discover clearer how resources and power are allocated between the said groups. For the most part, the difference in the allocation of resources and power leads to political and social conflicts among the groups.

By articulating a structural approach to group difference, the notion that a social perspective plays a prominent role in the concept of difference is established. This is an idea similar to the one espoused in an earlier section: that normative truths to a particular group are in fact framed in a social-evolutionary context – a group's social experience. Young (1997: 394) summarizes this intentionality best by stating a social perspective means, 'each differentiated group position has a particular experience of a point of view on social processes precisely because each is a part of and has helped produce the patterned processes'. Social perspective breeds a particular brand of 'situated knowledge'. It consists in a 'set of questions, kinds of experience, and assumptions with which reasoning begins, rather than the conclusions drawn' (Young 1997: 399). As such, individuals may have various social perspectives, but articulate contrasting interests due to the different process of reasoning and the fact that individuals inhabit multiple group positions within the social structure.

Multiple social perspectives can provide a stepping stone for the individual to have multiple viewpoints on the same social process. Thus, difference can be a valuable resource for public deliberation, given the multiple perspectives and information it can provide in the deliberation process.

3.2. Difference as a Deliberative Resource

Difference can be an important resource within the deliberative model of any political system. This line of thought is rejected in the formulation of a political will guided by the 'common good' (Habermas 1996). Such a republican theory – bearing some resemblance to key precepts from theories of socialism and communism – operates under the premise that 'politics is a commitment to equal respect for other citizens in a civil public discussion that puts aside private affiliation and interest to seek the common good' (Young 1997: 398). Seemingly, subscribing to this argument places an unnecessary characterization of the politics of difference, whereby a dichotomy exists between difference and the bonds of citizenship. Plainly stated, this erroneously ignores the fact group difference exists in reality, and power and resources are allocated quite differently to some and not to others, which prevents certain groups to participate in civic public discussion on equal terms. One way to rectify this problem is to include and incorporate all social group perspectives and 'situated knowledge' within the deliberative process.

The expression of a particular social group perspectives can allow one to access sources of information, which otherwise cannot be gained, within the deliberative mode. The quality of discussion is thus enhanced within the political process. Deliberative political processes must incorporate critical discussion and debate for the purpose of collective problem-solving. Participants must promote and

justify their interests; further encouraging the participant to seek to understand the other participants' interest and perspective in order to reach a more just solution. This epistemic function requires, 'a political equality that includes the expression of all perspectives equally and neutralized the ability of powerful interests to distort discussion with threats or coercion' (Young 1997: 400).

Having now considered the theoretical function of discourse and deliberation in a pluralized public sphere, as well as problems inherent to its formulation, and objections raised through a consideration of the politics of difference, I now turn to a consideration of how these concepts play out in an authoritarian environment.

4. Authoritarian Discourse and Deliberation

Any discussion of authoritarianism must commence with an acknowledgement that akin to Western democratic regimes, significant heterogeneity exists in the forms that it can assume. For instance, there are considerable differences in the operations of authoritarianism in Russia, China and Saudi Arabia. Nevertheless, despite the myriad of nuances that exist within the authoritarian typology, for purpose of this article I use it as a unified analytical category in contrast to the Western democratic system (see e.g., Glasius 2018: 518). Here, I focus on the two systems primarily as different mechanisms for allocating decision making power in the political realm.

In theory, Western democracies distribute, in differing degrees, the right to shape decisions to those impacted by the collective decision. These generally constitute negative rights in the form of civil and political liberties, e.g. freedom of assembly. Authoritarian regimes, in general, marshal decision making power into an individual or family, the military, or at the highest ranks of a powerful organization such as a party-state.

Theorists of deliberative democracies have generally contended that public deliberation is incompatible with authoritarianism due to the manner in which decision making power is apportioned in authoritarian jurisdictions (see e.g., He and Warren 2011: 274). There is a common-sense logic to this view. If one adopts a dogmatic understanding of public discourse and deliberation – that is, a universally accessible public sphere free from coercion where rational decision making occurs – it is difficult to theoretically reconcile this conception within an authoritarian structure.

Practically, however, public discourse and deliberation in Western democracies interact within the power and structure of their respective societies. As discussed, at a meta-level this is the very setup and relationship that theorists imagined between the public sphere and political system. Whereby the public sphere is a major location for framing input into policy-/law-making without final decision-making power. Moreover, the political system being attentive to the public sphere's opinions maintains the final decision-making power. Put differently, deliberation is conceived as a communicative framework in which public space is created where conflicts between divergent parties, possibly, can be resolved – potentially in a Tayloristic 'metatopical common space'. The final decision adopted by the political system – as the institutional legitimizer of principle *U* – are influenced by the deliberative process. This does not mean that the outcomes of public deliberation and discourse cannot be influenced or dictated by the existing power and structure. It thus follows, another way to conceive the deliberative process is to view public deliberation as a communicative strategy that socially legitimizes the actions taken by the powerful political decision makers who are well-entrenched within the institutions and structures of society. I submit, this operational description is far closer to how public deliberation and discourse occurs in practice. If we accept this operational description at face value, the theoretical possibility of deliberative authoritarianism emerges.

For a hypothetical, or pre-existing, authoritarian regime to be classified as engaging in deliberative authoritarianism two preconditions must be satisfied. First, the authorities must ideally encourage, but at minimum tolerate, the existence of public space – even to the extent of a Habermasian 'free spaces' conception. Whereby, issues can be debated and different responses and opinions on the issue in question are shared and considered. Second, it is not sufficient for decision-makers to merely allow the existence of deliberative space, or even for them to engage in discourse with those in the space; they should, at minimum, consider and factor suggestions stemming from the deliberative process in their final decision-making.

Deliberation amongst citizens in authoritarian regimes are not intended to politically empower them or enhance democracy. Rather, it is generally intended to (re-)legitimize the institutional authorities and improve governance. Furthermore, not all authoritarian regimes have adopted deliberative practices; instead, a specific subset have – and often in a limited fashion. Namely, those that do not want to, or cannot, maintain control of society through repression and force alone, and in which domestic non-state actors (e.g., non-governmental organizations or private enterprises) have gained power and importance. There is a small subset of authoritarian regimes that fit this characterization, with the People's Republic of China being most prominent.

4.1. Discourse and Deliberation in China

The historical roots of public deliberation in China can be traced back to the long cultural legacy of Confucianism, which differs dramatically from Western jurisdictions' conception of public deliberation informed by enlightenment era philosophical traditions (Min 2009: 445). One of the core beliefs in Confucianism is the ethical rightness of hierarchical social relationships and their necessity in maintaining social harmony, as outlined in Confucius's 'Five Right Relationships' (Hofstede and Bond 1988: 8). In addition, the Confucian moral code emphasizes the importance of concepts such as being people centric (*min ben*) and the values of being a gentleman (*junzi*). The result of this has been the development of a contemporary socio-cultural and political system that emphasizes responsible governance, hierarchy and joint reasoning.

Within this framework numerous public deliberative processes have emerged in contemporary China that are interesting for the study of authoritarian deliberation. These processes, at a minimal level, illustrate the respect for the existence of a public space, and provide a mechanism for decision-makers to consider the suggestions and comments derived from its deliberative participants discourse.

First, is the implementation of village-level voting in 1987, which had an original purpose of addressing corruption and incompetence amongst village leaders, improving governance and policy implementation, and promoting social stability (see e.g., O'Brien and Li 2000: 468). Turnout in village elections is usually high, and investigations by international monitors has found that the fairness of elections – including secret balloting, nomination procedures, and competitiveness – has improved since their inception (O'Brien and Han 2009). Villagers do not vote for a candidate selected by a political party. Rather, they engage in public dialogue and discussions amongst themselves, nominate candidates directly, and then vote for a committee of candidates who serve three-year terms. At the local level, recall elections have also been implemented as a mechanism for villagers to remove local leaders, potentially causing local leaders to be more responsive to the individuals they represent.

Village elections despite being relatively democratic, have not been adopted based on a moral belief in democracy for democracy's sake; instead, they are emblematic of the Chinese political culture's emphasis on good governance, maintaining social stability, and a belief in meritocratic leadership (see e.g., Tzeng and Wang 2017: 119). Accordingly, it is improbable that elections will be implemented above the local level, as many of the advantages – such as small communities possessing intimate knowledge, reinforced through public discourse, of the virtues of the leaders they elect, and the policy needs of the community – disappear at the higher levels of government.

Second, the Chinese state, recognizing the social costs that market reforms since 1978, the prioritization of economic growth (which will continue in the 14th Five Year Plan, 2021–2025), as well as the subsequent shrinking of the welfare state, has reluctantly accepted the emergence of a quasi-autonomous civil society (Hasmath and Hsu 2014; 2016). While Chinese non-governmental organizations (NGOs) continue to face strict regulations – especially foreign and legal rights based NGOs in the current Xi Jinping era (2013–present) – this does not preclude them from promoting or engaging in a deliberative process, let alone creating their own deliberative spaces. This is notably the case for Chinese NGOs who are engaged in relatively, less sensitive issues such as the environment, social welfare, healthcare and education. In fact almost 70–75 percent of Chinese NGOs fall under this characterization, and work in areas that generally do not require directly and overtly challenging the state (Hsu et al. 2017).

Stated differently, these Chinese NGOs – inclusive of GONGOs (see Hasmath et al. 2019) –have managed to navigate the precarious, and often capricious, nature of China's regulatory system and have been able to engage in discursive and deliberative practices that have ultimately informed state action. For instance, environmental NGOS (ENGOs) have been effective in creating bottom-up avenues for direct input from the citizenry to them, notably when it comes to issues such as low-carbon energy transition (see e.g., Wang and Lo 2022), water conservation (see e.g., Wang and Liu 2022) or anti-dam campaigns (see e.g., Han 2014). These ENGOs have translated the citizenry's concerns into a collective public consciousness, so to speak, which informs their engagement and interactions behind closed doors with the state.

Notably, NGOs and their networks are keenly aware of the hidden rules of success in operating in the authoritarian institutional environment (see e.g., Tam and Hasmath 2015). They avoid direct and overt criticism of the central government or the Communist Party in the public – a strategy that differs to Western democratic polities. Instead, they hold government agencies and enterprises at the national and sub-national levels to account by gathering and taking stock of the public's attitudes about a particular issue, and privately engaging in discussions with the state. To be clear, while public discourse and deliberation can, and does, occur to the extent of providing input into policy-/law-making in an authoritarian setting, the final arbitrator of balancing the various inputs and ultimate decision-making power lies with the state.

Third, there is a rise of citizen-led volunteering[5] activities in contemporary China. This is evident in the results of the 2018, 2020 and 2022 Civic Participation in China Surveys (see Hsu et al. 2022; Teets et al. 2022). Through the process of volunteering, citizens are increasingly learning and differentiating state and non-state channels most appropriate for addressing specific social problems. In other words, they are becoming more 'active citizens'. This as Gastil (2000) suggested in an earlier section, is a precursor for discourse and deliberation to flourish in the public sphere.

In the Chinese context there are important caveats to factor before becoming excitable that such an eventuality will fully come to fruition. Citizen-led volunteers generally do not try to directly hold the central or local governments accountable for poor performances. In addition, Chinese citizens expect the state to take the lead on most social issues, but nonetheless, recognize that the government cannot solve all social problems. For example, volunteers are willing to engage in public dialogue and consideration amongst themselves regarding select issues, such as school infrastructure and 'left-behind' children (see e.g., Teets et al. 2022). This suggests that certain social problems have the potential to galvanize civic participation, viz. public discourse and deliberation, if not adequately addressed by the central and local states. It further suggests that providing a space for public discourse and deliberation is not necessarily a major threat to the legitimacy of the authoritarian polity; and in fact, it can be a benefit to aid in solving select social problems, and improving overall governance.

4.2. Objections

A critic of authoritarian deliberation may suggest that the only way to make deliberation and authoritarianism fit together is to dramatically distort the original conception of deliberation as laid out by theorists discussed in the early sections of this article; to the extent, that it is no longer meaningful. While authoritarian regimes can be durable, authoritarian leaders generally accept or even promote civic associations in order to help prop up the regime by, among other things, allowing these associations to meet important social needs and thereby, take pressure off the regime (Hasmath et al. 2019; Hsu and Hasmath 2014). Namely, the restrictions placed upon the social space by authoritarian regimes – that could constrain the emergence of counter-hegemonic discursive practices which can weaken or challenge the dominant discourse espoused by the state – invalidate the possibility of genuine authoritarian deliberation (see e.g., Lewis 2013: 333–334; Mackinnon 2007: 3).

Similarly, critics suggest that the selective deliberative spaces for individuals or groups that are allowed to exist – whether via tacit or overt sanctioning by the state (Hsu and Hasmath 2014) – create a false sense of transparency and responsiveness. That is, the ultimate aim of the authoritarian state is to provide safeguards for the state's own discursive foundations. In addition, discursive spaces can serve the function of allowing authorities to monitor citizens and suppress dissent (Pearce and Kendzior 2012: 287).

While there are strong merits to these objections, the same can be held true in practice for any political regime type. For instance, while public space can be site for discourse and deliberation to occur in Western democratic polities, the ultimate arbiter of the outcomes of this deliberative process are those who possess the power within the social, economic and political structure of society. This realpolitik view is tempered by the fact that Western democracies, unlike authoritarian regimes, public discourse and deliberation is not explicitly introduced as a mechanism to take pressure off the regime, or to safeguard its own institutional discursive foundations. Nonetheless, this does not invalidate the existence of authoritarian deliberation. Rather it points to the fact that authoritarian deliberation is perverted by institutional influences, rooted in concentrated power, and a structure that reinforces the existing one.

The tendency that critics have towards dismissing empirical examples and theoretical conceptions of authoritarian deliberation is predicated on the assumption that even if the authorities are encouraging deliberative reasoning as a problem-solving mechanism, absent democracy, the entire process is suspect (see e.g., O'Flynn and Curato 2015: 300–301). Amongst many scholars, a commonly held alternative perspective is that evidence of deliberation in authoritarian regimes suggests actual democracy is potentially on the horizon, or at least a possible outcome (see e.g. Li 2003: 648–649). Absent in each dominant narrative is the possibility of deliberation without democracy. Put another way, there is a common failure to accept that the endpoint of authoritarian regimes is not necessarily democracy or collapse, but, rather, authoritarianism itself can remain stable, and evolve along a trajectory, independent of these two outcomes.[6]

These viewpoints are unsurprising considering that the foundations of communicative action theory are rooted in Western democratic philosophical traditions, with a distinct and clear institutional separation between state and society, and beliefs about individual political liberties that are considered sacrosanct. Analyzing public deliberation in alternative political-cultural contexts can contribute to a greater understanding of the limits and constraints facing Western democratic deliberation, help to explain how authoritarian regimes endure and evolve, and further the development of comparative political theory. Additionally, for Western policymakers, the growing global importance of authoritarian states such as China, necessitates better understanding how governance and politics operate in authoritarian states (Hasmath 2020). Inclusive of this is a need to interrogate the limitations of authoritarian deliberation, of which there are many. In the following section I will discuss one of the most significant limitations of authoritarian discourse and deliberation, the tendency to marginalize the 'Other' in society.

5. Authoritarian Difference

The management of difference and inter-group relations is one of the greatest challenges that any state can face, especially ethno-cultural and religious differences. As discussed in a previous section, a central critique of deliberative politics in Western democratic states is that power and resource inequalities hinder the ability of certain groups of individuals to participate in the public sphere on equal terms. In authoritarian states, this situation is far more prevalent than in the Western democratic context. Not only do significant power and resource differences exist between social groups, authoritarian states are also leery of the danger that difference can pose (see e.g., Teufel 2005: 69–71).

Within authoritarian states, there are populations that do not want to be governed by the ruling elite. It stands to reason that social groups who have less power and resources, sometimes significantly so, than the dominant population are most likely to harbour resentment towards the regime and possess a desire to change the status quo. This is particularly true for many ethno-cultural and religious minority populations whose collective consciousness includes a memory of a time when they were independent from the current state. Empirical examples of how conflict between different groups can contribute to the destabilization, or even collapse, of authoritarian regimes abound, including well known cases such as the Soviet Union (see e.g., Hale 2008) and Yugoslavia (see e.g., Sekulic et al. 2006). The incorporation and inclusion of all social groups into the deliberative process, as suggested earlier as a solution to the problem of difference and deliberation in Western democratic states is, therefore, extremely difficult to imagine in authoritarian contexts.

Theoretically, a potential solution to the conundrum of allowing different social groups to meaningfully

participate in authoritarian discourse and deliberation, without the risk of them challenging the status quo, would be to dramatically improve their access to resources and power. If a minority group is well integrated socially, economically and culturally into the society they reside in, they are less likely to seek dramatic change. As an example, in China, despite deep historical tensions between the Manchu minority population and the Han Chinese majority, the Manchus are well integrated (Hasmath 2007: 470). Consequently, Manchus do not face major barriers to participating in public deliberative spaces any more so than the barriers confronting, Han Chinese, the majority ethnic group. However, the integration of 'Otherized' social groups is not an easy task, and, in many cases, the authoritarian state lacks the will, or capacity, to do so.[7]

In fact, intentional efforts to deny particular social groups access to the deliberative process is theoretically the likely outcome, and, in practice, has been common. Further, not only are different social groups often denied participation in authoritarian deliberation, any effort to challenge the official discourse about the experience of said social group, or difference more generally, is restricted by the state. For instance, in China the state often monitors and censors those who espouse viewpoints that run contrary to the dominant state sanctioned discourse in relation to ethno-cultural and religious minorities such as Uyghurs or Tibetans (see e.g., Clothey et al. 2016).

The status of 'Otherized' groups in authoritarian regimes can also be quite precarious, and can change rather rapidly, as demonstrated by the experience of LGBTQIA+ individuals in Russia. In the years following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the LGBTQIA+ movement grew rapidly, and there was a willingness for LGBTQIA+ individuals to participate in discourse and deliberation in the public sphere. Nonetheless, during the 2010s this changed with the Russian general population becoming increasingly intolerant towards LGBTQIA+ individuals and groups. One of the main reasons for this shift is the influence of the state's discourse that manifested in the adoption of anti-gay propaganda laws (see e.g., Buyantueva 2018). Presently, Russian LGBTQIA+ activists and individuals alike are denied access to participate freely and equally in the limited public discursive space available, through both judicial and extrajudicial means. This also includes bans on LGBTQIA+ organizations, banning pride parades, arresting LGBTQIA+ activists, threats, harassment and violence.

The Russian example additionally provides evidence of how, under authoritarian rule, groups are sometimes used as scapegoats to further the political interests of the regime. It is worth noting that this can also occur in Western democratic states with political parties and movements exploiting intergroup tensions for their own ends. This is aptly illustrated in the Southern Strategy in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s, where the Republican party attempted to increase political support amongst 'white' voters in southern states by appealing to ethno-racial prejudices against African-Americans (Carter 1999). In managing difference more broadly, however, there are considerable differences between Western democratic and authoritarian societies.

Western democratic societies have inherent advantages compared to authoritarian regimes. Foremost, the ability of the 'Other' in society to vote for candidates that represent them, and the ability to overtly protest, in a relatively free manner, any mistreatment they experience, or said society's unequal apportionment of power. These mechanisms can serve not only to change policies that negatively impact non-dominant populations, but also as a powerful pressure relief valve that help to reduce inter-group tensions. Authoritarian regimes, by their very nature, do not allow free elections at the national level, and they generally clamp down on overt public protests as they see them as destabilizing and a threat to their rule.

Authoritarian regimes have employed a variety of tactics to manage difference and intergroup relations. Those policies utilized, form a loose spectrum between trying to accommodate difference, to more hardline efforts to control or destroy difference. More accommodating policies include, but are not limited to: allowing minority populations to engage in limited self-governance or federalism; providing formal legal protections against discrimination; promoting minority cultures (e.g., providing funding to support minority religious and/or ethno-cultural practices) and promoting affirmative action policies in education and the labour market (see e.g., Maurer-Fazio and Hasmath 2015). Conversely, hardline approaches include, but are not limited to: efforts to destroy difference by banning minority religious and/or ethno-cultural practices, attempts to prevent the teaching of minority languages, heavily policing and the surveillance of minority communities, imprisoning influential members of minority communities and the mass detention of minority individuals. Most authoritarian regimes have (and continue to) engage in a combination of the aforementioned policies.

In many respects, the contemporary manner by which Western democratic regimes manage difference is a relatively new phenomena and is not universally true across all Western democracies. Afterall, Western democratic regimes have also used many of the hardline approaches employed by authoritarian regimes against social groups such as Indigenous peoples, LGBTQIA+ individuals and the disabled. What remains to be seen is whether some authoritarian societies undergo similar evolutions in how they approach and understand difference, and the treatment of the 'Other'.

6. Conclusion

A society governed by the tenets of a public sphere is the ultimate project for Jürgen Habermas and Iris Marion Young. For Habermas, the rules of reason ought to reign supreme in the hopes of creating a condition in which 'free spaces' can be established for a public sphere. Only then can a practical discourse – out of which universally valid, justifiable norms may emerge – be realized. The principle of universalization will thus be applicable to govern the constant critical and rational examination of practical norms.

Problematic to this approach is the idea that a diversity of communities and participants, while following the same set of rules regarding discourse, may establish diverse sets of norms as legitimate for a given community, but not all. The discourse ethics is not an ethics that gives norms for every conflict that might arise. Irrespective of political regime type, it is most effective if seen as a tool for a communicative framework in which conflicts can possibly be resolved. Young's project is to defend the politics of difference from those who argue that it undermines the basis of Western democracy. In this article I explore how the notions advanced by these theorists play out in a vastly different context, that of the authoritarian regime.

Authoritarian discourse and deliberation are far more limited than its Western democratic counterpart in terms of its universality and capacity to collectively solve problems. As the article illustrates, these constraints, however, do not invalidate the notion that discourse and deliberation is theoretically possible and practically functionable in authoritarian regimes. Future research on authoritarian discourse and deliberation is necessary, especially empirical research, to better understand how it fits into the broader system of authoritarian rule, as well as the limitations that constrain it.

In this article, I also focused on one of the larger limitations of authoritarian discourse and deliberation, which is the difficulty in addressing difference. The incorporation of difference into authoritarian discourse and deliberation is a complex task, considering the inherent tension between the 'Other' and the ruling elite in authoritarian states. It remains to be seen, however, if difference can be better incorporated into authoritarian discourse and deliberation; after all, difference was not meaningfully accounted for in Western democratic societies until comparatively recent years.

Notes

[1] The underlying assumption here refutes moral skepticism which asserts that questions of practical reason cannot be decided on purely rational grounds.

[2] With this restriction we can take a step back from transcendental foundations as a 'final grounding' of (metaphysical) 'truth'.

[3] The problem with this approach is that it provides no way to distinguish between coerced solidarity from voluntary solidarity. Moreover, decisions guided by solidarity could be unjust for those who are affected by those decisions, but who are not part of the shared community.

[4] One strategy may be to preclude certain matters from being debated in the public arena in the hopes of achieving this singular position. Benhabib (1992) takes exception to this suggestion, by arguing avoiding any issue where fundamental differences are present simply falls prey to side-stepping the weaknesses in the model.

[5] Citizen-led volunteerism is contrasted to a state-led one. The Communist Party of China (CCP) have long promoted state-led volunteerism as a means to strengthen the state's ideological hegemony and implement innovative social management for social stability (see Hu 2021).

[6] There are compelling reasons for this belief, for instance South Korea and Taiwan both underwent democratic transition after periods of rapid economic development.

[7] In keeping with examples from China, there has been significant tension between the Han Chinese population and the Uyghur and Tibetan populations (see e.g. Hasmath 2019).

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Solomon Kay-Reid for his research assistance, and to the two anonymous reviewers and the editors for their helpful feedback. An earlier version of this article was presented at the 2021 European Consortium for Political Research General Conference.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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How to cite this article: Hasmath, R. (2023). Discourse, Deliberation and Difference in an Authoritarian Public Sphere. *Journal of Deliberative Democracy*, 18(2), pp. 1–10. DOI: https://doi.org/10.16997/jdd.1182

Submitted: 14 October 2021 **Accepted:** 18 May 2023 **Published:** 09 June 2023

Journal of Deliberative Democracy is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by University of Westminster Press.