
Deliberative Democracy: The cases of Bosnia and Columbia

Professor **Jurg Steiner** gave a three part lecture on deliberative democracy between the second and fourth of March, 2011. Using comparative approach, via Switzerland, Bosnia and Columbia, Prof. Steiner and the students of the **MIREES program** explored the meaning of deliberative democracy, its successes and its failures. The two case studies we examined were current research projects being undertaken by three of Prof. Steiner's Ph.D students.

With great enthusiasm, Professor Steiner introduced the topic through some general discussion and emphasis on student participation. We were all asked to give our initial opinions on what is meant by **deliberative democracy** and some feelings about it. This process revealed a high level of interest in the concept, but also some reservations as to its ability to make a great difference in conflict situations. Particularly in the cases of Bosnia and Columbia, the deliberative process on the national level had not succeeded.



By looking at how the deliberative process had worked, historically, in Switzerland, and how it was later applied in both Bosnia and Columbia, Professor Steiner addressed these reservations. Primarily, he argued that the deliberative process was not an institutional one, but a **cultural** one. As in the case of Switzerland, after a long history of war the divided communities began to build consensus in the villages and towns, not from the top down. Instead of creating political and social institutions and imposing them on a divided population, the opposite was true. Unifying institutions were the outgrowth of popular will to create them.

The problem with this theory as it was later developed, and then applied, is that it reversed the Swiss experience. The focus was on imposing a model onto the communities in order to develop the **consensus**. The final result, as the case studies demonstrated, has been a high level of politicization of these institutions. So rather than unify, local power-holders use them to keep divisions alive by pointing out what the short-comings are, or where there are imbalances.

This might be the reality on the institutional level, Steiner argued, but it is not reflective of local mentalities. The aim of the two **research projects** being conducted by Professor Steiner's students is to address the deliberation process on the local level and we were fortunate enough to have **Simona Mameli** join us on the final day to present her research and methodology. In short, they are looking at how to relocate the deliberative process to where it originated: in the local communities. While these are two small projects, they already noted that once people were around the same table, they talked about common problems, not in terms specific to their ethnicity but to the wider community.

There were certainly reasons to be optimistic of the success the deliberative process has on a grass roots level, but the question remains if the institutions will follow suit. All three lectures were highly interactive and deliberative in themselves, leaving us all with many reflections.

David Brown,
*MA Candidate at MIREES Interdisciplinary Research and Studies on Eastern Europe,
University of Bologna – Forlì campus*