A Defense of Cooperative Cognition

Abstract: This article explores the extent to which our deliberative culture determines our capacity to recognize relevant knowledge, to select and value epistemic authority, or to recognize the importance of individual and/or collective epistemic achievements in a deliberative context. This investigation is especially relevant in a moment in which the formation of public opinion no longer depends exclusively on political parties. This leads to a paradoxical situation in which the diffuse energy issued by the electorate is not easily subjected to the discipline of party-oriented proposals or by media disputes that, despite their projection, may be ignored by many people. Thus, it is unclear in which sense social networks act as an alternative to the traditional system of intermediation set up by trade unions and pressure groups. By combining the approaches of deliberative democracy and social cognition theories, this essay sustains the relevance of what is defined here as ‘cooperative cognition’ in order to face this challenge.

Introduction

The thematic field of politics (or, at least, its perception) has grown considerably in recent years, and this trend is not expected to decline. This socio-political phenomenon poses a challenge to public institutions at different levels of government (i.e. local, national and supranational or global). In the public space, perception vis-a-vis institutions’ legitimacy depends on the value deriving from their effective capacity for mediation (Innerarity 2006). When the thematic field of politics is enlarged and, at the same time, vehiculated in an accelerated manner, the following phenomena occur: (i) difficulty in channelling not only all the information but, above all, the demand for it; (ii) difficulty in determining who are the agents responsible for taking decisions; and (iii) increasing complexity in actual levels of government and, consequently, of decision-taking. To these, we may add another, no less important phenomenon: namely, greater opportunity and motivation to participate in public life. There is a causal explanation for this increase experienced by numerous collectives, both in opportunity and motivation to participate, which can be found in the theoretical framework of the
research conducted by Putnam (1993) on civic traditions in modern Italy. The concept of ‘social capital’ is generally accepted as an explanatory factor of the potential for development in a society and in a nation. Furthermore, society perceives the experience of participation as an instrument for orienting the benefits (symbolic or otherwise) deriving from the existence and operation of networks, bonds of confidence, and underlying social norms.

Despite the absence of a theory on risk of participation, the theoretical framework referred to above allows us to establish that the feasibility of a participative experience goes—necessarily—hand in hand with a situation of inequality: inequality of access to information, and inequality in the sharing of capabilities for processing not only such information, but also the diagnoses that stem from it; inequality in the personal, collective and group resources acquired during the associative and participative action itself; inequality that, essentially, likewise affects representability in political themes, as well as the theoretical articulation of demands and even the social profile of the groups expressing diagnoses and demands. Unequal representation derives from the fact that, in every participatory experience, people and groups appoint themselves as agents for collective actions. Because of this, the social function that can rightfully be attributed to participation (understood as an instrument for increasing the social capital of collectives) ultimately causes friction with the principle of representativeness. Even in cases where this can be understood as an expression of the collective need to increase the social capital, mere participation fails to guarantee public representativeness of political diagnoses or their frameworks.

‘Frame alignment’ is an example of a means to detect the existence of participative bias and to demonstrate the difficulty involved in identifying and building authoritative voices in the public space. Some political scientists (Snow et al. 1986) use the expression ‘frame alignment’ to refer to the socio-political phenomenon by means of which social movements develop as series of complex mechanisms that allow a progressive number of followers to adopt the aims of an organized collective or, in more general terms, of an organisation. Frame alignment exemplifies how, as they unfold within a society, participation processes give rise to hybrid new forms of participation, to solve legitimacy problems that derive from the challenge of representativeness. Today, professionals, groups and sectors from a broad range of society types form part of a frame alignment phenomenon whose immediate political action is herein linked to the enlargement of the thematic field of politics. This transnational political phenomenon draws our attention to the need to analyse and propose cooperative rationality models to solve the normative and practical problems of modern societies. In my defence of a cooperative cognition model and its rationality, I will focus on the following questions: (1) what kind of leadership is compatible with
the mentioned proposal; (2) what does social cognition means and why does it matter; and (3) in what sense is deliberation a specific kind of cooperative cognition?

**Types of leadership**

Analysts of deliberative behavior, aiming to measure and automate deliberative communication in order to programme and design platforms adapted to these communicative ends, usually establish three levels in defining deliberation. The first is the macro-level, in which deliberation is linked to deliberative democracy, a type of democracy in which collective decision-making is based to a large extent on a consensus-oriented discourse and on argumentative discourse rather than on the rule of majority. At the second or meso-level, we find specific types of deliberative forum (e.g. public addresses, round tables, citizens’ conferences or consensus conferences). Deliberative forums of this nature are created to make a decision on the adoption of a collective norm or the resolution of a local conflict. The third or micro-level describes a form of political communication that, for instance, is opposed to the various modes of rhetoric and strategic communication, and is present at parliamentary forums, political speeches and, to some extent, at certain moments during political negotiation processes. These three levels can be distinguished thanks to the assumption of (i) regulatory attributes of the institutional environment, (ii) interpersonal communications and (iii) the presence of individual deliberative behavior.

Deliberation is not only a form of political communication, but also the expression of a regulated form of communication on issues of public interest, implying a form of epistemic organization of the spaces for intermediation between civil society and the governmental structures generally identified with the State. If deliberative democracy can be understood as a specific model of democracy, then we must consider that certain initial epistemic assumptions exert an influence on the environment of deliberation. What are these presuppositions and what are the grounds for their legitimacy? Why is deliberative democracy a form of epistemic organization of socio-political environments? Deliberation is a political communication model open to analysis from an epistemic point of view because it is a space for the organization of subjects of knowledge, in which to examine truly epistemic aspects (e.g. epistemic virtues pertaining to the environment, epistemic values that strengthen and regulate this communicative practice, or epistemic and heuristic biases that, in certain spheres, may weaken the epistemic values and virtues of deliberation).
An image that conveys this position is found in the distinction commonly made in political science between three types of leadership: foundational leadership, moral leadership and creative leadership (Barber 1984, 1988). This image may seem somewhat paradoxical—after all, the capacity for leadership is usually attributed firstly to individuals, and, on counted occasions, to groups and human collectives.

The deliberative model exerts creative leadership in that it applies the principle of encouraging and reinforcing the will, the skills and the deliberative behavior of citizens in order to prevent them from seeing themselves as mere spectators of the capabilities displayed by those in governing roles. Creative leadership in the deliberative democracy model is embodied by the set of epistemic rules, principles and values used to design the political game in which the players are engaged. To a certain extent, we can say that leadership, in this scenario, is not only creative but foundational, too. Nevertheless, it can also be stated that it is creative, strictly speaking, given that it fixes its quasi-therapeutic attention on the citizenry, enhancing the latter’s civic commitment to the task of examining proposals, weighing the epistemic authority of proposers, opponents and proposals, and, finally, pondering the decisions to be taken.

In contrast to the foundational and creative leadership associated herein with the deliberative democracy model, moral leadership describes the skills of those advocating a specific awareness of the responsibility taken over any issue, but (seemingly) without becoming involved in the mobilizations and claims of a given proposal. Generally speaking, the people or collectives exercising this type of leadership inspire and encourage mobilizations by imbuing citizens’ social and political perception with a moralizing endeavor. Just as deliberative democracy is a vehicle for creative leadership, so is radical democracy for moral leadership. For instance, in the proposal put forward by Chantal Mouffe (1993), both the idea of rational consensus and the idea that there is a substantive good on which to found a community display traits of moral leadership. According to this model, the antagonistic character of the political is irreconcilable with the idea that pre-constitutive individual identities and collective identities may exist.

In accordance with Mouffe’s model of radical democracy, the identification and presentation of preferences is exogenous, or stemming from origins that are external to deliberative practice. This is not the case in the deliberative model, which is grounded, precisely, in a process—namely deliberation, oriented toward the identification and readjustment of preferences in an endogenous manner, which means that adjustments and/or readjustments originate in the interior of the deliberative process. Mouffe uses the dyad ‘friend/foe’ (Schmitt 1932) to evoke the impossibility of eliminating the antagonism between ‘we’ and ‘they’. 
in construction processes of political identity. In fact, her proposal implies that ‘affective dimensions’ act as a detonator for collective political identities. Individual, group and/or collective identification alike are constituted through the intervention of certain ‘political rivalry emotions’ stemming from a (radical) sense of belonging to antagonistic social and economic classes. One weakness that can be observed in Mouffe’s approach is that it does not consider the possible impact of the dynamism of beliefs, or the processes by which preferences are adjusted and calibrated, on her model of radical democracy. Her model provides information regarding the causal relationship existing between the discovery of an agonic identity (e.g. that of each among one’s own and opposed to that of the others) and its mobilizing effect. Hers is a model that does not accommodate spaces for the formation of preferences, but rather spaces for confrontation understood as vehicles of polarization and politicization, driven by the perception that the dominant group, i.e. the elites, is identified with non-convergent antagonistic preferences.

Democracy is told in many ways, and although the radical or radicalized representative democracy model can be seen—as I propose herein—as a paradigmatic example of moral leadership, it nevertheless presents a clear deficit in creative leadership. We may indeed ask, for instance, to what extent this model of radical democracy encourages a political culture favorable to the emergence of ‘vigilant societies’, an expression that describes the civil society of democracies such as those of Denmark or Norway, in which people display a higher degree of intolerance toward political practices that deviate from their function. Nevertheless, one of Mouffe’s many merits is that she allows us to establish a relationship between the antagonism with which each citizen experiences their individual and collective (political) identity, and their predisposition for protest, denouncement and social vigilance. Experiencing this antagonistic effect is dependent on individuals’ opportunity to identify the traits of their social and political identity when participating in collective vindication processes.

Opportunities and challenges in a deliberative democracy

Bearing in mind the many variables in the crisis currently affecting democratic institutions, it would seem only fair to recognize the value of moral leadership in this definition of democracy. However, moral leadership is not enough to build a political culture tied to a deliberative democracy model. This model does not share the deliberative notion of the shaping function of personal and
in institutional identity exercised by political culture. Such a scenario, in which radical and deliberative democracy are counterposed—subject to nuances, no doubt—may serve to lead us to the epistemic dimensions of a deliberative model of democracy.

Some of the factors involved in the epistemic dimension of deliberation are not only factors but also the materials necessary to secure the epistemic organization of democracy. According to the cognitivist thesis shared by most theorists, deliberation causes (1) problems in the statutes of individual preferences and opinions, (2) rationalizes preferences and (3) filters them. “Every successful deliberation impacts on individual opinions and preferences, significantly transforming them or providing an incentive for their deeper justification, and this epistemic character contributes to the very legitimacy of democracy”.

Research on the epistemic dimension of democracy may be regarded as an extension of traditional epistemology. Generally, it can be stated that the objects of such research are the doxastic decision processes in the case of institutional agents, processes and environments. Furthermore, it is initially assumed that, as pointed out by Broncano, the demos becomes something greater than a ‘mass’ when it recognizes itself as a ‘distribution’ of voices and capacities, and consequently, when it establishes a principle according to which citizens—on the strength of their citizenship—acknowledge each other’s authority (Broncano 2003, 2008). Citizens’ epistemic capacities are apportioned, but these capacities cannot be assessed independently of the environments produced by the (fallible) design of educational, political, economic or other institutions. It is therefore in social epistemology that we find the best arguments to understand the relationship between epistemology and democracy.

The existence of epistemic capacities, and of institutional environments associated with their configuration and confirmation, implies that these capacities present a public dimension when deployed in deliberative processes. The capacities to (1) formulate questions genuinely aimed toward safeguarding or representing public interests, to (2) make proper use of cultural resources, or to (3) make use of cognitive skills in order to articulate and defend claims in a persuasive manner, are samples of the many aspects open to research from the point of view of social epistemology.

How should we define intersubjective correction criteria that are not based solely on the (proper) use of argumentative ways of thinking? How should we distinguish beliefs from personal preferences when engaged in deliberation? Are the phases in deliberation effective to ensure the correct adjustment for beliefs? Does deliberation suffice to detect logical errors and to make use of intellectual virtues? In light of these and other questions, many authors query whether this model does not impose heavy restrictions and demands, as it involves
assuming as valid that its citizens possess sophisticated cognitive capabilities and are endowed with the necessary skills and criteria to make advantageous use of them. It would be interesting to verify whether this is the case, by assuming at the outset a certain epistemic paternalism with an analytical perspective. However, it is also reasonable to state that deliberative inequity is related not to the absence of a capability, but rather to the manner in which it is distributed—that is, with the institutional design that should guarantee the equilibrium between, on the one hand, the relational dimension (i.e. the social and democratic dimension of deliberation) and the logical and dialectic dimension associated with the consistent use of practical reasoning and argumentative lines of thinking. Furthermore, deliberative inequity is also related to the ignorance of reason shown in accessing the truth in beliefs; for instance, when giving justification for beliefs exclusively on the grounds of the reasons for holding that something is true, or to display sufficient skills as argumentative agents when making use of practical reasoning.

**Deliberative and epistemic inequities**

One of the greatest difficulties consists in failing to detect deliberative inequities promoted by institutional designs that inhibit the capacity to recognize the epistemic merits of proponents and opponents in a deliberation. Murguía Lores (2014, 2016) recalls, for example, the thesis of Smith and Semin (2007), according to which human cognitive systems produce situated versions of concepts, because said versions have specific functions within each context. If this is the case, then to what extent will the influence of our deliberative culture determine our capacity to recognize the relevant knowledge in a deliberative context, to select and value epistemic authority, or to recognize the importance of individual and/or collective epistemic achievements?

Bearing in mind the analyses performed by certain political scientists (Fricker 2007; Byung-Chul Han 2014; Subirats / Vallespín 2014; Ausín 2014), we can affirm that the crisis areas our political culture is crossing are related to eminently epistemic spaces, functions and dimensions of democracy. It is fundamental that we acknowledge this fact, if we accept the theoretical position in which the recognition of epistemic merits and achievements occurs in a situated manner—for example, within specific deliberative environments threatened by crises of all kinds. We can distinguish at least three major crisis areas: (A) the area comprising mediation mechanisms; (B) the communications area; and (C) the area of representation. These affect the following:
A) a crisis in the mechanisms for mediation between society and politics, which can be appreciated in the representation crises of political parties (which appear to represent themselves);

B) a crisis in the sphere of traditional communication that does not monopolize the traditional communication channels, but is shared by the new virtual community in the new debating scenarios (e.g. blogs, social networks); and

C) the difficulty to articulate a party model that satisfies the functions all parties need to fulfill (i.e. relative aperture and closure to gain identity, and to act as a stable, predictable political agent forming an institutional identity).

### Social cognition

The term ‘social cognition’ is used in human and social sciences to refer to theories, categories and principles that explain and interpret issues relating to human beings’ knowledge of the social world. It also refers to a complex of epistemic and neuropsychological processes that are deployed by human beings in the acquisition, processing and institutionalization of knowledge and information in social contexts. While we generally use ‘cognition’ to refer to learning and processing information in an individual and autonomous manner, the social perspective of cognition is based on the assumption that the nature and evolution of the processes of reasoning, memorizing, perception, learning, judgment, etc. are configured collectively, i.e. through personal interaction, and as a consequence of our exposure to the problem of extracting meaning from the behavior of other human beings.

The distinction between individual and social cognition lies in the fact that, in the latter, prototypically collective processes intervene (e.g. interaction, communication, social reasoning and inference, social categorization, adoption of perspectives and interpretations, causal attribution, and also the natural disposition of human beings to relate to each other and communicate among themselves their history). The convergence of all these factors renders social cognition an area of research in which such different disciplines as social psychology, evolutionary psychology, social epistemology, sociology of institutions, philosophy of the mind, evolutionary anthropology, social ontology and neuropsychology necessarily concur.

The field of research concerned with the study of social cognition has developed over the last 30 years (Higgins / Bargh 1987; Schneider 1991; Higgins 2000; Fiske et al. 2007; Nichols 2004). There is a degree of consensus regarding certain important assumptions shared by specialists; for example, that according to one such assumption, social cognition is presented as an activity that allows people
to understand other human beings and to interact successfully. We can say that
denial of this presupposition is only partial, and only expressed by those who
consider that social cognition, rather than an activity or an action, constitutes
a methodological perspective whose aim is to study social interaction (Ostrom
1994).

If this is taken as a methodological orientation of social psychology, the aim
is to measure and analyze situated social cognition, i.e. perceptions, judgments
and memories. It is also worth noting that some authors consider that there is
consensus over the two questions central to the debate on social cognition
(Fiske / Marcrae 2012). The first of these is how to establish a distinction between
social and non-social knowledge; the second is whether there is any aspect or
element of cognition that can be presented as fundamental to the acquisition
and configuration of social knowledge. When examining these questions,
some authors consider that action is precisely the determining factor in the re-
sponse to both questions, and that there are two reasons for this: because action
is a property that we assume as exclusive to social cognition agents, to the exclusion
of non-social objects; and because action expresses the dynamism and reciprocity
generated between the person and the social environment (Ostrom 1984;
Marsh / Richardson / Schmidt 2009).

One of the distinctive features of human cognition is the dynamic participa-
tion in collaborative activities that help the human race to develop a shared inten-
tionality in pursuing objectives in a collective manner. To participate in this
kind of collaborative activity, it is necessary (i) to gain the capacity to guess
the intentions of other members of the species; (ii) to have sufficient prior moti-
vation to share mental states; and (iii) to develop and recognize ways of repre-
senting cognition. As a result, one of the human race’s distinguishing features
is a radically cultural dimension of cognition, which is manifested through the
creation and use of linguistic symbols and material artifacts, the construction
and definition of social rules, and the establishment of social institutions (Tom-

A majority of authors find that there is sufficient empirical evidence to affirm
that the capacity to read others’ intentions and sociocultural cognition go hand
in hand. For example, both in the sphere of social psychology and in psychology
and evolutionary anthropology, mention is made of the use of linguistic symbols
in infancy that the child must necessarily understand, engaging with other peo-
ple as agents of their intention, as well as paying attention to entities that exist
in the social world. However, although social cognition specialists maintain the
thesis that an inextricable relationship exists between humans’ capacity for
reading others’ minds and cultural cognition, it is currently assumed that under-
standing intentional action in other agents can neither be presented as the sole fea-
ture of cultural cognition nor be considered enough to produce skills of cultural cognition. Instead, the research hypothesis that only human beings are biologically adapted to participate in collaborative activities involving shared objectives, socially coordinated plans of action (‘we-intentionality’) and dialogic forms of cognitive representation, seems more feasible (Tomasello et al. 2005, p. 676).

The above argument is linked to the idea that social phenomena cannot be reduced to the sum of the wills of individuals. The element of individual intentionality is not sufficient to explain phenomena such as the existence of rules and social conventions, or the social cognition hypothesis itself. Rather, the reverse seems to be true. We find that complex social structures allow human beings to reason and act in collective scenarios. In such scenarios, intentionality is expressed and structured in a collective manner, and is closely related to representations and interpretations of the world. Consequently, social cognition is not merely a social phenomenon, but is also related to the social expression of other phenomena.

Of these, one of the most outstanding has been named by John Searle ‘institutional fact(s)’. Searle claims that social reality is made up not only of raw facts, i.e. facts constituted solely by physical bodies, but of complex institutional facts, for the recognition and determination of which the following constitutive rule must be applied: ‘Given a raw fact $P$, let us say that $P$ counts as $Q$ in the context $C$.’ A commonly used example is money, that can be identified, let us say, with the raw fact associated with the exclusively physical properties of the paper that bank notes are made of. Applying the constitutive rule proposed by Searle, we can state that although $P$ is equivalent to the raw fact associated with money, when the raw fact $P$ occurs in the context $C$ (equivalent, for example, to the USA Federal Reserve that issues the currency), it is counted as $Q$ because, in that case, it represents money as a store of value. Therefore, a social environment or context exists in which certain raw facts may count as institutional facts, i.e. facts that are ontologically subjective.

Ontologically subjective facts determine and exhibit a collective dimension both in intentionality and in cognition. It can likewise be said that as these are facts whose objectivity, value, consistency, adequacy, etc. can be contextualized and evaluated by human collectives, both institutional facts and the cognitive contexts or environments to which they are associated (and from which they emerge) have a social dimension, and can be addressed from an epistemic point of view.

Considering the latter, some authors argue that social cognition in a narrow sense must be distinguished from its broad sense. Social cognition in a narrow sense is required to understand the attitudes and intentions of a person in every
specific context. In a broad sense, however, social cognition is that which takes place when we need to understand the intention shared by the members of social groups that in each case constitute determined institutional contexts (Fiebich 2014). These distinctions reinforce one of the fundamental theses in the contemporary development of cognitive science: that intelligent behavior depends on people’s cognitive systems to manipulate, transform and produce information when they develop in the social environment. Despite all this evidence, it can be said that all of us are immersed in social environments in which emblematic models of cooperative rationality are faced with institutional designs that not only do not favor, but also impede cooperation. Nevertheless, there is enough political and social evidence to think that there may be a clear opportunity in the future for the emergence of cooperative cognition.

Cooperative cognition

Political parties are ruled by the imperative for organization, but the formation of public opinion is no longer dependent exclusively on them. The diffuse energy issued by the electorate is not easily subjected to the discipline of party-oriented proposals, or of media disputes that, despite their projection, may be ignored by many people. Social networks have become a new public space emancipated from traditional communication media and from the channels open between citizens and those in government. However, it is unclear in which sense social networks act as an alternative to the traditional system of intermediation set up by trade unions and pressure groups. It is early to offer a diagnosis or assessment of the place that social networks will occupy in democratic practice. Nevertheless, despite the difficulties experienced today in establishing favorable forecasts, different authors have concluded that the communicative practices within social networks imply a type of presence that is perhaps excessively chaotic, because it:

- offers a fragmented public in disorganized public spheres;
- favors dispersion and rivalry in a great number of chat-rooms;
- foments centrifugal attitudes, through the absence of filters to screen reliable information;
- works by reaction, and is liable to be reactionary as it encourages currents of praise/criticism;
- produces ‘clusters’ that fail to conform to a ‘we’; and
- hinders the cohesion and unification necessary for preferences and proposals to reach the political system.
Facing these challenges, the stance of some authors (e.g. Subirats / Vallespín 2014) is clear, and forebodes that the media have not yet been ousted from their function as intermediaries of political information. This would explain how, today, they continue to ‘seek and break news’. Will the media promote the rehabilitation of political culture and its new operativeness? For Subirats and Vallespín, the answer to this question may be the affirmative—but to achieve this, it is necessary to devise an alternative action plan, applied especially to what I have called ‘ABC crisis areas’ and whose basic program items can be summed up as follows:

A) to increase traffic on networks whose line of political information is more informative and expressive than deliberative;
B) which might lead to a revival of traditional communication media, given the need to screen this higher level of noise by means of a return to the division of tasks; and
C) which might also lead to the appearance of alternatives to Facebook and Twitter that promote other forms of communicative intermediation at present unimagined, and consequently, the reinvention of the press and other aspects regarding communicability and expressiveness in political representation.

Nevertheless, to wield strategic competence on such a complex stage, it is necessary to re-state the aim of politics, that is, on what its rationality depends. For Innerarity (2011), it is necessary to set in motion forms of ‘cognitive cooperation’ to “optimally combine heterogeneous forms of functional logic, governance structures and knowledge resources to promote collective learning processes”. Underlying this notion of politics is a model of rationality that springs from the diagnosis and prognosis of opportunities and failures in a ‘democracy of knowledge’. We could call this model ‘cooperative rationality’. According to this model, one of the factors of configuring the space for opportunities and limitations in any democracy is that societies “must develop certain concepts of democracy itself” (Innerarity 2011, p. 100). However, it is impossible to put into practice such an objective in any manner but a cooperative one, through collective learning processes and self-observation that must be reflected in permanent advisory processes:

If there is a demand to our societies, it is the need to modify the rules governing collective learning and to programatically raise their mechanisms for self-observation and their capacity for learning. There is a need to institutionalise greater reflexiveness through structures and procedures. Learning takes place under conditions of great uncertainty, which is a difficult task not exempt from controversies. The deliberative theory of democracy points precisely in this direction, in the awareness that, faced with these collective chal-
lenges, the political discussion process must generate knowledge and not only tactics. (Innerarity 2011, p. 102)

Thus far, we have seen that deliberation is an appropriate environment for the deployment of a model of cooperative rationality with which to enlarge the field of social and political opportunities for citizens. However, to follow this model of cooperative rationality, in which ideas of collective learning and of advice in a democracy of knowledge find inspiration, it is first necessary to overcome quite a few ‘cognitive complications’ (Rescher 2015), such as those relative to the standards of suitability and effectiveness that can be established by applying heuristics to social cognition processes.

Bibliography


