Political learning in territories of exclusion, conflict and popular organization (research notes)[1]

Aprendizado político em territórios de exclusão, conflito e organização popular (notas de pesquisa)

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Abstract

This paper discusses some interfaces between the approaches to political learning, and their reference to situations of social exclusion, conflict and popular organization. The first part of the paper discusses the approach to the study of political learning among the elites; the second part examines approaches to research of political culture among the masses; and the third part outlines an alternative approach to political learning derived from Jürgen Habermas's theory of "communicative action". In the paper these approaches are applied to the study of a territory of exclusion, conflict, and popular organisation (a group of favelas in downtown Florianópolis, Santa Catarina, Brazil). Finally, the paper outlines some procedures to achieve a more general understanding of political learning.

Key words: political learning, elites, social exclusion, conflict, popular organization.

Resumo

Este trabalho discute algumas interfaces entre as abordagens ao aprendizado político e sua referência a situações de exclusão social, conflito e organização popular. A primeira parte examina a abordagem ao estudo do aprendizado político entre as elites; a segunda parte considera as abordagens à pesquisa da cultura política de massas; e a terceira esboça uma abordagem alternativa derivada da teoria da "ação comunicativa" de Jürgen Habermas. No decorrer do trabalho, essas abordagens são referidas ao estudo de um território de exclusão, conflito e organização popular (um grupo de favelas no centro de Florianópolis, Santa Catarina). Finalmente, esboçam-se alguns procedimentos para atingir uma compreensão mais geral do aprendizado político.

Palavras-chave: aprendizado político, elites, cultura política, exclusão social, conflito, organização popular.

There is growing recognition among political scientists that learning by political and social actors is an important source of democratic change and stability. This is so because "we are particularly interested in the survival of reemerging democracies – how to prevent the recurrence of democratic crises and avoid democratic breakdown" (Jennifer McCoy, 2000). Yet she adds that the literature does not satisfactorily address the question of how political learning reorients behaviour and attitudes to support political democracy. Moreover, even when this question is raised, it is mainly presented as a challenge for work still to be done. The present proposal is a response to this challenge that offers an overview of the available approaches to political learning, some of their contributions and virtual convergence in historical analysis.

The first part of the paper discusses the approach to the study of political learning among the elites; the second part examines the approaches to research of political culture among the masses; and the third part outlines an alternative approach to political learning derived from Jürgen Habermas's theory of "communicative action". In the paper these approaches are applied to the study of a territory of exclusion, conflict, and popular organisation (a group of *favelas* in downtown Florianópolis, Santa Catarina, Brazil). Finally, the paper outlines some procedures to achieve a more general understanding of political learning.

I

It is important to understand how elite learning affects democratic institutions. This process is more complex than a self-interest learning model would suggest. McCoy (2000) maintained that Latin American political elites became supportive of democracy due to traumatic experiences during the authoritarian regimes and the liberal transitions (hyperinflation, impeachments, etc.). The four national studies in her book (Venezuela, Chile, Uruguay and Argentina) indicate that the elites became gradually aware that a democratic regime would be less costly and more beneficial to their own interests than the previous authoritarian regime. The book maintains that political trauma (due to the abuse of basic human rights, or to deep economic crises) results in learning, that can be either "instrumental" or "complex", in the choice for democracy. When the learning process is mostly instrumental, it tends to concentrate on the main causes of trauma and strives to avoid them in the future. But this emphasis may also block the resolution of new challenges and of other unsolved problems of the past. McCoy (2000) stresses in her conclusion that future research should give more attention to the "complex learning" of the new norms, values and aims of democracy:

[...] Political actors and groups learn democratic behaviour, whether because they value the democratic norms and rules for their own sake (normative valuation of democracy) or because they value them as the best means at the moment to further their own private interests (instrumental valuation of democracy). This distinction, of course, will have consequences for the survival and nature of democracy.

She also emphasizes that there is a need for research on the changes of political culture and political socialization, which should provide new "comparative lessons" about political transition and political learning:

(H)ow is elite political learning translated into mass learning? [...T]heories of elite hegemony, cultural change, and socialisation will be of use moving to this next stage. Likewise, under what conditions does mass learning lead to elite learning [...]? Understanding the conditions that produce these different types of learning will require more comparative case studies in different settings, including new democracies, reemerging democracies, and established democracies undergoing strains and crises (McCoy, 2000).

This paper intends to continue the review of the literature on political learning, mainly by interpreting some "thematic interfaces"[3] between the more promising approaches in the bibliography. I propose to evaluate the different contributions of each approach to common issues of study, in territories characterized by exclusion, conflict and popular organisation.

The first interface, derived from elite theory, focuses on *organisational learning* (Haas, 1992), differently emphasized by McCoy (2000) and Eder (1999). What attracted attention to this area was the reported influence of "epistemic communities" on institutional development, when the dominant political elites fail to provide solutions to political and social problems. The main question here is whether this influence helps to institutionalise new worldviews, through a "complex" learning process among the elites and perhaps through what Habermas (1997) called "juridification of social relationships" among the people. For sure, such processes of institutionalisation are admittedly ambiguous, because they implement a "colonization" of daily life through administrative and economic procedures. However, the importance of "epistemic communities" is that they relate to the dynamics of civil society, where the creation of new knowledge to face unsolved problems may expand democratic participation in decision-making processes.

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[3] In a previous review on democratization, I argued that "these mutually exclusive approaches share ever more common ground in the issues they explore, both as a consequence of internal developments within each approach and of their competition with new lines of interpretation in Latin America – lines which border on theirs and/or are actual alternatives. All this is generating new interfaces and presenting fresh research challenges in this area of studies" (Krischke, 1997).

For example, we are studying a territory of popular organisation in a group of favelas in downtown Florianópolis. This group started to react to their situation of sociopolitical and economic exclusion about 25 years ago. (See map at the end of this paper highlighting the isolation on the mountainside of these 18 favelas, inhabited by 35,000 people, and the footnote below, extracted from Chapter 4 of Krischke, 2001b).[4] In spite of the improvements and relative success obtained by the community over the years, it continues to face strong conflicts and difficult negotiations with the oligarchic and clientelistic policies of the municipal and state governments. There are frequent disagreements among the community leaders, among the favelas on the hillside. Criminality is also growing in their territory, engendered by by drug trafficking gangs.

Our question here is to know to what extent this experience of popular organisation has acted as an epistemic community, capable of presenting new solutions to its problems, while also spreading a process of "juridification of social relations" between citizens – as well as an institutional building that implements organisational learning in the territory. Would such developments promote a "complex learning" about the values and procedures of democracy? We are attempting to answer these questions through the discussion groups which are being organised in the communities.

II

One might suppose that political learning would be one of the main topics of the studies on Latin American political culture, but this has not been the case. Political learning has seldom been specifically considered by this literature, and one may ask about the reasons for this flaw. I have suggested elsewhere (Krischke, 2004) that there is a certain determinism peculiar to modernisation theories that affects most studies of political culture. I am specifically referring to a determinism that sees modernisation as a result of external forces impinging on the individuals, without the involvement of any particular learning issues. For instance, many studies tend to consider that support for democracy is a

result of a "multicausal equilibrium" between the sociocultural system and economic-political development (Inglehart, 1997). This supposition is also adopted by many sociological interpretations of democratization (Lipset *et al.*, 1993).

In other words, some "grand" political-social theories tend to rely on unstated assumptions about the political-social learning processes underlying political-social change. Accordingly, the studies of political culture usually specify various agencies of political socialisation (religions, schools, family, media, age groups, etc.) that may be responsible for the diversity of political cultures and subcultures. For instance, the present trend toward "postmaterialism" among youth (Inglehart, 1997) has been related to the growing influence of the media (and other technological and economic factors of "postmodernisation"). Conversely, it is said that religion, family and schools are losing their previous central significance for political socialisation. As important as these changes may be, little is said about how and why they occur in political socialization. In other words, how does the *deus ex machina* of modernization affect political socialization and political learning?

Klaus Eder (1999) maintained that "societies learn and yet the world is hard to change". For instance, Alvaro Moisés's study of political culture and democratisation in Brazil (1995) detected a growing normative support for democracy among the public. Parts of the electorate increasingly preferred the democratic regime to a return to the previous authoritarian regime (in spite of the serious economic problems of the early 1990s). Simultaneously, these sectors strongly criticised the flaws of democratic governance, its lack of accountability and the many instances of political corruption. Moisés called this critical attitude apparently based on democratic principles "republican indignation". This is similar to the attitude Moreira (2000) detected, in the more recent and polarised situation of Uruguay, among a growing sector (almost a majority) of "unresigned democrats" of the electorate. Is this a sign of political learning?

The results of these surveys are very useful for political planning, public policy and electoral campaigns. However, it is doubtful whether they reveal much about political learning,

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4 Florianópolis has a population of nearly 300,000 and is the capital city of the southern state of Santa Catarina. Here the military regime was able to implement successfully, from the mid-1970s onward, a strategy of "conservative modernization" of the popular neighborhoods, establishing community councils mainly oriented by electoral clientelistic practices. The councils attracted basic improvements to their neighborhoods, and local community centers were built with government funds, providing day-care facilities, youth clubs, and public social services. Some of these improvements were made by the voluntary work of the residents on weekends, under the technical supervision of the government, which also provided the construction materials.

One of these *bairros* is a hillside *favela* (shantytown) near the center of the city. As it was situated within the parochial jurisdiction of the cathedral, priests and nuns ran social and educational services there and supported the voluntary work of the residents during the military regime. However, when the first free elections for the state government were scheduled for the end of 1982, the clientelistic-electoral connections of the conservative modernization program came to the fore. One of the priests decided to live in the *favela* and to start a CEB (church base community). Simultaneously, the son of one of the community leaders became the leader of the local youth club. Both CEB and youth club members began internal evaluations of the voluntary work carried out by the community council. Their conclusions were: "The government raised taxes from all citizens in order to provide basic services and facilities. The residents of the *favela*, however, had to do voluntary work in order to have access to these facilities; thus 'the residents paid twice for the same right'. Moreover, the government presented these improvements as a 'favor to be exchanged for votes', in a clear violation of the residents' freedom of choice."

political culture or "the social bases of democratic legitimacy" – as claimed by Moisés. In fact, one should ask whether "complex learning" can be assessed through survey research techniques. The point is that change in political values cannot be inferred from declared intentions and behaviour reported in interviews, and requires other research methods and techniques (Habermas, 1990, p. 104; Krischke, 2004).

A thematic interface on political learning, raised by studies of political culture, refers to its classic focus on *political socialisation* – emphasized by both McCoy and Eder. One important aspect of this literature is the reflexive component that some authors (Giddens, 2000; Beck, 2000) find in globalised society. Is this part of a "linguistic turn", or perhaps a new name for the deterministic overgeneralization of modernization theories? In any case, "reflexive modernization" has been interpreted as "a developmental construct open to the future" (Dryzek, 1999). This also allows the study of political socialisation to overcome the deterministic "naturalization" of social concepts and processes, previously adopted by the theories on the modernisation of political culture (Eder, 1996; Somers, 1995; Woolcock, 1997).

The aim of "reflexive modernization" is also to implement the process of institutionalisation resulting from socialisation in diverse local and national territories (Favell, 1998). Would this imply the construction of a "double-edged politics" (Putnam, 1988) between world globalisation and local legitimacy – engendering a sort of dual citizenship, national and global? Moreover, the importance of cognitive mobilisation (Dalton, 1984) is that it identifies the characteristics of subgroups and subcultures, around their commitment to diverse possibilities of collective participation, which attribute historically specific contents to political socialisation (Norris, 2003; Moisés, 1995).

In our local case study of popular participation in a territory of exclusion and conflict, there is a remarkable experience of political socialisation, in which it is possible to test the achievement of "reflexive modernization" (that is, a comprehensive worldview within and outside community boundaries) among the participants; their cognitive sophistication (mobilisation of concepts and definitions of political life, ideologies and institutions); and above all how they implement this cognitive mobilisation, attributing contents (values and procedures) to the modes of political participation they have adopted.

III

Habermas's previous research may be interpreted as an attempt to explore an alternative approach to political learning (Krischke, 2001a). It is important to understand political learning in the context of what one defines as democracy. Habermas's "linguistic turn" – and his concepts of communicative action

and "democracy as an institutionalization of discourses" – provide a common ground to examine previous theories of political learning. In this new context previous approaches can be seen as coordinated instead of competitive – as I suggest in my search for "thematic interfaces". Although I cannot develop this argument here, this approach attempts to solve some of the problems outlined above in the literature on Latin American democratisation.

This helps to understand local, national, and regional historical processes of sociocultural and political democratization, through a general comparative outlook. This outlook is able to address comparatively political learning as "moral/cognitive development" (Habermas, 1990). Such a development results from mutual interaction and constitution, historically and intersubjectively situated, among *individuals*, *social* actors/processes, and *political* actors/institutions (Krischke, 2001a).

The proposal stems from a coherent theoretical foundation. Habermas's theories on "communicative action" and "moral/cognitive development" are multidimensional, including a cognitive dimension (the development of worldviews), alongside a normative dimension (moral and legal development) and a subjective dimension (the development of complex identities and personality structures). My research (Krischke, 2001b) has suggested that political learning occurs in all three dimensions, in historical intersubjective processes that occur diversely and unequally in each dimension.

Moreover, Habermas's definition of "democracy as an institutionalisation of discourses" (Habermas, 1979, p. 73) implies that "discourses are institutionalised to the extent that a social setting is created that permits collective, post-conventional agreements which, in turn, create whatever shared structures actors may have" (Bohman, 1990). This emphasis shifts the burden of proof of political learning to a historical intersubjective validation – by *individual*, *social* and *political* actors – of the political processes and institutions they are supposed to build and sustain.

This paradigm shift (or "linguistic turn") also leads to a debate about the reconstruction of democratic theory (Habermas, 1997) within Latin American social sciences. This reconstruction aims to recover alternative contributions from various approaches (often considered mutually exclusive). It is seen as part of political learning within our own professional activity, during the present attempts to build and to strengthen the democratic life of our societies (Krischke, 1997; 2000). But it is also impossible to plausibly outline this argument in this space. The main problem with this Habermasian approach is its somewhat utopian emphasis on the development of human rationality and conviviality, as we shall see below.

For instance, there is a vast literature on *discourse ethics*, which originally drove attention to the work of Jürgen Habermas. Klaus Eder (1999) has contributed critically to this

line, around the topic of political learning. There are many criticisms and commentaries of Habermas's contributions (Benhabib/Dallmayr, 1990), which center the debate on discourse ethics in the polarization between Communitarians and Universalists (Avineri and Shalit, 1992). Communitarians insist on the importance of community cultural traditions (Charles Taylor, 1998), in contrast to the individualistic emphasis of Universalists, who give priority to the personal agreement (or contract) between citizens (John Rawls, 1993), on a level considered abstract and rational. Communitarians argue that only communities may demand and assure recognition of the right to difference, as well as the correction of inequalities.

The contributions by Habermas and Axel Honneth attempt to reconcile the universalist approach with the reform of traditions and institutions, through an appeal to a discourse ethics grounded on an "ideal speech situation" – that is, unconditioned by political and economic constraints. Many authors have raised objections to this utopian proposal (Bernstein, 1988). Some critics focused specifically on Habermas's assumed parallelism between ontogenetic and phylogenetic "moral/cognitive development" (Aragaki, 1993; Piet Strydom, 1993; Wetterstein, 1998). Klaus Eder (1999) denounced its reliance on a "naturalistic" trend in the social sciences, which defined political learning as an evolutionary process of Western "enlightenment".

There is certainly ground for the denunciation of utopianism and abstract universalism in Habermas and other universalistic thinkers. And it is also certain that it is always possible to progress and/or regress in the processes of political learning. Nevertheless, some communitarian feminist thinkers (Seyla Benhabib, 1990; Amy Gutman, 1992) succeeded in recovering the universalistic approach, insisting on the historical and transitional character of traditions and communities. Nancy Fraser (2003) has specifically situated such reform on the level of interpersonal and institutional change, through the study and action on the policies of recognition of the right to difference and the correction of injustice – within "paritary" norms of citizen participation. Thus, the universalistic utopian appeal to the "ideal speech situation" can be historically grounded on communitarian autonomy and self-development.

It is possible to see in the communities we are studying in Florianópolis that political learning happens through a discourse ethics, which is both communitarian and universalistic. The presence of Catholic religion (and of liberation theology) is very strong in the reorganisation of the communities. This presence is often in competition, but more recently acts in complementary forms, with other religious and cultural traditions. Perhaps the conflicting relations and the difficult negotiations with politicians and other outside authorities are the best examples of a discourse ethics that has been expanding over the years (as is the case of the recently founded Forum of communities of the region that includes all the favelas). Starting from its early polarisations against the previous conservative governments, the communities evolved to the point of achieving participatory policies and alliances in municipal politics.

Nevertheless, this positive process has also attracted new opposition, both within and outside the area. The conflicts generated by drug trafficking have especially raised fear and suspicion among the local communities, as well as in the media and public opinion in general. It is therefore necessary to research the points of contact between the discourse and practice of popular organisation and other religious and cultural traditions – in order to see whether it reinforces or reforms those traditions, in a communitarian and/or universalistic sense. Moreover, the discourse of popular organisation must also be tested in its capability to promote convergence and/or divergence in the area, in order to interpret its connections and negotiations around public policies, political parties and public officials.

Finally, one has to appraise to what degree these local practices and discourses involve the adoption of a policy of recognition of the right to difference and of tolerance toward other individuals and popular groups in the area, as well as toward the municipal institutions and the population at large. For sure, there were important urban and material improvements in this area over the years, and its inhabitants thus gained considerable access to some of the basic rights of citizenship. But it is now necessary to appraise the political learning engendered by this process, so that other urgent problems may also be properly addressed.

The evaluation of the local impact of political participation on the change in political culture, the virtual constitution of

Table 1. *Political learning: thematic interfaces.*

Approaches	Themes	Variables	Indicators	Interfaces
Elite Theory	Organisational Learning	Institutional Development?	Social Juridification	Epistemic Communities
Political Culture	Political Socialisation	Reflexive Modernisation?	Cognitive Sophistication	Modes of Participation
Communicative Action	Discourse Ethics	Cultural Traditions?	Policies of Recognition	Universalism/ Communitarianism

epistemic communities to sustain the goals and values of the leadership, and the choices between communitarian and/or universalistic solutions to their problems will help understand some of the achievements of their political learning. All popular communities and groups in the "Forum" are being invited to participate in this process of evaluation.

Theoretically, the lines and currents of study which are being reviewed will present various interfaces that are either complementary or alternative contributions to common issues of study, in the area of political learning. These contributions will be underscored and comparatively analysed, emphasising their possible relevance to the theoretical development of this field. The following scheme outlines the procedures for the analysis of the interfaces between the approaches we have discussed.

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