Chapter 1
Deliberation and Democracy

Where deliberative democracy is discussed and where it is recalled how it has been formulated in the contemporary debate and how this debate has failed to consider who (in particular Aristotle) discussed it previously.

1.1 Deliberation for All

It is not always the most orthodox philosophical approach to look for the meaning or the etymology of a technical term in a dictionary. In fact, the everyday use of that term may largely differ from the technical one. Nevertheless, to look for the origin of ‘deliberation’ might not be such a bad idea. Etymological dictionaries say that deliberation comes from the Latin deliberatio, that is, from the verb deliberare; i.e., de (entirely) plus liberare (liberate), thus to free someone or something or deliver from, especially where decisions are concerned. Yet de-liberare also has another meaning since it could have come from de-librare: to subtract something from a libra, i.e. a balance, after having measured its weight. This is the origin of the verb libro, libras, libravi, libratum, librare, which indicates, by extension, pondering or weighted judgement.

Such an origin is worth keeping in mind. It is not an issue of cultural vanity, which may be serviceable in more or less sophisticated circles, or at conferences where we would like to show off. The origin of this word, instead, allows us to understand that ‘to deliberate’ relates to choosing on the grounds of the various reasons that enable us to ponder the different options that lay on the table. This entails that deliberation is not just the outcome of a process; rather, it is the whole process that eventually leads to the choosing.

It is now time to start.

1.2 The Many Faces of Democracy

It is not at all easy to define, in abstract terms and in a manner that is satisfactory in all circumstances, what democracy is (see Dahl, 1989). According to the etymon (again!), we could claim that democracy is that form of government in which the people (demos) handle the power (kratos). However, defining an unclear term through terms that are just as unclear like ‘people’ and ‘power’ is not
very exciting if we are aiming at any degree of precision. For the sake of curiosity, we might wonder: Who are the people? Are they all the inhabitants of a nation? Are they just those who possess citizenship? What features qualify an individual as a citizen? Should all citizens be involved in the government or, perhaps, just those within a certain age range? Within what age range? Should only those in good mental and physical health be included? Who defines such mental and physical standards? Supposing we satisfactorily answered these questions of inclusion once and for all, we would still have to deal with the issue of ‘power’. What is power and, more significantly, what are the different powers we are speaking of? Should all powers or just some be considered and, in that case, which of them exactly?

In short, it is quite worthless to speak of democracy in a general and shallow way. We would run the risk of using the term in a superficial fashion, which does not convey any meaning and cannot be used outside pub debates. As we all know, the pub is an excellent place for social gathering; however, the pub has its own communication rules, which may not coincide with those that govern an in-depth discussion. This does not mean that in-depth discussions are impossible at the pub. They are just uncommon. As we all know, pubs, bars and similar places can host writers that write, thinkers that think and serious discussants that seriously discuss, and so on.

In high school, we were taught that, on the one hand, there is direct democracy, which, according to the typical hagiographic account, is “that of Athens in the classical age”, in which all citizens directly participated. On the other hand, there is indirect democracy, in which individuals delegate (and they pay for this) legislative and executive affairs to a portion of their number – the representatives. Obviously, in this latter case, there are rules that representatives must, or should, follow. Such rules shape the kind of indirect democracy we are considering. In Italy, for example, there should be an indirect, or representative, democracy, in which individuals with certain characteristics – and, therefore, not all those who live within the Italian territory, but only those that possess Italian citizenship and are at least 18 years old – can vote for representatives who constitute the Parliament, which then, in turn, elects the President in accordance with certain rules and so on. However, we must not fail to remember that, for example in Italy, there are forms of direct democracy too, like the ‘referendum’ and ‘popular initiative’. The former allows Italian citizens of appropriate age to directly claim (in a legally binding way) what they think about a certain issue. The latter concerns the possibility for a group of at least 50,000 citizens to submit to the Parliament a draft law to be discussed and possibly approved.

Beyond this initial distinction, we must take an additional one into account, which is most probably not contemplated in the course of high-school studies, that is, the distinction between aggregative democracy and deliberative democracy. Aggregative democracy is a form of participation in political decisions in which all citizens (of appropriate age) are requested to give their opinion. It can be one of the possible realizations of direct democracy, as well as the mode that characterizes the referendum. However, aggregative democracy is mainly characterized by the fact that citizens are not required to justify their choices. They