

12-14-2007

It's a Long Way from Helsingborg to Porto Alegre: A Case Study in Deliberative Democracy in Late Modernity

Jakob Svensson

Lund University, Institute of Communication, jakob.svensson@icomm.lu.se

Follow this and additional works at: <https://www.publicdeliberation.net/jpd>

Recommended Citation

Svensson, Jakob (2008) "It's a Long Way from Helsingborg to Porto Alegre: A Case Study in Deliberative Democracy in Late Modernity," *Journal of Public Deliberation*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 1 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://www.publicdeliberation.net/jpd/vol4/iss1/art4>

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by Public Deliberation. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Public Deliberation by an authorized editor of Public Deliberation.

It's a Long Way from Helsingborg to Porto Alegre: A Case Study in Deliberative Democracy in Late Modernity

Abstract

Since the 1990's representative democracy has been challenged by a deliberative turn in political philosophy, reaching even into the practices of established political institutions. In Sweden, the Municipality of Helsingborg, inspired by deliberative ideals, established civic committees as a way to deal with changing patterns of civic political behavior in late modernity. One reason for this is that deliberation is assumed to revitalize representative democracy by avoiding the instrumental rational focus on self-interest. However, there are some difficulties in implementing deliberative democracy within this municipal representative democratic setting. This article will point to some problems in the Helsingborg experiment.

Keywords

Deliberative Democracy, Late Modernity, Representative Democracy, Civic Influence

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the Ted Becker and Emil Persson for valuable comments and support through out the process

Introduction

In 2003 the Municipality of Helsingborg, in southern Sweden, established five civic committees. One of the purposes of these committees was to engage its citizens in political conversations with each other, as well as with politicians and municipal officials. This idea to increase civic engagement within municipal institutions is linked to a widespread understanding that liberal representative democracy is currently facing a crisis of legitimacy. By facilitating interpersonal conversations and stimulating public arenas where inhabitants, politicians and municipal officials could meet and exchange ideas, liberal representative democracy might be transformed.

The emphasis on dialogue and conversation is inspired by deliberative theories of democracy. Since the 1990's there has been a deliberative turn in political philosophy that has built upon the work of Jürgen Habermas (1960, to date) (See Fishkin, 1991; 1995; Dryzek, 2000). This has been followed by a number of deliberative experiments (Muhlberger, 2006). Today, parliamentary institutions are showing interest in citizen deliberation. In Sweden there are explicit references made to deliberative theories of democracy in state official reports (SOU, 2000), as well as in governmental documents (Government bill, 2001). This interest in deliberative theory has resulted in a range of deliberative initiatives, especially on a municipal level. Deliberative democracy has entered the arena of established legislative politics.

The aim of this article is to examine the rise of different municipal deliberative projects to address issues of growing civic apathy and disinterest towards traditional parliamentary politics, by using the Helsingborg civic committees as a case study.

Representative Democracy in Crisis: The Challenge of Late Modernity

Liberal representative democracy has been dominant in political philosophy, to the extent that Francis Fukuyama declared the end of history, with liberal representative democracy as the ultimate stage in the development of human government (1992). But society is changing and liberal representative democracy faces challenges in late modernity, challenges that hardly could be predicted at its dawning. Citizenship does not function in the same way today and political engagement is qualitatively different. The supposed victory of liberal democracy seems to have accompanied social disintegration and voter alienation (Carter & Stokes, 1998). Low participation in elections and decreasing membership in political parties has launched a debate about a growing civic apathy towards traditional politics.

Citizens in western democratically governed societies more frequently declare themselves to be dissatisfied (Bentivegna, 2006). We are currently witnessing a civic withdrawal away from formal politics, away from larger collective identities and community sensibilities. Carl Boggs refers to this as “*the great retreat*” (2000). This retreat has some real hands-on consequences. Traditional political practices have noticeably declined. In Sweden, electoral participation has diminished from over 90 percent in 1976 to 80 percent in the latest national elections 2006¹. Even though these figures are high in an international comparison (the USA has less than fifty percent turnouts regularly), Swedish electoral participation has not been as low since 1958. When it comes to faith in politicians and confidence in political parties, the citizens are becoming increasingly skeptical (Olsson, 2006; Peterson et al., 1989). It has even been suggested that the political parties will disappear if the current drop out of members continues at the same pace.

This can be explained in part as a result of our entering a new phase of history: late modernity (Giddens, 1991; Beck, 1995; Bauman, 2001). Dahlgren characterizes late modernity by identifying two interrelated cultural processes at work: dispersion of unifying cultural frameworks and individualization (2006). The first refers to the increasing pluralization, fragmentation and nichification of society along lines of ethnicity, media consumption, cultural interests, life styles, interests, tastes etc. Individualization refers to lacking a sense of social belonging and a growing sense of personal autonomy. Apathy and disinterest towards traditional politics can be understood in the light of these cultural changes.

As traditional parliamentary political engagement is declining, some non-parliamentary activities are increasing, such as signing petitions, protesting and creating new communities and associations (Peterson et al., 1989; Beck, 1995; Bennett & Entman, 2001; Dahlgren, 2001). The importance of reflexivity and individualization has resulted in a different lifestyle-based approach to politics (Giddens, 1991). The collective and traditional comes second when politics becomes a part of the individual identity formation process.

As an example of this new form of engagement, a number of young music lovers of Helsingborg mobilized in order to save a popular rock club that municipal politicians wanted to turn into a conference centre. Through Internet and mobile technology, they gathered signatures, protested against the municipal plans, got older inhabitants and residents interested in architecture to protest as well in order to save the old railway station in which the club was housed. This illustrates the type of lateral electronic-based engagement that is emerging, engagement that is based in late modern life practices, outside parliamentary politics, and engagement that is mobilized around one particular issue, attracting a new form of temporary collective.

¹ These figures are from <http://www.riksdagen.se/arbetar/siffror/deltagan.htm> 2006-10-02

It should be underlined that this shift towards life-style politics is a slow process of changing attitudes rather than a distinct rupture (hence I use the term *late* modernity). But nonetheless we are witnessing a change in civic political practices today and this is considered a serious problem for liberal representative democracy and parliamentary institutions. The struggle to get more citizens re-engaged in traditional politics has thus begun (van Gunsteren, 1998). Different forums where inhabitants are expected to engage civically in politics are created. But before exemplifying the rise of such deliberative democratic experiments within the framework of representative democracy, there is another factor behind the growing significance of deliberative democracy to discuss; the opposition to self-interest.

Deliberation in order to Avoid Self-Interest

In the 1990's, Swedish municipalities were still influenced by traditional liberal representative democratic theories. The dominant discourse in the municipalities considered citizens as motivated by their own self-interest. The citizens of the city were seen as citizens when consuming municipal welfare, claiming their right to welfare programs and voting to legitimize the system. In Swedish municipal research, this is largely referred to as the *client discourse* (Montin, 2002)².

In Helsingborg, the idea of *pavement politics*³ illustrates the instrumental way in how inhabitants claimed their rights as citizens. Politicians often used the term referring to inhabitants complaining about broken lampposts, badly lit alleyways and sidewalks that are not broad enough for wheelchairs et cetera. The rise of the welfare state was based on comprehensive social programs. For the inhabitants this meant that in relation to the municipality they became consumers of municipal services, clients, seeing themselves as having rights to certain welfare programs (Montin, 2002). Pavement politics, such as demanding better public transport in the neighbourhood, complaining about the refuse collection, demanding a better management of the local park or cleaning the beach are examples of the instrumental relationship between the inhabitants and the municipality. In such instrumental accounts of rationality it is often implied that the ends agents want to realize are motivated by self-interest (Hindess, 1988; Mueller, 1989). If we look at the first representative democratic constitution, in the USA, its theories are based on rationalized self-interest, and this has dominated liberal representative democratic theory and practice ever since.

But, a lot of modern civic political engagement is difficult to understand referring exclusively to instrumental self-interest. Considering the

² Montin calls it a model; I prefer to call this a discourse since it refers to an institutionalized way of thinking and focus upon communicative aspects of social life.

³ My translation: trottoarpolitik

utilitarian argument of cost and benefits, it would make more sense not to engage at all (the so called free-rider problem). Policies, emanating from civic engagement, affect all inhabitants whether they engage or not. Inhabitants then have every rational reason not to participate in public action, or even thought (Olson, 1965). If self-interest is the motivational force underlying civic participation, it becomes most rational to stay at home (Downs, 1957). Muhlberger, one of the deliberative democracy movement's experimenters, refers to this as *rational apathy* (2006). Hence, parliamentary institutions holding on to an instrumental rational view of the citizenry would contradict its efforts trying to promote civic participation. Self-interest has thus become the scapegoat when politicians and municipal officials are trying to understand civic apathy. This is illustrated in Helsingborg when politicians and municipal officials seek to avoid pavement politics. Politicians have talked about the citizenry as "*The Wailing Wall*" only interested in issues concerning their own immediate everyday situations. When vitalizing and legitimizing representative democracy there is therefore a need for new ways to understand civic participation. In Helsingborg the municipality claimed it wanted to raise the horizons and get the citizens to engage in discussions concerning the future development of the whole polity, rather than pavement politics.

Trying to understand this shift, I argue that the old conflict between a liberal and a republican understanding of citizenship has been rearticulated, but in a new manner. The republican ideals of civic virtues for the greater good of all have been renewed in a more deliberative costume. With a greater focus on deliberation conducted by free and equal individuals searching for understanding and consensus, the liberal understanding of the citizens as primarily self-interested and seeking bare majorities to impose their will on all, is challenged. The well-known distinction between instrumental and communicative rationality becomes embodied under these new circumstances.

Communicative rationality refers to an emphasis on critical interpersonal discussion as *the* mode of communication in a democracy (Habermas, 1996). In order to understand each other and to become aware of the inherent subjectivity in our assumptions, the rational thing to do is to truly communicate with others. Communicative rationality occurs when communication is free from coercion, deception, strategizing and manipulation. Deliberation is often referred to as this rational communication in such ideal speech situations. According to Forst the central feature of deliberative democracy consists of "a political practice of argumentation and reason-giving among free and equal citizens" (2001 p. 346). Self-interests are put aside and people are willing to be convinced by the better argument (Jodal, 2003). Deliberative democracy also puts an emphasis on having a full range of information and expert opinion that is moderated by independent, well-trained facilitators. The purpose is to strive for maximum consensus among the participants.

Civic participation today is marked by “a low voter turnout, pointless pundit-speak, and empty political spectacle” (Friedman, 2006 p. 1). In this context the deliberative vision of robust civic engagement and communicative rationality enters the arena. Fishkin refers explicitly to direct democracy in ancient Greece, using mental images of the *Agora*, full of life and active citizen participation (1991). The current state of participation in western liberal representative democracies pales in comparison with these deliberative images (Friedman, 2006). Therefore, parliamentary institutions dealing with an increasingly apathetic citizenry become interested in the communicative rational understanding of influential direct civic participation in deliberative democracy. Assuming that inhabitants do have this more communicative orientation to their engagement, and actually want to participate in such deliberations, the instrumentally influenced client discourse, alienation and pavement politics should decrease. It is in this sense deliberative theory contributes with a more attractive account of civic participation (Stokes makes a similar argument, 2005). And it is from this perspective I understand the rise of deliberative experiments within parliamentary institutions.

The connection I propose between ideas of late modernity, deliberative and representative democracy is not always logical. For example, Habermas, being faithful to the Enlightenment project, is rather associated with high modernity than late modernity. And the focus on consensus through organized municipal deliberations may indeed be difficult to combine with the more eclectic and individualized understanding of civic participation in late modernity. But the late modern state of increasingly privatized civic engagement is something the politicians and municipal officials seek to change. Or at least, they wish to channel this late modern engagement through the activities organized within liberal representative democratic institutions. In an attempt to manage this, an understanding of inhabitants as communicatively rational, willing to engage in dialogue with others in order to understand each other and seek agreement, becomes somewhat attractive. If the inhabitants would have such civic morality and act accordingly, the task to reorient their political engagement back towards the parliamentary institutions would not seem that difficult.

Merging Deliberation and Representative Democracy: The Experimental Phase Globally and in Sweden

There is a focus towards deliberation in recent participatory democratic experiments and projects. Thus, here has been a deliberative turn, not only in academia (Dryzek, 2000), but also within traditional parliamentary institutions (Gastil & Levine, 2005). According to the Deliberative Democracy Consortium, political leaders are starting to realize that the distance between citizens and

government is an obstacle to solving serious public problems (www.deliberative-democracy.net, 2007-02-20). Therefore new formats for decision-making are being invented and tested, where citizens' potentials and public resources are better taken care of, not least to avoid non-productive conflicts. These new designs emphasize public deliberation.

In *The Deliberative Democracy Handbook* a good number of deliberative experiments are discussed from the US and the rest of the world (Gastil & Levine, 2005). Experiments on consensus conferences (Hendriks, 2005), deliberative opinion polls (Fishkin & Farrar, 2005), citizen juries (Crosby & Nethercut, 2005), and deliberative city planning (Sokoloff et al., 2005) have been conducted mostly in the US. But there are also examples of deliberative participatory projects in such diverse parts of the world as China (He & Leib, 2006), Australia (Niemeyer, 2004), Brazil (Vera-Zavala, 2003) and Turkey (Kanra, 2004).

Participatory Budgeting in the Brazilian city of Porto Alegre is often cited as one of the most successful sustained example of deliberative democracy within the framework of representative democratic institutions (Becker & Ohlin, 2006). Citizens gathered in different neighborhoods in order to discuss and then elect representatives to a Participatory Budget Council where the delegates could vote on how, and on what, the city should spend its capital improvement budget (Vera-Zavala, 2003). A deliberating citizenry actually decided on the city's budget, thus the name *Participatory Budgeting*. And this form of deliberative democracy has spread throughout Latin America (see for example Cornwall & Coelho, 2007). Another new long-term example is the Danish Technology Council (www.tekno.dk, 2007-03-06). The Danish Parliament founded the council in order to spread knowledge about technology, their effects and possibilities for inhabitants, society and environment. The council promotes an ongoing discussion on technology and is an advisor for the Danish Parliament. Methods they use are café seminars, citizen summits, citizen juries, consensus conferences, panels for the future and citizen hearings. According to Becker & Ohlin, these methods have had a big influence on the Danish Parliament (2006).

Deliberative ideas have also reached Sweden. To stimulate more effective civic participation between elections and reinforce the legitimacy of representative democracy is a part of the Government Bill from 2001 *Democracy for the New Century*. According to this bill, Swedish democracy should be recognized by a broad civic participation within the framework of representative democracy (2001). One example is that, a new policy area, *Democracy*, was installed within the budget 2001 (The Government letter, 2003). The Government wanted to attend to problems of civic apathy towards traditional parliamentary politics, including less people running for office and a decreasing recruitment to political parties, especially among the young and people with immigrant background (Government bill, 2001; Government letter, 2003).

To increase civic engagement, participation and influence are considered important when vitalizing representative democracy (SOU, 2000; SOU, 2001; Government bill, 2001; Government letter, 2003). Therefore, during the last years, new organizational models have emerged within public administration that are designed to better consider citizens' needs and experiences more effectively. For example in Helsingborg, politicians and municipal officials claim that they want to make possible a public service that is closer to the inhabitants (Benson Consulting, 2006). In this manner a link is made between municipal administration and democratic development. This is in turn connected to the idea that an increased civic engagement should contribute to a revitalized liberal representative democracy.

According to the municipal auditor in Helsingborg, the increasing distance between politicians and citizens is a major problem (Stadsrevisionens rapport, 2005, see also Deliberative Democracy Consortium, www.deliberative-democracy.net). In order to decrease this distance, improve the municipal administration and augment civic participation, several inquiries and reports emphasize the need to develop a robust civic dialogue (SOU, 2000; SOU, 2001; Government bill, 2001; Benson Consulting, 2006). The democracy report (SOU, 2000 p. 23) and the following Government bill (2001 p. 27) recommend a "participatory democracy with deliberative qualities"⁴. Deliberation and dialogue (which seems to be the way politicians and state officials interpret the concept of deliberation) is presented as a solution to a range of different problems the state and municipalities are dealing with. For example, in the democracy report it is written that "there is no shortcut for legitimizing political parties, dialogue is the way"⁵ (SOU, 2000 p. 29). And the Government establishes that "within a democracy the work should be concentrated on emphasizing conversation and discussion"⁶ (Government bill, 2001 p. 30). Words such as civic dialogue and civic influence are increasingly frequent on Swedish municipal websites (Djörke, 2006). Also initiatives such as referendums, civic panels, civic offices have become more common in Swedish municipalities (SOU, 2000). Deliberation and dialogue is emphasized as the means to reorient the citizens back to liberal representative institutions (The Strategy Document, 2003; SOU, 2000).

Hence, in Sweden politicians have attempted to reinforce municipal democracy by initiatives such as local referendums, civic panels and citizen proposals (SOU, 2000; The Government bill, 2001). The northern municipality of Kalix constitutes one example of this trend. In 2000 the municipality organized public meetings and Internet based communication channels in order to promote a

⁴ My translation: deltagardemokrati med deliberativa kvaliteter

⁵ My translation: Det finns inte någon genväg till politisk legitimitet för de politiska partierna. Dialog är vägen.

⁶ My translation: Arbetet bör också inriktas mot att lyfta fram värdet av samtal och diskussion i en demokrati.

Greener Kalix. Fifty-two percent of the population participated in one way or another, and they agreed on a program to reach their goals with only small increases of taxes as a consequence (Becker & Ohlin, 2006).

In Helsingborg it is within the civic committees that dialogue and deliberation are intended to be produced. By being a broad meeting place for politicians and citizens alike, the civic committees should work to diminish the distance between the two groups (Stadsrevisionens rapport, 2005). A civic dialogue should also contribute to an increasing influence and engagement in the political processes concerning municipal services in the neighborhoods so that the problems that produce pavement politics and alienation are minimized (The Strategy Document, 2003). The idea in Helsingborg is to invite inhabitants to participate in the planning and development of their own neighbourhood.

The Civic Committees in Helsingborg

A majority of the Municipal Council in Helsingborg decided in 2002 to renew its municipal organization with five civic committees, covering different parts of the municipality (west, east, north, south and center), beginning in 2003. This is due to the fact that certain municipal officials, especially being inspired by local municipal participatory projects and ideas of deliberation and social capital, allied themselves with the dominant Social Democratic Party and managed to gain a majority in the Municipal Council. Although the civic committees in Helsingborg were unique, they are similar to participatory democratic experiments in other municipalities and other countries. Like others they were an initiative to improve and transform representative democracy by recognizing the value of conversation, stimulating civic participation between elections and promoting a comprehensive view on issues within the municipality (The Strategy Document, 2003).

The civic committees should foster civic participation as well as encourage dialogue between decision-makers and those affected by the decisions (The Strategy Document, 2003). Promoting dialogue was the method municipal officials and politicians in these committees worked on. Democratic dialogue between politicians and citizens was the fundamental idea in the municipal program *The Good City* that should permeate all aspects in the municipality. With such a democratic dialogue, civic participation and influence should be guaranteed (The Strategy Document, 2003).

According to the regulations for the civic committees, they should especially look into issues of ethnic integration, collect the inhabitants' viewpoints, and produce local development programs. Their main task was to cover different geographic areas and supply knowledge to seven different *branch*

*committees*⁷. The branch committees covered different sectors⁸, and their political composition mirrored political parties different mandates in the elected Municipal Council. The Municipal Council established branch committees in order to prepare policy-making before the council assembled. Even though resolutions symbolically were passed in the Municipal Council, it was in the branch committees that issues, policies and regulations were discussed, mapped out and in practice decided upon. The civic committees' task was to provide useful data to the branch committees so they could make better decisions, considering citizens' needs and experiences more effectively.

Civic Committee ⇒ Branch Committee ⇒ Municipal Council

Figure 1: The decision-making process in Helsingborg.

The figure above illustrates the decision-making process in Helsingborg. The civic committees should engage citizens in discussions concerning the future of their particular neighbourhood. The politicians should then bring the citizens' concerns and viewpoints to the branch committees. The policy-making in the branch committees was thus supposed to be based on the results of the different discussions organized by the civic committees. And then finally, resolutions were formally passed when the Municipal Council assembled.

A civic committee consisted of fourteen politicians. These politicians also had commissions in a branch committee. In this manner politicians in the civic committees had two commissions, both as a representative for a geographical part of a city (in a civic committee) and as a representative for a different sector (in a branch committee). With this organizational design the municipality intended to create intersectorial spaces, putting forward a comprehensive view on municipal matters. The figure on the next page illustrates the intersectorial composition of politicians in a civic committee, and the comprehensive composition of politicians in a branch committee.

It was considered a benefit to have all branch committees represented within a civic committee, and all the geographically different civic committees represented in a branch committee. For example, if drugs were a problem in a school in western Helsingborg, politicians from the Committee of Education as well as the Committee of Social Welfare could discuss the issue together within the Civic Committee West. If it then was decided to close the school, it was considered an advantage to have all civic committees represented within the

⁷ My translation; facknämnd

⁸ The Committee of Culture, The Committee of Social Change (Development), The Committee of Education, The Committee of Health and Care, The Housing Committee, The Committee of Social Welfare, The Committee of Technical Development

Committee of Education. For example, students may have to be transported from western Helsingborg to schools in the east or in the city centre.

<i>Civic Committee West</i>	<i>The Committee of Education</i>
The committee consisted of two politicians from each Branch Committee, hence the following distribution:	This Branch Committee had among its eleven politicians, two from each Civic Committee, hence the following distribution:
The Committee of Culture	Civic Committee West
The Committee of Culture	Civic Committee West
The Committee of Social Change	Civic Committee East
The Committee of Social Change	Civic Committee East
The Committee of Education	Civic Committee South
The Committee of Education	Civic Committee South
The Committee of Health and Care	Civic Committee North
The Committee of Health and Care	Civic Committee North
The Housing Committee,	Civic Committee Centre
The Housing Committee,	Civic Committee Centre
The Committee of Social Welfare	
The Committee of Social Welfare	
The Committee of Technical Development	
The Committee of Technical Development	

Figure 2: The Intersectorial and comprehensive design of the committees in the Municipality of Helsingborg.

The civic committees organized different kinds of activities. Their practices changed and developed constantly as they gained experience from early messy meetings. Neighbourhood walks⁹, workshops for the future and meetings with specific interest organizations (Islamic groups, youth centres, neighbourhood associations et cetera) are examples of activities that have been organized. Public meetings, open for inhabitants in geographically defined neighbourhoods, have been the most common activity during the period I followed the committees. The alleged purpose of these meetings was to create a constructive and respectful dialogue between politicians and inhabitants (The Strategy Document, 2003). Problematic issues and concerns for the future development of the neighbourhood were to be defined and discussed. These conversations together with a statistical survey, sent out in the neighbourhood, formed the basis of a local development program. The civic committee returned to the neighbourhood in order to present

⁹ This refers to organised walks in the neighbourhood where the Police and different officials from the Municipality together walk a predetermined route in order to identify insecure areas.

and discuss how the municipality worked with the issues and concerns that had been put on the agenda. The inhabitants were also encouraged to actively participate both independently and together with different municipal organizations. Invitations to public meetings and activities were both posted as ads in the newspaper, and as posters in the actual neighbourhood where the meeting would take place. Invitations were also sent out by mail, often together with other information brochures from the municipality. When the committee beforehand knew that a specific issue would be discussed, they would invite experts to the meetings, often municipal officials, such as the city architect, if new buildings were planned in the neighbourhood. The municipality's webpage was also used to draw attention to different activities as well as asking for citizens' viewpoints.

My studies of the civic committees started in February 2004. The main part of the empirical data gathering took place during 2005 when I especially followed two committees in demographically different parts of the municipality. During these years I participated in 81 different meetings and activities and made twenty-four in-depth interviews with politicians, municipal officials and participants in the activities organized by the civic committees.

Let me take an example from one neighbourhood in Helsingborg I monitored. Initially, strong neighbourhood associations were involved in order for the civic committee to get an idea of which issues should be on the agenda. In connection with planning the first open meeting, ads were placed in the newspaper, and the survey started to be sent out to a representative sample of in the neighbourhood. Because of the big immigrant population, the committee also organized a meeting with interpreters at a popular shopping centre. In this way the immigrant population could be targeted, and the immigrants could get assistance in issues concerning their relation to the municipality. Posters were also put up in the neighbourhood, advertising the open meeting.

After the meeting with the neighbourhood association, the civic committee knew that inhabitants were concerned for the survival of the local school. Inhabitants also made it clear they did not want building new apartments in the area. The committee also knew that many old people lived the neighbourhood. Therefore, the civic committee brought some experts to the open meeting, from the Committee of Education, the City Architect and the Municipal Coordinator for Geriatric Care. Politicians were seated at small tables in order to facilitate small-scale dialogue rather than big question and answer sessions. Politicians and municipal officials also acted as facilitators, trying to engage all citizens in the discussions and counteract stronger participants from taking over. Participants circulated to different tables according to what politician or municipal official he or she wanted to talk to. A municipal administrator documented everything, and participants could leave their address or e-mail address and get notes from the meeting sent home to them. When then the survey was being processed, other activities were organized in the neighbourhood such as a

neighbourhood walk, identifying unsafe areas in the neighbourhood. The civic committee also visited a youth centre, an immigrant organization and organized a workshop about the future of the neighbourhood.

After all these activities had been conducted, and when the survey was compiled, the civic committee returned to the neighbourhood in order to present the results of the survey and to discuss what progress had been made concerning the issues that had been raised and discussed in the different activities. All these experiences were then compiled into a local development program that should guide the decision-making in the branch committees. This process took about six months from the first meeting. A civic committee worked with different neighbourhoods at the same time.

A total of thirty local development programs were produced and the five civic committees visited all together forty-six different neighbourhoods in the municipality. According to the Municipal Auditors Report (Stadsrevisionens rapport, 2005) approximately 1900 citizens had participated in different meetings during 2004, with an average of forty-four citizens per meeting (Helsingborg has 120 000 inhabitants). The participation increased during 2005. According to the committees' own documentation, approximately 4500 inhabitants participated in different activities organized 2005.

Civic Influence in Helsingborg

Did the citizens have any influence in the policy-making as the Government Bill (2001) and the state official report (SOU, 2000) sought? It is difficult to understand how the organizational design in Helsingborg should guarantee civic influence. The issue of civic influence was not addressed in a sufficient manner in municipal documents, and therefore no measures were put in place to ensure participants' influence. Influence concerns relations and the ability to induce change (Engelstad, 2006). In this section I'm therefore going to discuss the relations between the politicians, municipal officials and citizens in Helsingborg, and whether the citizens really were able to change anything through their participation.

Discussing civic influence in Helsingborg, the representative democratic setting in which the civic committees operated, becomes pivotal. It was never intended that the power, installed in elected representatives through democratic elections, should be transferred directly to the participants in the activities organized by the civic committees. It was the politicians that had the decision-making power, but only through their commission in a branch committee. Thus, the actual policy-making took place far away from the deliberative activities organized by the civic committees. The role of the citizens was then only consultative (So also in Kalix, but less influential than in Porto

Alegre, see Becker & Ohlin, 2006). Inhabitants were expected to come to the activities organized by the civic committees, share their ideas, experiences and discuss how they wanted their neighbourhood to develop in the future (See The Strategy Document, 2003). It was then up to the politicians to bring these ideas and opinions to the branch committees, and this was a more complicated process than it may look like at a first glance.

In this process above there were problems and obstacles. Many politicians and municipal officials talked about a rivalry, because the branch committees often felt stepped on its toes by the civic committees. Many of the representatives from the traditional sectors never fully accepted the civic committees intersectorial design, and they felt rather threatened when the civic committees engaged in issues that normally had been in their field of decision-making. Hence, the citizens did not only have to engage the politicians in the civic committee, the politicians in their turn had to mediate citizens' ideas to the branch committee, and to do this in a manner acceptable for the branch committee. The branch committees thus became a layer of bureaucracy in between the citizens and the actual decision-making.

The intersectorial organization with branch and civic committees was complicated. Even the politicians had a hard time to fully grasp its purpose and their different roles in this particular design. Civic committee politicians had difficulties in connecting their different commissions. Most often they conceived of themselves as representatives for a branch committee or a different sector rather than for a civic committee. Important to underline here is that these politicians were not the most significant in the municipality. They were politicians on their free time and had "normal" jobs beside their political commissions. It is also important to clarify that the branch committees also consisted of politicians that only had commission in the branch committee. We should thus keep in mind that civic committee politicians were in general not the most powerful members of the branch committees. In other words, it was easy to ignore civic committee politicians and what they brought to the table.

If we now turn to the deliberations organized by the civic committees, citizens did not possess the same knowledge and verbal abilities that politicians and municipal officials possessed. Therefore they were often disadvantaged. Eloquent inhabitants, used to talk in front of people, had an advantage in these activities. From a deliberative perspective the civic committees did not facilitate participation from weaker and disadvantaged citizens. Also, It was the politicians that were to facilitate discussions, but when they were uncertain of their role, and when they knew that they would have a difficult task putting forward the results in the branch committees, they didn't always do a good job. The politicians and the professional municipal administrators, who sometimes participated as expert in some of the activities, never received training as facilitators. Deliberative democrats underline having professional and independent facilitators (see for example Fishkin, 1991). Having politicians and administrators doing this job,

proved to reinforce the top down system, with politicians making the decisions and the citizens only as advisors to the politicians. The question is also whether the activities only did attract stronger groups in society from the beginning. The meetings were mostly frequented by middle-aged to old inhabitants. The turn out was not demographically representative (the exception is meetings in rural parts in the municipality that attracted a large segment of the actual population). The civic committees thus failed to attract the young and the immigrant population, even though they specifically targeted these groups by visiting youth centers and immigrant associations.

Representativeness was a problem for the civic committees. And politicians could use this strategically. If the participants confirmed the opinions by the politicians, politicians gladly talked about having the citizens on their side et cetera. But on the other hand, when participants opposed politicians, their opinions were often disregarded as non-representative. Even though it was the civic committees explicit aim to attract a majority of the population in the neighbourhood, they failed to do this. Thus the outcomes of these activities could be used strategically, when it suited the purposes of politicians and municipal officials.

When inhabitants were dependent on politicians consent, politicians in their turn were dependent on the municipal officials and their preparations. It was the municipal officials that organized the activities; it was they who worked full time implementing decisions and preparing political, as well as open meetings and other activities. In this way they had a big influence on how much space citizens was allowed to take, and in what form citizens were allowed to express themselves. Even though politicians had the symbolic power, being elected representatives, the municipal officials had an advantage working full time preparing the municipal agenda. It was often easier and least time consuming for politicians to accept the proposals administrators had prepared on different issues. It also happened that municipal officials discussed among each other how they should present different issues in order to get the politicians to make the “right” decisions. This is of course problematic since the officials are not elected and held accountable to the same extent as politicians are.

Despite all this, it is my impression that some municipal officials and some politicians in Helsingborg had somewhat good intentions. In interviews it seemed that they really believed that the dialogues they organized could empower citizens and reinforce municipal representative democracy. There are also a few examples of neighbourhood associations that have been established, people joining political parties and citizens forming groups to promote a neighbourhood library or a recreational centre, as a consequence of the activities organized by the civic committees. But these examples are easily counted. My conclusion then is that citizens’ influence was strongly limited, mostly by the disinterest from the branch committees, but also by the filter, constituted by the politicians and municipal officials of the civic committee.

Were citizens able to change anything through their participation in the activities organized by the civic committees? The issue of implementation is important to consider in this context. Not least because if citizens are supposed to be continuously motivated to participate in deliberative practices, they most likely want to see an outcome of their engagement. Interviews with participants in Helsingborg underline this argument. However studying the design of the civic committees and the decision-making process, it becomes apparent that the municipality overlooked the implementation part of the deliberative process. There were no measures put in place to ensure that the outcomes of the citizen deliberations actually were implemented. For example the local development programs, that were one of the explicit tasks of the civic committees to produce, *should* guide the decision-making in the branch committees, but they didn't (See Benson Consulting, 2006). The local development programs were just another municipal plan that didn't prove to have any significant impact on the decision-making process. And this is serious, because if once disappointed by the municipality, it will be harder to engage citizens in the future. In this sense the practices in Helsingborg did not come close those in Porto Alegre, where the participants actually had decision-making power on what the city should spend its money on.

My conclusion is that a half-hearted try to produce deliberations will not be enough. The civic committees most often failed to attract a majority of the inhabitants in neighbourhoods targeted, and they failed to reach weaker groups in the municipality. One of the problems in Helsingborg was that the civic committees' originators and advocates never fully succeeded to convey their ideas to all the different sectors in the municipal organization, and get them on board. The civic committees were rather overlooked by others in the municipality. Different municipal meetings taking place, discussing and explaining the purpose of the civic committees and its working methods, underline this argument. In order to be successful, the committees would have needed to have a majority of the municipality's politicians and officials behind them, especially the significant and powerful ones, and they would have needed real and dedicated will from these actors. A more substantive attempt to produce deliberations would also entail having trained and independent facilitators and providing participants with information on issues prior to deliberations. A financial incentive could also be considered in order attract the participation of weaker groups in the society, as well as random sampling in order to reach representativeness, so that the outcomes could be useful.

Were the Civic Committees Really Deliberative?

With civic influence strongly limited in Helsingborg, it could be claimed that the practices of the civic committees were more like traditional public hearings or public opinion polls, but dressed up to appear to be deliberative. To conclude I will then compare the civic committees to a deliberative poll. Fishkin's deliberative polls constitute one of the most celebrated empirical examples of deliberative democracy. A deliberative poll studies what the electorate's opinion on a matter would be when they have extensive information on the matter, think it through and engage in deliberation with others (Fishkin, 1991). This is different from an ordinary opinion poll where unreflected and uninformed opinions are measured (*ibid*).

The deliberative activities organized by the civic committees have important differences from deliberative polls. First of all, in a deliberative poll the deliberation is designed around certain topics of which the participants are extensively informed (Fishkin, 1991; 1995). The activities in Helsingborg were to a certain degree more open for the participants to introduce issues they themselves find important. This openness gave these activities a more expressive character than those described by other deliberative theorists (He & Leib, 2006; Fishkin, 1995; Kanra, 2004; Niemeyer, 2004). This open and expressive character also gave prominence to everyday experiences and unreflected commentaries in the civic committees.

Second, in comparison with the civic committees, other deliberative experiments are not open to the general public, only to a selected few. Fishkin argues that in modern nation states it would be impossible to invite all affected by a decision to deliberate (1991). The civic committees operated on a neighborhood basis and one of its explicit aims was indeed to attract a majority in the neighborhood to their deliberations. In this sense the deliberative polls are more directly exclusive than the deliberations in the civic committees. On the other hand, the problem of lacking representativeness made it possible for politicians to disregard the outcomes of the activities when it didn't suit their purposes.

Thirdly the deliberations in the civic committees were organized and conducted within the state, not in the civil society. This may open up for a discussion where deliberative practices should take place and who should organize them. An interesting comparison would also be with He & Leib and the more authoritarian deliberative polls in China conducted in close cooperation with the Chinese Communist Party, CCP (2006). The advantage with deliberation in such an authoritarian setting is that the results are claimed to be implemented directly (*ibid*).

Last, but definitely an important difference to Fishkin's deliberative polls, is that the participants in the civic committees were not paid or compensated for their participation; citizens were expected to want to turn up in Helsingborg. This could be an answer to the question why mostly wealthier citizens did participate in the activities organized by the civic committees.

It is then legitimate to argue that the practices of the civic committees did not constitute an example of *true* deliberative democracy. Important to keep in mind here is that politicians' and municipal officials' interpretation and application of deliberative theory differ from the ideas of deliberative scholars and projects established by dedicated practitioners. Reading governmental and municipal documents and reports it seems to me that politicians and administrators have understood the concept of deliberation to only include talking with the citizens, not giving them any impact or influence. Striving for consensus, having well-trained and independent facilitators as well as providing a full range of information were not emphasized in Helsingborg. This led to unequal participation in the meetings organized by the civic committees. Power relations, embedded within the municipal organizational design, also made it very difficult for the committees to ensure the participants any real influence.

Conclusion

The perspective of late modernity articulates the problems parliamentary institutions are facing today. In late modernity it has become apparent that the liberal focus on self-interest and instrumental rationality is not efficient in motivating civic political participation within the framework of representative democracy. On the other hand, the deliberative understanding of the citizenry as inherently interested in talking to each other suggest that the great civic retreat that Boggs is discussing (2000) is not inevitable. The communicative rational assumption in deliberative democracy is thus appealing for a municipality trying to reorient the citizens back towards its representative institutions.

However, as the example with the civic committees in Helsingborg has shown, it is important to evaluate these different deliberative experiments to deliberative standards since politicians' and administrators' application of the ideal could be far from the original ideas. It is then possible that the deliberative turn within liberal representative democratic institutions is the same old-fashioned public hearings, but dressed up to appear deliberative. In Helsingborg the civic committee organization provided the citizens with a channel to express their opinions in relation to the municipality. But constraints within the municipal organization, the decision-making procedures and the lack of powerful and significant politicians and municipal officials in the civic committee organization, made citizens' influence in actual policy-making, very limited.

When interviewing politicians and municipal officials they made it clear that there is no way they would circumvent the power installed in the elected representatives. The elected politicians were the ones making the decisions, in the branch committees, away from the deliberating citizenry in the activities organized by the civic committees. The participants in Helsingborg were only

advisors to the politicians, not policy-makers together with the politicians. It then becomes questionable whether deliberative ideas could be fully implemented within a representative democratic institution such as the Municipality of Helsingborg. Dryzek argues along these lines, proposing that deliberation should take place within civil society (2000). However, as participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre has shown, there are examples of successful deliberative experiments within the framework of representative democracy.

The municipality's understanding of deliberative democracy needs to be further studied. Deliberation is a concept that has caught the attention of many politicians and administrators lately (see also Cornwall & Coelho, 2007). But as this article has shown, the attempt to implement deliberative ideals in Helsingborg did not come close to what theoreticians and practitioners would consider as true and stringent deliberative democracy. The question we have to ask then is whether the civic committees really were interested in creating true deliberative spaces for the citizens in Helsingborg from the beginning. Or was deliberation just another fancy concept that the politicians and administrators used without any substantive thought behind it? Further studies would imply in-depth interviews with the politicians and officials that were behind the municipal design in Helsingborg. Studies should also be undertaken on the citizens that participated in the activities organized by the civic committees. Why did they participate? Were they satisfied? Did they think that their engagement would have any effects on the actual policy-making?

References

- Bauman, Zygmunt (2001) *The Individualized Society*. Cambridge: Polity Press
- Beck, Ulrich (1995) *Att uppfinna det politiska; Bidrag till en teori om reflexiv modernisering* (To Invent the Political; Contribution to a Theory of Reflexive Modernization). Göteborg: Daidalos
- Becker, Ted & Ohlin, Thomas (2006) *The Improbable Dream: Measuring the Power of Internet Deliberations in Setting Public Agendas and Influencing Public Planning and Policies*. Published in Journal of Public Deliberation, volume 2, issue 1, article 2
- Bennett, Lance W. & Entman, Robert M. (2001) "The Big Spin: Communication and the Transformation of Pluralist Democracy", in Bennett, Lance W. & Entman, Robert M. (editors) *Mediated Politics: Communication in the Future of Democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Benson Consulting (2006) *Medborgarutskott. Arbete med tvärsektorieella frågor* (Civic Committees. Working With Issues Cutting Across Different Sectors). Malmö: Benson Consulting

- Bentivegna, Sara (2006) *Rethinking Politics in the World of ICTs*. Published in European Journal of Communication, volume 21(3), pages 295-309, London: Sage Publications
- Blichner, L. (2000) "The Anonymous Hand of Public Reason: Interparliamentary Discourse and the Quest for Legitimacy", in Eriksen, E. O. & Fossum, J. E. (editors) *Democracy in the European Union - Integration through Deliberation?* London: Routledge.
- Boggs, Carl (2000) *The End of Politics. Corporate Power and the Decline of the Public Sphere*. New York: Guilford Press
- Carter, April & Stokes Geoffrey (1998) "Introduction: Liberal Democracy and its Critics", in Carter, April & Stokes Geoffrey (editors) *Liberal Democracy and its Critics*. Cambridge: Polity Press
- Cornwall, Andrea & Coelho, Vera Shattan P. (2007) *Spaces for Change: The Politics of Citizen Participation in New Democratic Arenas*. London: Zed Books
- Crosby, Ned & Nethercut, Doug (2005) "Citizen Juries: Creating a Trustworthy Voice of the People", in Gastil, John & Levine, Peter (editors) *The Deliberative Democracy Handbook. Strategies for Effective Civic Engagement in the 21st Century*. San Fransisco: Jossey – Bass
- Dahlgren, Peter (2001) "The public sphere and the net: structure, space and communication", in Bennet, Lance W. & Entman, Robert M. (editorss) *Mediated Politics: Communication in the Future of Democracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University press
- . (2006) "Civic Identity and Net activism: the Frame of Radical Democracy", in L. Dahlberg and E Siapera (editors) *Radical Democracy and the Internet*. London: Palgrave MacMillan
- Djörke, Bo et al. (2006) *Med- eller Motborgare? Nåt jävla inflytande ska man väl ha i en demokrati* (Citizens or Denizens? You Are Supposed to Have Some Bloody Influence in a Democracy). Sundsvall: Offentliga Rummet
- Downs, Anthony (1957) *An Economic Theory of Democracy*. New York: Harper & Row
- Dryzek, John S. (2000) *Deliberative Democracy and Beyond; Liberals, Critics, Contestations*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Engelstad, Fredrik (2006) *Vad är Makt?* (What is Power?). Stockholm: Natur och Kultur
- Fishkin, James S. (1991) *Democracy and Deliberation: New Directions for Democratic Reform*. New Haven: Yale University Press
- . (1995) *The Voice of the People; Public Opinion and Democracy*. New Haven: Yale University Press
- Fishkin, James S. & Farrar, Cynthia (2005) "Deliberative Polling: From Experiment to Community Resource", in Gastil, John & Levine, Peter (editors) *The Deliberative Democracy Handbook. Strategies for*

- Effective Civic Engagement in the 21st Century*. San Fransisco: Jossey
– Bass
- Forst, Rainer (2001) *The Rule of Reasons. Three Models of Deliberative Democracy*. Ratio Juris, volume 14, issue 4, December 2001, pages 345-378
- Friedman, Will (2006) *Deliberative Democracy and the Problem of Scope*. Published in Journal of Public Deliberation, volume 2, issue 1, article 1, <http://services.bepress.com/jpd/vol2/iss1/art1>
- Fukuyama, Francis (1992) *The End of History and the Last Man*. New York: Maxwell Macmillan International
- Gastil, John & Levine, Peter (2005) *The Deliberative Democracy Handbook. Strategies for Effective Civic Engagement in the 21st Century*. San Fransisco: Jossey - Bass
- Giddens, Anthony (1991) *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Cambridge: Polity Press
- Government bill 2001/02:80 (2001) *Demokrati för det nya seklet* (Democracy for the New Century). Stockholm: Fritzes
- Government letter 2003/04:110 (2003) *Demokratipolitik* (Democracy Politics). Stockholm: Riksdagstryck
- van Gunsteren, Herman R. (1998) *A Theory of Citizenship: Organizing Plurality in Contemporary Democracies*. Oxford: Westview Press
- Habermas, Jurgen (1984) *The Theory of Communicative Action I: Reason and the Rationalization of Society*. Boston: Beacon Press
- . (1996) *Kommunikativt handlande; Texter om språk rationalitet och samhälle* (Communicative Action: Texts about Language, Rationality and Society). 2nd Edition, Göteborg: Daidalos
- He, Baogang & Leib, Ethan (2006) *The Search for the Deliberative Democracy in China*. New York: Palgrave
- Hendriks, Carolyn M (2005) "Consensus Conferences and Planning Cells: Lay Citizen Deliberations", in Gastil, John & Levine, Peter (editors) *The Deliberative Democracy Handbook. Strategies for Effective Civic Engagement in the 21st Century*. San Fransisco: Jossey - Bass
- Hermes, Joke (2006) *Citizenship in the Age of the Internet*. Published in European Journal of Communication, volume 21(3), pages 295-309, London: Sage Publications
- Hindess, Barry (1988) *Choice, Rationality and Social Theory*. London: Unwin Hyman
- Jodal, Ola (2003) "Fem frågetecken för den deliberativa teorin" (Five Question Marks for the Deliberative Theory), in Gilljam M. & Hermansson J. (editors) *Demokratins mekanismer* (The Mechanisms of Democracy). Malmö: Liber

- Kanra, Bora (2004) *Deliberating Across Difference: Bringing Social Learning into the Theory and Practice of Deliberative Democracy in the case of Turkey*. Thesis (PhD), Australian National University
- Mansbridge, Jane & Hartz-Karp, Janette & Amengual, Matthew & Gastil, John (2006) *Norms of Deliberation: An Inductive Study*. Published in *Journal of Public Deliberation*, volume 2, issue 1, article 7, <http://services.bepress.com/jpd/vol2/iss1/art7>
- Montin, Stig (2002) *Moderna kommuner* (Modern Municipalities). Malmö: Liber
- Mueller, Dennis (1989) "Democracy: The public Choice Approach", in Brennan, Geoffrey & Lomasky Loren E (editors) *Politics and Process: New Essays in Democratic Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Muhlberger, Peter (2006) *Lessons from the Virtual Agora project: The Effects of Agency, Identity, Information, and Deliberation on Political Knowledge*. Published in *Journal of Public Deliberation*, volume 2, issue 1, article 13, <http://services.bepress.com/jpd/vol2/iss1/art13>
- Niemeyer, Simon (2004) *Deliberation in the Wilderness: Displacing Symbolic Politics*. Published in *Environmental Politics*, volume 13, issue 2, summer 2004, pages 347 - 372
- Olson, Mancur jr (1965) *The Logic of Collective Action; Public Goods and the Theory of Groups*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press
- Olsson, Anders R. (2006) "När medborgarna tystnar" (When the Citizens Become Silent), in Djörke et al (editors) *Med- eller Motborgare? Nåt jävla inflytande ska man väl ha i en demokrati* (Citizens or Denizens? You Are Supposed to Have Some Bloody Influence in a Democracy). pages 67-79, Sundsvall: Offentliga Rummet
- Peterson, Olof et al. (1989) *Medborgarnas Makt* (The Power of Citizens). Stockholm: Carlsson Bokförlag
- Schuck, Peter H. (2002) "Liberal Citizenship", in Isin, E. F. & Turner, B. S. (editors) *Handbook of Citizenship Studies*. Chapter 8, pages 132-144, London: Sage Publications
- Stadsrevisionens rapport (The municipal auditors report) 04:19R (2005) *Granskning av medborgarutskotten i Helsingborg stad* (Examining the Civic Committees in Helsingborg) Helsingborg: Revisionsrapport den 16 februari 2005
- Sokoloff, Harris & Steinberg, Harris M. & Pyser, Steven N. (2005) "Deliberative City Planning on the Philadelphia Waterfront", in Gastil, John & Levine, Peter (editors) *The Deliberative Democracy Handbook. Strategies for Effective Civic Engagement in the 21st Century*. San Francisco: Jossey – Bass
- SOU (The Swedish State Official Report Series) (2000:1) *En uthållig demokrati! Politik för folkstyrelse på 2000-talet* (A Persistent Democracy!)

- Politics for Democracy in the 21st Century). Demokratiutredningen (The Democracy Report), Stockholm: Fritzes
- . (2001: 48) *Att vara med på riktigt. Demokratiutveckling i kommuner och landsting* (To Really Participate. Democratic Development in Municipalities and County Councils). Stockholm: Fritzes
- Stokes, Geoffrey (2005) *Critical Theories of Deliberative Democracy and the Problem of Citizenship*. Paper delivered to the Institute for Citizenship and Globalisation Seminar, 4 October 2005, Deakin University, Burwood, Australia
- The Strategy Document (2003) *Medborgarutskott för demokrati och delaktighet* (Civic Committees for Democracy and Participation).
<http://www.helsingborg.se/medborgarutskott/Utskott.pdf>
2004-03-26
- Vera-Zavala, America (2003) *Democracy in the Era of Globalisation. Power and Counter-Power with Special Reference to Participatory Budgeting in Porto Alegre*. Uppsala University: Department of Economic History. MFS-reports 2003:1