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## **Public Debate as Important Element of Democracy – Pedagogical Issues**

**Abstract.** Different models of democracy, specially republican, consensual and deliberative, underline the meaning of citizens' participation in public debate. It is also important from pedagogical point of view. On the one hand, participation in debate helps to achieve the most important goal in education, i.e. supporting man's development. On the other hand, successful participation in debate needs many competences, most of all communicative ones, that may and should be shaped and advanced in education on different levels.

**Key words:** democracy, debate, civil competences, education.

### **The meaning of debate in democracy**

What is the meaning of public debate in democracy? In political writings it is often taken as axiom that “democracy stands on debate”, but without arguments for it. It is time to grasp some, starting from concise presentation of what the essence of democracy is. “[...] democracy may be defined as social-political system, in which at least two subjects compete for power over a state by regular, free and fair elections, in which every adult can participate on equal rights, but also as a system guaranteeing basic civil rights where division of power in a state exists” (Rajca 2007, s. 26–27).

Miłowit Kuniński, citing the so called procedural definition of democracy: “[...] a set of procedures, that allow peaceful change of political power in some politically organized community, i.e. changing from one group of people in charge to another one” (Kuniński 2004, s. 116), and characterizing its substantial meaning: “Substantial meaning of democracy is based on value defined as common good, and in some conceptions as community's interest or public (social) interest. In this version democratic procedures are used to achieve the main goal, namely successful realization of people's will, who are sovereign or political society” (ibidem), he would recognize definition of democracy, given by Lucyna Rajca, is mostly procedural in its sense. Real, “vivid” democracy is by and large substantial in its meaning.

In political philosophy different models of democracy are considered of which liberal

is the most popular. The essence of liberal model, according to Rafał Wonicki, is the pressure decrease principle, “[...] which should be guaranteed by constitutional governance and the rule of democracy, saying that everyone has right to participate in decisions which influence the society” (Wonicki 2007, s. 63). Lucyna Rajca sees this issue in more detail: “[...] the fundamental idea of liberalism is the concept of limited power leaving maximum freedom for individual. The fundamental idea of democracy is possibility of participation in power, at least in the process of authorities' election and control by maximum number of citizens” (Rajca 2007, s. 34; see also: Król 2008a, s. 200–210; Marczevska-Rytko 2001, s. 73–78).

Traditionally competitive to liberal is republican model. Its main foundation is, in the first place, the need of taking responsibility by every citizen for the shared power, where active and conscious attitude is needed, and in the second place – kind of state structure in which no one is in the right of taking decisions for citizens (see Król 2008a, s. 145 and next.; Wonicki 2007, s. 64–66; et al.). Rafał Wonicki writes: “According to republicans the essence of citizenship is right to participate in political life. Politics is mostly about debating for republicans. Public debate aiming at rational understanding makes social harmony possible. Thus republic celebrates discussion. Power exists due to public acceptance of debating gathering. This also means that truth, having its source in citizens' opinion, can be exposed in debate” (Wonicki 2007, s. 64).

Liberal idea of democracy was also criticized by stand called communitarian (see Gawkowska 2004), that to some degree is a variant of republican stand. Experts point also to other models of democracy, such as consensual (Marczevska-Rytko 2001, s. 96–100; Rajca 2007, s. 38–44), social (Wonicki 2007, s. 82–100), corporate, participant, delegation one etc. (Rajca 2007, s. 44–46, 53–73).

Deliberative model of democracy, meaning debate, discourse or discussion in democracy, plays important role in contemporary political philosophy. Marcin Król cites the following definition: “It is a form of power, in which free and equal citizens (and their representatives) legitimize decisions in the process of mutual presentation of rationales, that can be accepted by everyone and commonly understood. This is aimed at drawing conclusions and making decisions that oblige, in a given moment, every citizen, but can be criticized in the future” (Król 2008a, s. 173). Piotr Juchacz writes, that this type of democracy is based on three fundamental ideals: rational legislation, participative policy and citizens' self-government (Juchacz 2006, s. 28). Rafał Wonicki is situating this model of democracy in

Jürgen Habermas' concept of communicative rationality and draws conclusion that “[...] democracy is institutionalized form of act of communication” (Wonicki 2007, s. 124). According to Habermas' theory of communicative acting, practice of reaching a consensus must be public, commonly accessible, devoid of violence (also the symbolic one) and allowing rationally motivated strength of better reason, and representatives (elected authorities) “[...] must be sensitive to suggestions, information and arguments from discursively shaped informal public sphere and public opinion connected with it” (ibidem, s. 138).

Some foundations of deliberative democracy sound like utopia, specially vision of reaching consensus without conflict. Because of that, Chantal Mouffe for example criticizes this model of democracy and accentuates that conflict is irremovable and emotions play important role in that process of making decisions. What she proposes is called agonistic model of democracy. It is characterized by acceptance of impossibility of reaching consensus without exclusion and accentuating the need for creating public sphere for different opinions and developing institutions, in which this difference may safely and constructively be showed. (Mouffe 2000, s. 97–123).

The review (short and selective) of the most important motives of different democracy concepts, presented above, give many arguments for the need for public debate in democratic state and citizen society functioning. Actually, except the liberal model, other concepts of democracy strongly accentuate the need for debate. In the circumstances of lasting, nearly for a year, world economic crisis, when numerous dogmas of economic liberalism bankrupted, political liberalism perhaps will also be in crisis, and it seems that renaissance of republican, communitarian and consensual concepts should become, concepts that accentuate deliberation and participation, and renovation as well as cure of public sphere recognized as civic (see e.g.: Krzynówek 2007, s. 43–54; Zborek 2007, s. 55–64).

Besides it is worth notice that development of modern forms of communication may flourish new – difficult to anticipate and imagine for now – models of democratic citizenship; currently some authors write about e.g. tele-democracy or e-democracy (e.g. Marczevska-Rytko 2001, s. 178–193), in which debate must play important role.

### **The essence of and conditions for public debate**

The essence of debate is to freely exchange views and arguments, and its fundamental aim is to give people who are making decisions, knowledge of how opinions are divided and what interests are standing behind given positions. Task of politics – representatives elected in democratic elections – is to solve different problems of community, and solving those problems is connected with a phase of making decision. Decisions considering common problems are characterized by a feature, that some groups of citizens make profits – the other do not. And in this aspect the task of debate is clear. Politics of course prefer making decisions without listening to the voice of citizens, sometimes they ask experts for advice, but most of all they make decisions themselves. Being conscious of the fact that interests of different groups of people are counteracting, that making decision in a given case makes profit for some groups but not for others – certainly makes decision difficult; this is the fundamental reason why politics do not like public debate. However citizens – for their own interest – should aim at debate before making decision important for the whole community.

Piotr Sztompka writes: “We debate too little, because we do not understand well, that the essence of democracy is to create conditions, in which, for the good of the community, maximum of knowledge, wisdom, intuition and engagement of an average citizen is showed. [...] Without debate we will not be able to agree, as a community, what is our common good, what is so important for us, that every one should decide of it. Differences in values and interest will last, but on the agora of free exchange of views only debate allows at least some agreement, views accepted by majority of citizens” (Sztompka 2007). It is then not only about presentation of different rationales, but also about showing common wisdom, and most of all about possibility of consensus on common good – despite of counteracting interests.

To make debate sensible, some conditions must be provided. Marcin Król enumerates the following: (1) minimum of good will of all participants of the debate, meaning readiness to understand (not necessarily accept) arguments of others, (2) using language that is clear and devoid of foggy terms, (3) clearly stated and narrow theme, (4) achieving the goal (Król 2008b, s. 7). In my opinion it is worth adding at least two other conditions: (5) avoiding empty words and instead of that giving arguments for one's position, (6) culture of speaking and restraining emotions.

### **Pedagogical meaning of debate**

Relation between good debate and education may be considered in two ways. Firstly, participating in debate has educative influence. Secondly, education may advance debate.

Public debate has educative value because it allows for learning some important things. First of all it raises consciousness that people usually differ in every case, and in every issue there can be, and there are, differences in views. This can allow some of the participants but also spectators of debate, become conscious that the fact of having different opinions does not mean that we are enemies, but those different views should be exchanged in order to enrich both sides and make it possible to look at the issue from different point of view. Engagement and participation in debate also allows for becoming more conscious that debate is the most effective and the cheapest way to present rational circumstances for making decision (it is its fundamental value).

Another conclusion that can be drawn from observation, but better from participation in debate, is fact that the most important skill is to choose arguments for our stand – to be heard, but most of all to convince opponents. That is why empty words, like “I think so because I think so” have got no meaning. After that “because” convincing arguments should be presented.

During debate we have occasion to gain some general skills and competences important for participation in democratic society, also called as civil competences – such as e.g.: respect for others, tolerance for different stands and views, criticism and resistance to manipulation, listening and ability to hear the essence of another person's speech, ability to understand other ways of thinking. Moreover, during debate participants become more engaged in the discussed problem and their knowledge about this problem increases, as well as general orientation in public issues, and what is more important for substantial dimension of democracy – motivation to take up different social actions also increases.

In the discussed issue, some specific feedback is present – participating in debate shapes competences, but principally the same competences are necessary to participate successfully in debate. It is important that the above mentioned competences are (and should be) gained in education. What are the possibilities of education in schools and institutions of higher education in this area?

Educational undertakings are as follow: (1) frequently organized group work instead of individual one in the class and outside – aimed at promoting cooperation, not competition, advancing communication skills and raising mutual trust and respect; (2) resigning from

teacher's and handbooks' information monopoly towards equality of different sources of knowledge; (3) promoting discursive (based on discussion) forms and methods of teaching instead of one-sided transmission.

Apart from *stricte* didactic ones, other kinds of actions are needed – concerning interpersonal relations. This is for example ability (so rare among contemporary teachers) to see human behind the mask of pupil (numerous research concerning opinions and expectations of pupils towards teachers show that lack of this ability, or will, is very unpleasant) – for raising and grounding believe, that every man is worth to be respected. It is also the art of creating and preserving communities, enhancing pupils (students) towards over-individual ideas, movements, projects – in which young man can realize naturally young idealism and gain (or advance) pro-community attitudes and competences. The last group of actions can be made real mainly in informal education – through meetings, as well as initiating and caring for different ideas, movements and associations.

However, if education (in schools and institutions of higher education) is limited to didactics, and schools, colleges and universities are devoid of youth energy and do not create inspiration and conditions for development of other spheres, not only the intellectual one – we should recognize that we are witnesses of neglect, but from a different point of view this is a chance for a change.

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