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SYMPOSIUM/9

LUIGI BOBBIO

A Mentor Between Fieldwork and Public Action

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Much of the activity conducted by Luigi Bobbio over the last 25 years of his life arose from his profound dissatisfaction with the way public choices are usually formulated (and then implemented) and in part also from a certain intolerance towards the analytical categories through which analysts interpret the dynamics of policy making.

His dissatisfaction arose in particular from the awareness, substantiated by various studies (Simon 1947, 1983; Festinger 1957; Twersky and Kahneman 1974; Tajfel 1978, 1981; Tajfel and Turner 1981; Gigerenzer and Goldstein 1996), of the fact that most policy makers enter into decisional processes with a completely counterproductive attitude: the conviction of knowing all there is to know about the problem and of already having the solution. This perception induces individuals to act in a decisional process as in a zero-sum game, in which they attempt to make their own views and their own positions prevail, through power resources, and thus avoid questioning them. The dimension of the collective investigation a la Dewey (1938) almost disappears from this horizon. Luigi

shared the idea, with other scholars, that this attitude of defending one's own consolidated beliefs and preconceived position was the ultimate cause of a typical derive of policy-making processes: on one hand, the imposition of choices from public institutions, and on the other, the rigid opposition by those excluded from or against such choices, with the consequent radicalisation of the conflict (which, on occasion, has resulted in physical violence) and, finally, decision-making deadlock (Tilly and Tarrow 2007).

The conflicts created by those public policies that have an important territorial, environmental or social impact, and which Luigi Bobbio began deal with, together with some colleagues, from the nineties onwards (Bobbio 1991, 1994; Bobbio and Zeppetella 1999; Allasino, Bobbio and Neri 2000), without doubt represented a privileged venue to investigate his convictions in more depth and to attempt to reason about innovative modalities that could challenge the partial and partisan perceptions of policy makers, in part demolishing the cycle of radicalisation and avoiding or overcoming decision-making deadlock. These conflicts were in fact explosive and dramatic, but at the same time the coalitions that confronted each other were in many ways unprecedented, and therefore were not a re-proposition of the capital-labour conflict, on which, in the good and evil, the twentieth century political systems were structured. New dualisms emerged, within which the political parties, the interests and the institutions were divided. As time passed, Luigi's interest expanded to include other issues, that is, in general, everything on which the classical decisional processes tended to lead to situations of impasse, from institutional reform to ethical questions (Bobbio and Pomatto 2007). In short, he was above all interested in conflicts that created disorientation and confusion and which, because of their novelty, were worth the experimentation of alternative decisional modalities.

As has also emerged from the essay "Neither Thoroughly Political nor Thoroughly Unpolitical: the Third Way of deliberative Arenas", deliberative processes, which at that time had timidly begun to attract the attention of Italian social scientists, represented, for Luigi, an intriguing response to the inadequacy of decisional processes. According to him, deliberative processes were not a panacea. They deserved to be observed with a certain dose of genuine optimism, but also deserved to be analysed carefully and understood through rigorous theoretical categories and scrupulous empirical investigations. It was in fact through his activity, which straddled theoretical and empirical research, that Luigi, over the years, and together with others, contributed to construct what is now known about deliberation and about ad hoc deliberative devices applied to real contexts. And it was in light of this several decade-long experience that he decided to intervene in the debate on the presumed de-politicising effect of public deliberation, again not so much with the intention of convincing others of the goodness and intrinsic superiority

of the deliberative model, but rather of contributing to rendering the view of real processes less simplistic.

In the essay that appeared in *Partecipazione e conflitto*, Luigi synthetically covered the main arguments in favour of the thesis on de-politicisation induced by the deliberative arenas. According to some scholars, deliberation first of all tends to de-politicise policy making, as it attempts to identify, through a selection of the most convincing arguments, a kind of truth that is rooted in knowledge and founded on the integration of different points of view. Secondly, the selection of typical ordinary citizens in deliberative processes would render the decisional process immune to that political logic which results from elective representation. Finally, de-politicisation would also take place through the more or less explicit intention of anesthetising conflicts, which should instead represent the main ingredient of policy making.

These three types of dynamics are interpreted in different ways. For the advocates of these democratic innovations, deliberation contributes towards broadening the horizons of policy making (Habermas 1996; Elster 1998; Pettit 2004; Marti 2006), while, for the critics, it instead contributes towards removing responsibility from elected representatives (Mouffe 2005; Gourgues, Rui and Topcu 2013; Urbinati 2014). The former maintain that the integration of different points of view can contribute towards rendering policy making more rational and can make shared solutions emerge, as the involvement of ordinary citizens is able to substitute, or at least to integrate, the logic of short-term consensus (which is typical of elected politicians) with wider scope objectives, and that the reduction in conflicts reduces the risk of decisional deadlocks. The critics instead maintain that focusing decisional processes on rational argumentation leads to the risk of reducing the dialectics between the values and conceptions of the world in the name of pseudo-objective technocratic criteria, that the involvement of ordinary citizens risks producing elitist derives when the political authorities make use of them in a strategic and manipulative way to preclude organized civil society from these political dialectics, and that the reduction in the conflict between government, political minorities and civil society risks depriving the decisional processes of the essential element through which the policy paradigms can be challenged, thus favouring immobilism in policy making and the dominance of consolidated views.

Luigi intervened in this debate by problematizing the three forms of de-politicisation dynamics attributed to deliberative processes, and only in part did he take sides in the dispute between supporters and critics, although with his known non-militant touch of optimism. In short, the thesis of the essay is that deliberative processes de-politicise policy making in a clear and indisputable way in terms of location, since ordinary citizens, who are usually involved in deliberative processes, tend to be immune to the typical

logics of the mandate and of the search for consensus. However, deliberative processes can instead contribute to politicising policy making (as, according to Luigi, occurred both in the case of the British Columbia's citizen assembly and in the case of the public debate on the Genoa highway) in terms of content, since participants usually also question technical options in light of social considerations and because the process tends to feed the conflict instead of anesthetising it.

By evidencing this potential combination between de-politicisation and politicisation, Luigi's essay warns against two derives. The first is the excessive simplification of social phenomena induced by the application of analytic categories as monolithic concepts, when, in reality, such categories often hide different facets. The concept of politicalisation is a clear example: it can concern the composition of a policy arena (more or less centred on elected individuals, who must be accountable to their constituencies), the type of relationships between policy makers (more or less conflictual and more or less focused on the comparison between tools or values) and the prevalent mechanism to solve a conflict (the balance of power or the majority vote instead of the search for a shared and wide consensual solution). As Luigi underlined, there are no reasons to assume that the three dimensions of politicalisation are connected, and the only way of establishing this is to observe real processes as well as the mechanisms that develop within them. In fact, the central argumentation of his essay is that the two real processes that were analysed both de-politicised (in one sense) and politicised the decisional process (in the other two senses).

It is from this consideration that his implicit warning against the latter derive takes its cue, that is, that of analysis at a distance, mainly conducted through the elaboration of data and secondary sources. The understanding of decisional processes, and among these, the understanding of deliberative processes, according to Luigi, cannot be attained without an assiduous and scrupulous activity of observation of the participants. The participant observer, apart from having to implement intuition and perseverance in order to be able to enter into the initial stages of the processes, often finds it impossible to directly observe crucial stages that take place behind the scenes, unless he/she become an integral part of the process by assuming a more or less official role. This is in fact what many scholars who get to grips with the empirical analysis of these phenomena do, and it is what Luigi did for more than twenty years of his work on deliberation. Most of his essays are based on empirical analysis of real or experimental deliberative processes, which he had occasion to co-design and jointly execute with other experts. It is not by chance that the argumentations he presented in his essay that appeared in this Journal are based on the results of investigations conducted by analysts who had contributed towards designing and conducting the processes (scholars from the University

of Vancouver and their colleagues involved in the British Columbia project and he himself with other analysts in the case of the Genoa public debate).

However, the direct involvement of the observer in the process he/she intends to analyse and explain is risky, as it weakens the neutrality of judgement, but it is also often the only strategy that allows the researcher or analyst to see things that a less involved glance cannot discern. When faced with criticism about the impartiality and non-neutrality of his own analyses, Luigi responded that it was the price that had to be paid to be able to gather causal and dynamic mechanisms which he would otherwise been unaware of, and that the secret of maintaining the necessary distance, or better still, the necessary equidistance from the process and its dynamics was to always try to maintain the approach of a scientist (in primis guided by scientific curiosity) and not to pass over to the side of the militant (oriented towards promoting his/her own study objective). Moreover, Luigi faced the theme of the militant view in a frank and direct way in another of his recent interventions, which appeared in the French journal *Participations*. In this essay, written together with Antonio Florida (2016) in response to an article that was written by a French colleague (O'Miel 2016) and which appeared in the same journal, Luigi basically argued that the real discrimination between more or less good scientific analysis does not depend to a great extent on the role of the researcher who is involved in the phenomenon that is the subject of observation, but rather on his/her capacity to reveal and attribute the observed dynamics to more general analytical categories, by reconstructing and interpreting the collected empirical material through clear and strong arguments and not on the basis of dogmas and preconceptions. It is difficult to say to what extent we scientists are really able to be immune to dogmas and preconceptions, but when reading his writings, it is not possible but to ascertain the effort he made in an attempt to come close to this ideal, that is, of the scientist who mixed public duty and direct experimentation while maintaining a lucid and unattached view or, as he preferred to say, an equidistant view.

Please allow us to conclude this contribution with a final, more personal reflection about his person and about what he represented for us. The university is often depicted, by various parties, as being a place of injustices, injustices that doubtlessly exist, as in any other public and private organisation. But the university is also made up of honest and profound relationships, such as those that become established between mentors and pupils. For us, Luigi was a true mentor. A mentor who argued his point of view without mincing words and not from the top of a pedestal, a position earned from his experience, but with the enthusiasm of a person who had found a key to understanding and who had the desire to share and compare. A mentor who never transformed his judgement of substance into a judgement of value on the intellectual or moral standing of his

interlocutor, who was not afraid to question consolidated arguments and who knew how to be convinced without being ashamed to say “you are right and I was wrong”, whether talking to an illustrious colleague or a newly matriculated student.

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