



« POLITICAL DECISION AND TRUTH » SYMPOSIUM

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*Argument**

We are used to saying a political decision is *good* or *fair*, or even *right* rather than to say it is *true*. Yet, that the statement “true decision” may seem unapt, clumsy, even meaningless, does not imply that there is generally no conception of truth involved in practical choice, and particularly in political decision-making. Thus our describing political decision as *good* or *bad*, or as *fair* or *unfair*, would express an ambiguous and controversial involvement of the concept of truth rather than its exclusion. At the same time, political debate purports to *demonstrate* that some are *right* and others *wrong*. Moreover, knowledge is permanently called for and required, including within the context of modern democracy, as shown by the use of *skillfulness* made in all *experts* debates. Those experts are supposed to *know* better than the average citizen what *ought* to be chosen, and what decisions *ought* to be made.

This conference aims to be an opportunity to explore the use of the notion of truth, which is often implied in the way we analyze and value political decisions. Among the different issues that are raised, two main directions – likely to be connected – take shape:

- The first one, more conceptual, addresses directly the questions of the determination and nature of the notion of truth involved in the political field.

The goal is to clarify the meaning of the notion of truth in the field of political decision-making. What kind of truth are we talking about? Which sense is most apt to make for a legitimate use of the notion? Certainly not the paradigm notion of truth we meet in theoretical fields and which implies the double attribute of necessity and universality. If the realm of human affairs is one where the modal status of things and events is contingency, where normativity is implied, and where we have to decide between various ends and values, it seems debatable and – to say the least – difficult to think of practical truth according to the model of theoretical truth.

On the other hand, it is probably not relevant to say that all decisions are merely *subjective* – not to say *arbitrary*: admittedly, political choices cannot claim to be *unquestionable* the way theoretical statements can be, but some of those choices are obviously considered *better* than others, and are considered to be so from a point of view that claims not to be merely subjective. Insofar as decisions can be *debated*, a debate presupposes the production and the confrontation of *reasons* – reasons which involve and mix in a problematic way concepts of fairness, goodness, and truth. So, exactly what are we discussing when we make a decision? Since one must determine the best *ends* to aim for and the best *ways* to achieve them, both practical and theoretical rationality – or, in Kantian terms, practical judgments and knowledge judgments – seem to be involved, without any sharp divide between each.

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In order to get round difficulties – both epistemological and strictly political – which are linked to determination of a “goodness”, a “fairness” and a “truth”, well-known theories plead purely procedural conceptions of decision-making. But, what is the meaning of “justice” in those theories? Does this meaning really succeed in excluding every reference to such notions?

- The second direction is more contextual and is concerned with how the notion of truth is used in current public space, within modern, pluralistic, and representative democracy.

The notion is pervasive under different shapes. We appeal to experts in science, economics, even ethics. Think tanks have become common institutions whose explicit goal is to influence policy-making in virtue of their expertise. In France, the CCNE (National Consultative Ethical Committee) is an expression of the need for debate – especially about bioethics –, but equally of the preference for experts’ advice over citizens’ opinions. While political pluralism and democracy are not overtly questioned, a distinction between those who know and those who don’t is consistently reasserted. So, what do those who know actually know? Even if they know *more*, why would they know *better* what ought to be done? Is there but one right answer to a given problem? If so, the range of possibilities would be drastically reduced and would echo Margaret Thatcher’s famous “TINA” slogan: “*There is no alternative*”. But then, exactly what is *practical* in political decisions: are they not reduced to a problem of pure knowledge, and politics to simple management business? On the other hand, it’s not clear that such a reduction really is more value- and preconception-free: choosing means is only meaningful in relation to an end, even when aiming at this end does not result from an explicit decision.

Finally, questioning the relationship between political decision and truth is confronting the way we think of democracy and of the possibility for each political entity to make its own destiny. It’s as well questioning the way we circumscribe and define the realm of the possible and the contingent, within which and no other something like a real political decision can be conceived: human agency takes place in a sphere where, while not everything can be known, one nevertheless has to choose and decide. Now, isn’t the very definition of this sphere something that implies, at least in part, a decision? In other words, isn’t it itself a genuinely political issue?