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*MOBILITA' E CONFLITTI*

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Dipartimento di Pianificazione e Scienza del Territorio  
Università degli Studi di Napoli "Federico II"

TeMA  
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# TeMA

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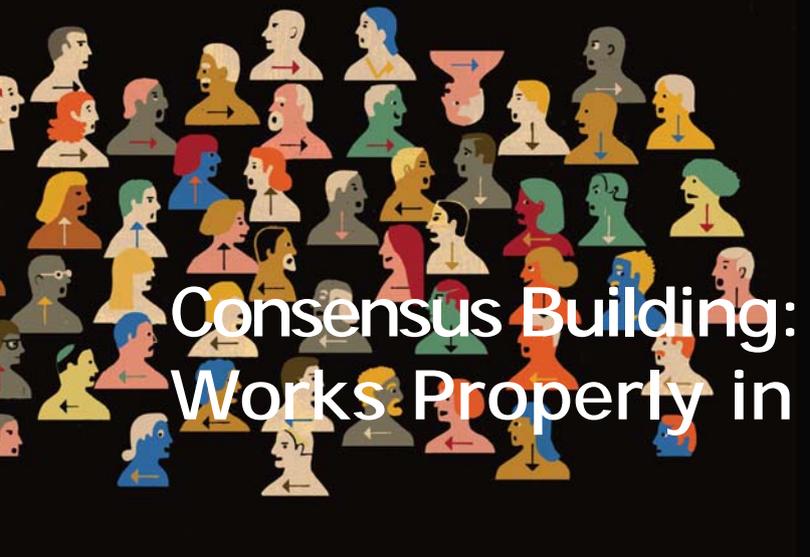
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# Consensus Building: the Democracy which Works Properly in Complex Society

**Confronto Creativo: l'altra democrazia  
quella che funziona nelle società complesse**

**Lawrence Susskind\*, Adriana Goni Mazzitelli\*\***

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On September 2011 Lawrence Susskind came to Italy in order to presents his book *"Confronto Creativo, dal diritto di parola al diritto di essere ascoltati"*, that he wrote with Marianella Sclavi who has been working in these topics for the last twenty years in Italy.

The Civic Art and Participatory Planning Laboratory (Department of Urban Studies, Università degli Studi Roma Tre), interview Susskind in order to understand what is happening with this topics in the world, as he teaches at the MIT Massachusetts Institute of Technology Boston, where he directs one of the most important centre of Consensus Building studies.

*What is this book about, and what does it means for the research that you are taking ahead with your group at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology?*

This research is part of an international effort, it started with a book in English and then there was a Spanish version, Deutch, French, Chinese, Korea, Portuguese, Japanese, and in each case someone that is my writing partner, as Marianella Sclavi is in Italy, said, *"I understand what you says in English but we have to make it make sense in our country"*. Thus he/she switched it and I become the second author and the person didn't just translate it, the partner changed all the stories to make it make sense, in his own country. And it's not so easy in China or Russia, to find examples to do it, but the partner had done it. It was not so hard here in Italy because of Marianella Sclavi's work in this topics in the last years.

In the middle of the book there is a story of a Town Community Meeting, where it could be identified as very common story anywhere that started with; some local officials that are worried, for wider reasons, about possible

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"Quality of life and governance are more and more related. The Consensus Building method is the "other" democracy, the one which works in complex societies. This approach has old roots, but its current success born in the last years due to two phenomenon's; the great crisis in traditional governance in particular in western societies from 70's until nowadays, and the inadequate local answers to this problems. On one hand some governments try to solve it with more restrict places of power, that take decisions on their own, on the other hand or they try to solve it with naive participation, open new moments of decision without specific methods, thinking that differences could be solve with "good will" and voting. (From the introduction "Confronto Creativo: dal diritto alla parola al diritto di essere ascoltati" Lawrence Susskind- Marianella Sclavi 2011)

On September 2011 Lawrence Susskind came to Italy in order to presents his book *"Confronto Creativo, dal diritto di parola al diritto di essere ascoltati"*, wrote with Marianella Sclavi. This book has been published in more than 20 countries, from China, to Japan. The authors underline the idea that globalization is, in certain way, helping the born of a different governance, which makes democracy and new ways of participation been closer than in the past. This interview tries to answer some questions of participatory urban planning in Italy nowadays. As for example; *can consensus building help to deal with complex cities nowadays? Who should promote consensus building approach: governments, citizens, private entrepreneurs? Which are the obstacles, and the methodologies to solve them? Once urban planners finish their work, who implement the projects? What are the new languages that urban planning should find in order to create local processes?*

controversies against local development plans. And so, because of the community leaderships are worried somebody says, *"Why don't we try to put all the people that are going to fight among them, together in order to make a consensus building proposal?"*.

The method in the book is told as a story not as an academic method. I have an academic book with many hundreds of pages, with all the details and assumption about the method. But I want a book for citizens, little, not expensive, it's a book for people to read, how can I work to and with my community. Some questions are there and we tried to give them some answers.

This story is universal, but everybody has a different idea, we tried to show how are the main different steps to solve the problems not having a discussion, not democratic deliberation, but how to reach a consensus, almost unanimous agreement, how to do it involving people from the very beginning. That means; *"How would you make an invitation? Who do you like to represent each group? How do you decide what the agenda could be?"*

*Do you think this approach is important for urban planners? Why?*

Many people with many different points of view see this as an opportunity, not as something dangerous that they have to stop.

I think most urban planners have to learn a different way of rebuilding cities. They need to start by offering an invitation to people who live and work there already, it is not just we have a plan come and approve it, rather, it's a problem to be solved, how we come up with a way of rebuilding that will meet almost everyone's interests. Everyone should like this processes, that's the main problem that urban planners have. And how can someone facilitate this conversation or use this information, therefore to make sure that technical information and not just political points of view are on the table. How can you describe the procedures, in order that many people can participate in a processes of reaching a consensus? This method is technically sophisticated, and the product is a proposal to local public officials, to the local government.

At the end with the proposals that came out with the consensus building methodology you can say to the government: *"Now it's your decision public official, but if you do what we have agreed, everyone it's going to like it and support you"*.

*How can you do to be so sure about that this proposals are going to like everybody and don't have great oppositions that stops them? Can you explain us the method?*

It's a very rich method, but we need to explain which the steps are in an easily understandable way. We have to

Argentine demonstrators crowd a bridge over the Uruguay River between Argentina and Uruguay in a protest against the construction of a pulp mill, at upper right, on the Uruguayan side of the river.



describe the method, and what the obstacles are, because in general people don't understand the idea of working together to come up with a plan that almost everyone can agree upon. Some groups are afraid to participate, to expose their views, some others feel they are at a disadvantage because they don't have power or they don't have information.

For each one of these obstacles, there's a section of the book that demonstrate it's not an impossible obstacle. We handle that and we still get a consensus that it's still a proposal, not a decision, because you can't take away the final decision from the political officials. They have the responsibility to decide. But it's a very different kind of proposal if all the groups came together to produce it, if they listen to each other, if although they have different points of view and strong positions, with technical assistance they arrive at common proposals. And the only way in which proposals came out is because almost all agree.

*Thus in the first part of the process you make a psychological analysis of actors and their relationships? I can see many similarities with ethnographic methods of understanding different points of view in a specific territory or about a specific topic.*

Since the 1960's when urban planners in the United States started with participatory methods, they were convinced that participation meant giving everyone a voice. But none of them started with the goal of arriving at a political consensus. When you started with that goal, the whole processes looked to be different. Giving everyone a voice just leads to a lot of contradictory demands which can be easily ignored by the elected government.

Politicians think that in their own country it's not possible to take a consensus building approach, mostly because they don't know how to do it. They tell us when we talk about this that they have a different kind of problem, a different kind of situation, a different model of leadership. And, we tell them that the problem is exactly the same – how to get all stakeholder groups involved in the search for an informed consensus.

This is a huge psychological obstacle, because people are so pessimistic, they are convinced that agreement is not possible. . Our method has a great deal of political theory and also a sociological analysis behind it, but we don't presented it our proposal as an academic theory. Instead we present it as the story of a place that needs to make a decision, and unless agreement can be reached, nothing



On the 23rd of March 2011 waste pickers marched from Delhi's Kudeshiya Park to Lt. Governor Office to demand the immediate stoppage of the waste-to-energy plants in Delhi at Okhla-Timarpur (16 MW) and Gazipur (10 MW).

will happen, they will be politically deadlocked. And, we say: *look it's so similar to you, that could be your place.*

In other words this is about how people in a politically realistic way, can alter their usual way of working, with the help of someone to facilitate a consensus building process. The model we are proposing requires the involvement of a trained facilitator. Not a political leader, not a moderator, but someone who knows how to help people with different views work together to reach informed agreement.

*What is the main differences between America and Italy? For example our laboratory, but also some important European researchers of participation, as Giovanni Allegretti and Yves Sintomer, underlines how important should be, not only the moment of build a proposal (it could be with the consensus building method), but also the moment in which this proposal be done and the "day after", thus how it's going to work and who is going to manage it. Who could be in charge of implement the projects once they were decided with the consensus building?*

In fact we don't use the word consensus in many countries. For example, in Italy, the title of our book is *Confronto Creativo*. In many cultures, like Italy, people think that negotiations only end when one side gets what it wants and the other give up. In many parts of the world, they don't know another model. We have to introduce examples from everyday life to show that it is possible for people with conflicting interests to reach agreement. . We often start with very simple stories, as for example a mother with two daughters that are fighting for an orange, there's only one orange left, and the mother says *"I'm going to solve this dispute"*. She cuts the orange in two pieces, half to



A 10 m high inflatable dinosaur depicting dirty energy technologies as well as an inflatable nuclear power station protested in front of the EU Council building.

one and half to the other. The mother's intervention is terrible. She thinks that her daughters want the orange for the same reason, but she doesn't ask what they want the orange for. In fact, one wants the fruit of the orange to make juice, while the other one wants just a little part of the orange peel to make orange-flavored icing for a cake. If she had asked better questions, and listened carefully, she could have helped the girls come up with a better solution. Merely giving half to each didn't solve the problem very well.

In general governments don't ask people why do you take this position? They assume they know. They listen only to their friends and supporters. They don't even search for ways of meeting multiple interest at the same time. But we can change that. As planners we should try to mediate. We can't say that one side is right and the other is wrong. I've worked in many countries over the past 40 years, and all the government officials I've met get surprised by the idea that they might be able to help groups with conflicting interests meet their goals at the same time. Of course, this would require changing very basic assumptions about the role of government and the practice of public administration.

Implementation of agreements can and should also be approached as a collaborative process. The implementation of agreements requires monitoring and adjustment.

A government can call us, and we offer to produce, in 6 to 8 weeks, what we call a "stakeholder assessment". We might interview one to two hundred people. These are

confidential conversations, not for attribution. Nobody's name it's going to be on them. The document we produce can be summarized as a one page matrix. Categories of stakeholders down one side and a list of issues (or concerns of the various stakeholders) across the top. We fill in this matrix based on our interviews (without mentioning anyone by name) and send it in draft to everyone we have interviewed. We say, "Call us if you don't see what you told us. We'll fix it.? Then we can give the relevant public officials a clear understanding of who needs to be involved, what the agenda needs to cover, what information people need to participate effectively, and how much time a process of joint problem-solving will take. We first talk with the

small group that everyone knows has a view on the issue under discussion. Those folks tell us about others they think we should see. The process snowballs. Sometimes, there are interests at stake but no obvious group to call. So, we might have to reach out to stand-ins or proxies to make sure all appropriate stakeholders are involved. Based on everyone's reactions, we can craft a budget proposal to the city and a timetable. We can even suggest rules and procedures by which a problem-solving group would operate.

One very important thing is make *The invitation*. The question to people is, "If you are invited from the mayor or the city council to participate in a redevelopment effort, with all these information, that makes you are saying clearly what the process is, the objective, the budget, the time, and the role of people involved. Would you participate?" If not, call us, don't call the mayor, and tell us which you want to change of the processes in order it likes you to participate in. After that we get this suggestions, someone can say they don't want to participate anyway, others say how to improve it, or change something in order to make a processes that they like. In a second moment we say to the mayor, this is the processes we propose to you, and have the acceptance of people that wanted to participate with this agenda, this budget and this timetable, and this are the people who want to participate with this rules and this conditions.

At that point we say to the government now it's your decision. If you want to get people involved, you know

who to contact and what their concerns are. They know that there has been a process in which all the relevant stakeholder groups have been consulted on the design of a participatory procedure.

*In our experience in Italy, in the last years with the many Regions that are making participation processes in territorial planning issues, we have similar processes but in general they end in the moment people decide the project, or the social programme, or how to invest some funds as in the case of the participatory budgets. What happened after that with all the work of local networking, that make associations know each other, put their trust in the process, take time to use new methodologies, ecc.? Does it finish there or we can also make an empowerment of this local networks in order to continue taking care of the public investments, or as Ellinor Ostrom call them "Commons" after urban planners end their work? For example in LatinAmerica, we work with Tomas Rodriguez Villasante from the Complutense University of Madrid, and his group makes all the process with people, trying to give them simplify planning tools, for the day after the technical group go away.*

In general we try to work with people of the place inside of our technical group, if the processes start and the public administration says yes, you create a third neutral group. We need to have in mind three different stages.

The first stage is the *collaborative design of the process*, somebody in a position of authority asks us to initiate a process in which everybody is able to decide in three months. The second stage is the process itself that can take as much as a year, meeting each month. Then you have the last stage, when the proposal is finished and that includes specifying an implementation plan.

The city government is on the table during the 11 months. It's something that they pay for and supported. They can ignore it but they know now that everybody agree to have these proposals and are looking for the results of that process. That is very different to the traditional way of planning.

*Thus you are talking about participatory democracy? Or how some politicians are experienced alternative ways of representative democracy in the world? How much do you think it's growing this phenomenon in the whole world?*

In fact we are talking about participatory democracy, or what is sometimes called deliberative democracy. But, as I said at the beginning. It depends on the place. Ten years ago when I started to work in Korea they thought I was talking about some crazy American idea. Since then, things have completely changed. Now they prefer a participatory planning process than having people occupy city hall when they don't like the new city's energy plans. We can use

In Italy the movement No Tav protests against the construction of the high-speed rail, AGV, Lione - Torino in Val Susa.





Protest march in Brasilia against the Belomonte hydroelectric dam in the heart of the Amazon forest.

*Do you think this is also an anthropological change of values? The places that you mentioned before are changing their view about human rights for example?*

Look about China, every 6 month a new city of 1 million people is created. People move into these places, but they don't always like what they see. This creates pressure for further adaptation and change. The central government in China is not going to give away its power easily or rapidly. But in my view, the forces of democratization are unstoppable.

*What about people that came from different parts of the world and live in the same context which is not their natural culture? What*

town meetings or other methodologies; it's a new way of representing a wide range of interests in decision-making and ensuring that technical considerations are taken into account.

This is direct democracy, although we don't say that. We say *it's the latest development in the participatory side of democracy.*

*Do you notice that these practises are growing in the whole world? There is a change in the administrations, in the political theory and practises? Globalisation could be a good tool although we think on it as many great economic powers that need central and authoritarian governments for make business?*

We are not waiting for the whole democratic system to change. With globalisation more people are learning about collaborative decision-making methods and processes. Why they are changing now? Do you see what happened in the Middle East, or the changes in China, they can't stop it anymore. When so many people are being educated in a global curricula they find a way inside the system of their countries to move ahead. These nations are not going to be completely democratic all of a sudden. But movement in the direction of deliberative democracy is possible everyone.

*happened with migrations in the whole world? Which is the new democratic mixed culture that is emerging in Europe, for example, but also in other destination of migration movements? In our experience at Rome, we find not a single culture, but many different cultures which don't want to reproduce new ways of exploitation. Sometimes they left their countries because of that, therefore they don't want to be under new hierarchies.*

This is a new question of research, how marginalized groups in cities make claims to improve their lives. For example, they want to make gardens. They want to cultivate their own food in these gardens. They want to control the access to housing in their area.

They want access to some public resources to maintain and improve the infrastructure in their area. They want to teach to their children in their own language. Even in the poorest areas of every city, there are community groups that want to "green" their community and work for improvements. They don't want to escape from these areas. They want to improve them. They want to be involved in decisions that will shape the future of the neighbourhoods where they live. This is true in poor immigrant areas around the world. Urban researchers need to focus on local sustainable development efforts and how they can be facilitated.

#### Image sources

The image on page. 65 is the cover of the book: Susskind L. E., Sclavi M. (2011), *Confronto Creativo. Dal diritto alla parola al diritto di essere ascoltati*, Edizioni Et Al., Milano; the image on page. 66 is taken from <http://www.britannica.com>; the image on page. 67 is taken from <http://bargad.org>; the image on page. 68 is taken from <http://www.foeeurope.org>; the image on page. 69 is taken from <http://www.formatonews.com>; the image on page. 70 is taken from <http://amazonwatch.org>.

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