

Summary: Homo, Hunter-Gatherer, Habermas: An Inquiry into Deliberation

Ramon van der Does*

Many political theorists and pundits deplore the way people talk politics. Arguably, elites and ordinary citizens alike tend to shy away from deliberation, that is, respectful political talk marked by a give-and-take of reasons. A fundamental reason why people supposedly do not deliberate is that it goes against human nature. This view of deliberation vis-à-vis human nature has so far received little scrutiny but has had major implications for how we think about what deliberation requires. It has led some to argue that interventions to promote deliberation are futile (Achen & Bartels, 2016) and others to maintain that deliberation requires institutional tinkering and corrective pedagogy (e.g. Rosenberg, 2014).

But is it really true that people are naturally inclined to refrain from deliberation? What if it is not? What if, say, people are instead predisposed to spontaneously engage in deliberation, if only under certain conditions? My thesis critically engages with these questions from both a theoretical and an empirical perspective.

Theoretically, I ground our understanding of deliberation and human nature in the existing literature on human evolution, in particular work in the field of evolutionary psychology. I start by drawing attention to the emerging consensus in the social behavioural sciences that understanding human na-

ture means understanding human evolution (Chapter 1) (Scott-Phillips et al., 2011). Human nature is best thought of, then, as the product of a process of natural selection that occurred over the long stretch of human evolutionary history when people lived as (semi-)nomadic hunter-gatherers until some twelve thousand years ago. Specifically, in the context of social behaviour, human nature encompasses the set of evolved psychological mechanisms we have in our brains because they improved our distant ancestors' odds to survive and/or reproduce (Lewis et al., 2017).

In Chapter 2, I go on to suggest that the human brain might also contain an evolved psychological mechanism specific to deliberation. I put forward the 'group hypothesis', which holds that deliberation formed an adaptive response to the problem of intra-group political disagreements, a problem recurrently encountered by our distant hunter-gatherer ancestors. I expect that when people today disagree about politics with others from their ingroup, they will still become inclined to deliberate. Conversely, I expect that disagreements over political decisions involving people from an out-group (i.e. inter-group disagreements) will reduce people's propensity to deliberate.

Empirically, the dissertation relies on diverse sources of data to test these expectations. In Chapter 3, I start by

* Ramon van der Does, ISPOLE, Université catholique de Louvain, Belgium.

probing the plausibility of the premise that deliberation prior to political decision-making was indeed the default way to deal with intra-group political disagreements among our ancient ancestors. I do so by means of a cross-cultural analysis of political talk in thirty-four historic hunter-gatherer societies, which form the closest proxy to how humankind must have lived for most of the species' past (cf. van Vugt et al., 2008). Based on the analysis of ethnographic materials retrieved from the electronic Human Relations Area Files World Cultures, the results suggest that in the majority of hunter-gatherer cultures there is evidence of people talking before they make political decisions and that there is also some evidence that such talk in cultures in different parts of the world involves reasoning and/or respect. However, overall, the available materials offer too few details on decision-making to draw firm conclusions about the group hypothesis.

I then move on to mass societies. In Chapter 4, I concentrate on deliberation among national political representatives. Following the group hypothesis, I expect that representatives' propensity to deliberate prior to making decisions will increase the more those decisions are to be made *for* as well as *by* people from the same group. By contrast, the more a society and/or its politics become fragmented, the lower the odds will be that representatives will deliberate. Based on data from 174 countries (1945-2021), I find that the tendency of representatives to deliberate drops the more fragmented a society becomes, lending support to the group hypothesis. However, against the hypothesis, I also find that this tendency is unaffected by changing levels

of division among representatives themselves.

Chapter 5 turns to political talk among ordinary citizens. It relies on an experimental approach to manipulate group membership, allowing for a comparison between political talk in response to intra- and inter-group political disagreements. Based on two experiments conducted with Honorata Mazepus among Polish citizens, we do not find supporting evidence for the group hypothesis: participants who imagined talking to someone from their ingroup were not more likely to deliberate than participants who imagined talking to someone from an outgroup.

In Chapter 6, I examine whether the limited support for the group hypothesis in Chapters 3 to 5 might be the result of neglecting potential gender/sex differences. Based on a re-analysis of the gathered empirics, I do not find clear signs of average differences between women/females and men/males in their propensity to deliberate in response to cues of intra- or inter-group political disagreements. That said, much uncertainty still remains with regard to a potentially evolved sexed psychology of deliberation and we should, therefore, be careful in reading too much into the findings.

In the Epilogue, I end by underlining the need for political theorists and practitioners working on deliberation to reconsider the assumptions they tend to make about human nature.

References

- Achen, C. H. & Bartels, L. M. (2016). *Democracy for Realists: Why Elections Do Not Produce Responsive Government*. Princeton University Press.

Lewis, D. M., Al-Shawaf, L., Conroy-Beam, D., Asao, K. & Buss, D. M. (2017). Evolutionary Psychology: A How-To Guide. *American Psychologist*, 72(4), 353-373. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0040409>.

Rosenberg, S. W. (2014). Citizen Competence and the Psychology of Deliberation. In S. Elstub & P. McLaverty (Eds.), *Deliberative Democracy: Issues and Cases* (pp. 98-117). Edinburgh University Press.

Scott-Phillips, T. C., Dickins, T. E. & West, S. A. (2011). Evolutionary Theory and the Ultimate-Proximate Distinction in the Human Behavioral Sciences. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 6(1), 38-47. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691610393528>.

van Vugt, M., Hogan, R. & Kaiser, R. B. (2008). Leadership, Followership, and Evolution: Some Lessons from the Past. *American Psychologist*, 63(3), 182. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003066X-63.3.182>.