

*Habermas's discourse principle between political theory and experimental studies
about collective reasoning*

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Abstract

Habermas believes that the foundation of democracy is to be found in the “discourse principle”. According to this principle, the only valid decisions and laws are those approved by citizens through their participation in rational discourses. Democracy should therefore be considered as a discursive process with specific rules, based on the exchange of opinions and aimed at defining a framework of legitimate laws, through which citizens may feel free and equal.

However, the Habermasian model shows also some ambiguity, or internal tensions, about the discourse principle and its practical use, i.e. about theory and practice. On the one hand the democratic community, since its legitimacy is founded on dialogic procedures, is based on the premise that the participants in the discourse work hard to find the best solutions together. On the other hand, the democratic process allows citizens to misuse irrationally their right to communicate.

Modern cognitive and experimental sciences, especially recent studies about collective reasoning, introduce new scientifically based arguments, which may shed light on the features of Habermas's theory.

On the basis of the studies about collective reasoning, we will try to answer a series of questions. Is a practical use of the discourse principle possible for people? To what extent does the discourse principle remain in the ideal sphere or is put into practice? Can the dialogic procedure really lead to an improvement of democracy's performances? In other words, we will try to understand to what extent Habermas's democracy model highlights the dialogic value of democracy, without this model being impossible to achieve and detached from individuals' cognitive features. Indeed, if the cognitive dimension of the human being is not taken into account, the political theory risks to be inadequate and incomplete.

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