

Collective Decision Making Around the World

Essays on Historical Deliberation Practices



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Introduction

By Julie Fisher & Ileana Marin

The question of whether people have always engaged in public deliberation has often been posed at the Kettering Foundation. David Mathews, president of the foundation often says that deliberation is a natural process. Indeed, democratic practices probably appeared before the term *democracy* was invented, and direct self-rule through deliberative talk predates the Greeks in a number of cultures. Even though people may not have always deliberated by specifically spelling out pros, cons, and tradeoffs of different options, decisions based on alternative courses of action have often been made by communities.

At times, communities revert to deliberation as a kind of default mechanism during a crisis. For example, during the collapse of East Germany in 1989, citizens spontaneously began to organize round tables to explore what to do next.¹ In Argentina, after the economic collapse in 2001-2002, neighbors flocked to the streets in front of their houses to talk about their problems.

This sort of “crisis” deliberation however is not usually sustained; democracy requires that we keep on deliberating beyond crisis situations. In Tupelo, Mississippi, it took a series of crises, combined with innovative leadership, to produce a long-term commitment to informal community deliberation.

The Kettering Foundation has been interested in this topic for over ten years. A background paper on this topic by Noëlle McAfee and Denis Gilbert is included in this book following the introduction.

In 2003, the Kettering Foundation decided to sponsor a series of research papers on “historic deliberation.” The papers were written by international colleagues, none of them historians by profession. Despite the challenge of finding accurate historical records, we

¹ Cristiane Olivo, “The Practical Problems of Bridging Civil Society and the State: A Study of Round Tables in Eastern Germany,” *Polity* 31 (Winter 1998): 245-267.

received ten case studies² from eight countries that included accounts from colonial records of the open town meetings in nineteenth-century Colombia to an interview with an 81-year-old man in a mountainous region of eastern Romania. Six of these studies representing as many countries were selected to be included in this volume.

The first case study looks at traditional decision-making processes in Cameroon. Joseph Sany Nzima, the author, pays particular attention to the Baka people of his country. Next, Gabriel Murillo and Catalina Arreaza are the authors of a case study that describes the artisan democratic societies of Colombia in the nineteenth century. Daut Dauti of Kosova presents the ancient forms of public deliberation as found in one of the oldest codes of Albania, and David Robinson and Kayt Robinson conducted research on “Pacific Ways of Talk” in New Zealand.

The Romanian *sfat*, one of the oldest forms of deliberative assemblies in a community, is the topic of Ruxandra Petre’s case study. German Artamonov and Denis Makarov of Russia describe the early traditions of rural collective decision making in their country.

Sustainability

Most of the case studies reveal that particular manifestations of deliberation in its traditional form have died out. However, Russian peasant communities and their regional or tribal *veches* survived in some areas until 1917. The Council of Elders preceding meetings of

² The case studies not included in this volume were:

Melanie Beauvy, “Political Participation at the Village Level in the Frankish Kingdom during the Middle Ages.”

Elfidio Cano del Cid, “Guatemala: Santiago Atitlan: A Case of Contemporary Civic and Political Participation.”

Gheorghe Cretu, “Decision Making Process in the Romanian Togetherness Villages.”

Lariza Pizano and Sandra Martinez, “The Cabildo of Santafe de Bogota: Between Deliberation and Representation.”

Luciano de Privitellio and Luis Alberto Romero, “Civil Society Organizations, Civic Traditions and Democratic Culture: The Case of Buenos Aires, 1912-1976.”

Parichart Sthapitanonda, “The Deliberation Process in the Urban Society: A Case Study of the Civic Group in Banglumpoo Area, Bangkok, Thailand.”

the peasant assemblies included a singer to preserve organizational history. In Albania, communism put an end to centuries of deliberation fairly recently. The Illyrians used deliberation to control the power of kings as long ago as the eighth century. With the introduction of the Ottoman rule in the late fourteenth century, the Albanians withdrew to the highlands, and a ruler named Lekë Dukagjini (1410-1481) wrote down and codified deliberative practices that had been valued and passed on for centuries. These practices continued among Albanians in Kosova and survived the loose Yugoslav version of communism until the United Nations occupied the country in 1999 and began promoting Western-style democracy.

The practices of *Hui* in New Zealand and *Talanoa* in Fiji survived to the present day, perhaps because of references to people from the past not present in the room. In Fiji, a modern version of *Talanoa* has been used to heal polarization among politicians. In Romania, seven unusually prosperous small mountain towns where deliberation is still practiced were discovered. And among the Baka, or Pygmy, in Cameroon, deliberation remains a key to the survival of small hunting-and-gathering communities.

The diversity of cases, despite the fact that only a few have survived, suggest, rather paradoxically, that deliberation may be widespread, albeit ephemeral, throughout the world and throughout history.

Contrasts with Modern Deliberation

How do historic examples of deliberation differ from present practices? In Fiji and among the Māori people of New Zealand, the *Talanoa* and *Hui* provide opportunities for all voices to be heard, not just all views, as in a modern forum. National assemblies and regional assemblies in Albania used the phrase “to beat a matter” the way Americans would say “to beat a matter to death.” Deliberations among the Baka in Cameroon sometimes last for many days.

A second major distinction with modern forums is that traditional deliberation did not typically include women or young people. In Albania, citizens were represented by household heads, and in Russia, every tenth head of a household was drafted to serve in the peasant

assembly. Among the Māori in New Zealand, women convene the Hui but are not part of it. Here again, however, there are exceptions. Among the Baka in Cameroon, deliberation is based on horizontal kinship, and everyone in a community of 1,000 is important for survival. No one has institutionalized power; authoritarianism is criticized; and leadership shifts, depending on talents and tasks at hand.

How democratic were these forums in other respects? In Russia, Albania, Romania, and the South Pacific, elders were given privileged positions, either as a separate council or within forums. Russia reacted to the long Tartar invasion that began in the thirteenth century by centralizing power, and the *veches*³ were less able to restore democratic processes. Further deterioration occurred with the introduction of serfdom in the seventeenth century. Yet Russian assemblies had two chambers, and the upper aristocratic assembly's decisions had to be approved by the lower assembly of commoners. Within the Albanian forums, the position of the priests and imams was not privileged.

The artisan democratic societies and the town meetings in nineteenth-century Colombia excluded the indigenous population. However, the first artisan society in Colombia, founded in 1838, included both artisans and peasants. Along with other groups, such as the Masons and literary associations, the societies promoted the idea of an informed rational public opinion. As Gabriel Murillo and Catalina Arreaza write, "Deliberation did not just happen in their chambers"; they also "made sure it happened outside and made it accessible to the masses." Through the civic education provided by these groups, tradesmen learned to speak in public, read newspapers, and contact politicians. Members could propose themes for internal deliberation. Ultimately, it was the bipartisan hegemony of the Liberal and Conservative parties that ended the role of the artisan societies. Since this hegemony eventually culminated in the civil war of 1948, the survival of these societies might have led to a more positive form of political development.

³ Etymologically, *veche* comes from a word meaning "to speak" or "to talk." In early Russia, the word was used to denominate town meetings.

The Russian tribal unions also clashed with authorities and provided a kind of rough check on state power. The community assembly in Smolensk prosecuted Governor Schein after his military loss to Polish invaders in 1626. Although governors generally negotiated between the community assembly and the czar, it was harder for the community to replace a headman of the council of elders than a state-appointed governor. The czar sometimes replied to a request to stop a subsidy with, “you elected him, you solve the problem.”

The Process of Deliberation

Although evidence is limited, the case studies suggest differences in the deliberative processes:

- Hui and Talanoa in New Zealand “go in circles” and “repetition is common.” People drink *kava*⁴, and gifts are presented. During a Hui, an elder listens to the contributions of all, then pulls them together into a decision. Women are not allowed to speak but are traditionally the peacemakers behind the scenes.
- In Russia, elders organized lists of speakers and subsequent voting. When no decision was made, “going to the wall” meant that a physical fight might be the only way to settle an issue.
- In Albania and Kosova, “beating a matter” was followed by the best orators presenting their opinions based on the “common benefit,” followed by majority vote.
- Among the Baka of Cameroon, tense situations are avoided by paying no attention to the speaker. Deliberation involves long, meticulous discussions of alternatives and the one with least opposition is chosen.

Despite contrasts with modern deliberation and differences among traditional processes, there are also similarities with the more structured process used today. During the *sfat* in Romania, participants consider the interests of people not in the room. Then

⁴ Kava (*Piper methysticum*) is an ancient crop of the western Pacific. Kava is related to black pepper; both have heart-shaped leaves and flowers similar to the flower spike of the anthurium. Kava also has a peppery taste. Kava has long been a part of religious, political, and cultural life throughout the Pacific. Kava is traditionally consumed as an herbal tea.

all opinions are presented, followed by the effects of alternative decisions. The elders enforce rules, such as the “need to find the best solution,” but the decision is made without voting. It is simply recorded on a blackboard and implemented. Community members who did not attend the sfat told Ruxandra Petre and her colleagues that they trust whatever decision is made. For example, one sfat and the mayor’s office jointly started building a local clinic, which helped them lobby for support from the government.

In Russia and Albania, assemblies were also courts that could try people accused of crimes. Thus, deliberative juries may have common historical roots with deliberative forums. Just as courts today settle civil disputes, traditional assemblies were also involved in peacemaking. In Albania, local assemblies often helped communities avoid blood feuds. People not allied with either side, after getting the respect of both sides, got people to talk to one another openly. Sometimes blood feuds were settled at the expense of the individual victim whose suffering had prompted the feud in the first place.

Conclusions

Is deliberation rare? Is it a part of the cultural basis for democracy? How widespread has it been at any one point in history? Are its organic practices at the very core of collective decision making? Was it ubiquitous before governments developed? These case studies only begin to answer these questions. However, they do support the views reflected in Amartya Sen’s⁵ contemporary work as well as the Kettering Foundation background paper and others who challenge the notion that democracy is an exclusively Western practice.

Taken as a whole, the case studies also show that deliberation is both fragile and powerful. It can be destroyed by top-down politics but seems to also be as natural as a sturdy plant eradicated in one area and reseeding itself in another. Sustainability seems to be related to codification, references to the past within the process itself, and how ingrained it becomes in the overall political culture.

⁵ Amartya Sen, “Democracy and Its Global Roots,” *The New Republic* (October 2003).

The preservation and recovery of unique public places in the twenty-first century could help resurrect deliberative democracy as well as community and collective decision making. Democracy becomes effective when those who have the capacity and will to live by its rule are able to deliberate together about what really matters in their community life. If there was once an openness to deliberation in a community, then maybe this could resurface with new opportunities.