



Conferencia Internacional
Democracia Directa en América Latina 14/15 de
Marzo de 2007, Buenos Aires, Argentina

International Conference
Direct Democracy in Latin America 14-15 March
2007, Buenos Aires, Argentina

Rolf Rauschenbach
rolf@rauschenbach.ch
www.rauschenbach.ch

**Processes of direct democracy as generators of
postconventional moral culture.
Radicalizing Jürgen Habermas' theory of deliberative
democracy with Lawrence Kohlberg's developmental
psychology**

Organized by:



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Introduction¹

In this paper I argue that processes of direct democracy are a powerful method to create positive political culture. In the theory of deliberative democracy, political culture is an important element. It is described as a phenomenon, which cannot be enforced by the state, but which is crucial for spontaneous initiations of deliberations. Due to its prepolitical status, political culture remains a rather vague concept in the literature of deliberative democracy and no hints are provided how it could be fostered.

The first line of thought in this paper is that *political culture* can be better understood when it is seen in the light of Kohlberg's thinking on *moral psychology*. I argue that moral culture is the core element of political culture, besides ethical and pragmatic aspects. Revisiting Kohlberg's scholarship leads us to an expansion of his four collective stages of moral culture by two additional stages. This allows us to differentiate between preconventional, conventional and postconventional moral cultures. It will become clear that adequate deliberations of issues in a complex society can take place only with a postconventional moral culture.

The second line of thought is that *processes of direct democracy* are a powerful method to create *postconventional* moral culture. Processes of direct democracy can be derived from Kohlberg's pedagogical methods of dilemma discussion and just community. From this point of view, processes of direct democracy no longer appear as a mere complement or substitute for parliamentary decision-making processes, but as a unique means of political socialization and collective learning and therefore as generators of postconventional moral culture.

This paper is based on my ongoing Ph.D.-research project. Due to space restrictions, I am not able to give an outline of the full theoretical background of my argumentation. I focus on psychological issues and integrate them into the notion of political culture. I shall present my work as follows: I will give a brief overview on Kohlberg's concept of individual stages of moral reasoning (1) and the pedagogical methods he has suggested to facilitate the development of higher stage moral thinking (2). Based

¹ I would like to thank Tonia Speich-Hess and Raffael Himmelsbach for their valuable comments. Furthermore, I would like to thank the Swiss Academy of Humanities and Social Sciences and the University of St. Gallen, Switzerland, for sponsoring my participation in the International Conference on Direct Democracy in Latin America.

on that, I will outline his concept of moral culture and expand it into Habermas' notion of political culture (3). Then, I will show how processes of direct democracy help to create postconventional political culture (4). In the conclusion, I summarize my arguments and highlight my contributions to the debates of political culture and processes of direct democracy.

1 Individual stages of moral reasoning

According to Kohlberg², *moral behavior* is the result of *affective* and of *cognitive processes*; it is however the cognitive reasoning which gives behavior a moral quality. Cognitive processes create the moral consciousness, which enables a person to interact with others along explicit moral choices. In that sense, moral reasoning is a cognitive capability, which allows a person to assume different perspectives in a moral dilemma and to reflect on the conflicting views in order to derive a just solution. However, this capability needs to be *learned*. Kohlberg describes this learning process in six stages.

In general, cognitive *stages* have the following characteristics: while different cognitive stages serve the same basic function of moral reasoning, they imply a qualitative difference in structures. This means that *different modes of thinking* can be observed in different stages. Stages form an *invariant sequence*, meaning that an individual has to go through one stage at the time, none be skipped. A number of factors may speed up the progress along this sequence or slow it down or even stop it, but they do not change the sequence. Each of these different and sequential modes of thought form a *structural whole*. A given stage response on a task does not simply represent a specific response determined by knowledge and familiarity with that task or tasks similar to it; rather, it represents the organization of an underlying thought. Stages are *hierarchical integrations* and form an order of increasingly

² Lawrence Kohlberg was born in 1927 in Bronxville, near New York. He grew up in a conservative Jewish environment, as his protestant mother was divorced when he was five years old. In 1945, he joined the merchant marine and was sent to Europe. The devastating results of the war and of the Holocaust motivated him to join the Haganah, the paramilitary organization of the Jewish community. He was imprisoned by British troops, then again liberated by the Haganah and spent some time in a kibbutz. After his return to the United States of America, he started his studies in psychology and philosophy. From his doctoral dissertation on, he did research in the field of moral psychology and philosophy. Quickly, he became one of the most important authors in that area; from 1968 to 1987, he was professor at Harvard University. In 1987, he committed suicide due to chronic depression and pain, which were the result of a tropical disease he had contracted 16 years earlier while doing research.

differentiated and integrated structures for fulfilling a common function. Therefore higher stages integrate the structures found at lower stages.

While Kohlberg's theory has an explicit *normative basis* – he favors the postconventional moral reasoning of the highest stage, with reference to, among others, the discourse ethics by Habermas – it would be wrong to conclude that a person who is assigned to a lower stage is not equally worth morally. The assignment to a lower stage means that a person's cognitive capabilities to reflect on a moral dilemma are limited; however, it is assumed that this person uses his (limited) skills in the best and most just way. At the same time, this implies that in a complex moral dilemma, a person with a low stage moral reasoning will most likely not be able to make an *adequate judgment*. Kohlberg provides extensive descriptions of the six stages of moral reasoning of which I provide some excerpts:

Stage 1 – Heteronomous morality: The perspective at stage 1 is that of naive moral realism. That is, the moral significance of an action, its goodness or badness, is seen as a real, inherent, and unchanging quality of the act, just as color and mass are seen as inherent qualities of objects. This realism is reflected by an assumption that moral judgments are self-evident, requiring little or no justification beyond assigning labels or citing rules. Punishment is seen as important in that it is identified with a bad action rather than because the actor is attempting pragmatically to avoid negative consequences to him or herself. Likewise, there is an absence of mediating concepts, such as deservingness or intentionality, through which the particular circumstances of the case alter its moral significance. The perspective of moral realism represents a failure to differentiate multiple perspectives on dilemmas. Morality at stage 1 is heteronomous; that is, what makes something wrong is defined by the authority.

Stage 2 – Individualistic, instrumental morality: Stage 2 is characterized by a concrete individualistic perspective. There is an awareness that each person has his or her own interests to pursue and that these may conflict. A moral relativity develops out of the understanding that different persons can have different, yet equally valid, justifications for their claims to justice. The morally right is relative to the particular situation and to the actor's perspective on the situation. Since each person's primary aim is to pursue his or her own interests, the perspective at stage 2 is pragmatic – to maximize satisfaction of one's needs and desires while minimizing negative consequences to the self. The assumption that the other is also operating from this premise leads to an emphasis on instrumental exchange as a mechanism through which individuals can coordinate their actions for mutual benefit.

Stage 3 – Interpersonally normative morality: At stage 3 the separate perspectives of individuals are coordinated into a third person perspective, that of mutually trusting relationships among people, which is embodied in a set of shared moral norms according to which people are expected to live. These moral norms and expectations transcend or are generalized across particular persons and situations. The primacy of shared norms at stage 3

entails an emphasis on being a good, altruistic, or prosocial role occupant and on good or bad motives as indicative of general personal morality. As a result of the socially shared perspective, the individual at stage 3 is particularly concerned with maintaining interpersonal trust and social approval. The justice operations of Stage 3 are most clearly represented in golden rule role-taking – Do unto others as you would have others do unto you. Logically, this involves the coordination of the inverse and reciprocal operations.

Stage 4: *Social system morality*: At stage 4 the individual takes the perspective of a generalized member of society. This perspective is based on a conception of the social system as a consistent set of codes and procedures that apply impartially to all members. The pursuit of individual interests is considered legitimate only when it is consistent with the maintenance of the sociomoral system as a whole. There is an awareness that there can be conflicts even between good role occupants. This realization makes it necessary to maintain a system of rules for resolving such conflicts. The perspective taken is generally that of a societal, legal, or religious system which has been codified into institutionalized laws and practices.

Stage 5 – *Human rights and social welfare morality*: The stage 5 prior-to-society perspective is that of a rational moral agent aware of universalizable values and rights that anyone would choose to build into a moral society. The validity of actual laws and social systems can be evaluated in terms of the degree to which they preserve and protect these fundamental human rights and values. The social system is seen ideally as a contract freely entered into by each individual in order to preserve the rights and promote the welfare of all members. This is a 'society-creating' rather than a 'society-maintaining' perspective. Society is conceived of as based on social cooperation and agreement. Within the stage 5 perspective, the primary focus may be either on rights or on social welfare. The former orientation emphasizes the point that some rights must be considered inviolable by the society. These rights cannot be abridged even through freely chosen contracts. Each person has an obligation to make moral choices that uphold these rights, even when they conflict with society's laws or codes.

Stage 6: *Morality of universalizable, reversible, and prescriptive general ethical principles*: The sociomoral perspective of stage 6 is that of "the moral point of view," a point of view which ideally all human beings should take toward one another as free and equal autonomous persons. This means equal consideration of the claim or points of view of each person affected by the moral decision to be made. This prescriptive role-taking is governed by procedures designed to insure fairness, impartiality, or reversibility in role-taking.

The *empirical existence* of preconventional (stages 1 and 2) and conventional stages (stages 3 and 4) has been proven in studies around the globe. Postconventional stages (stages 5 and 6) could be found only in modern and complex societies, and even there, they are not widespread.

2 Dilemma discussions and just community

Kohlberg's intention was not only to provide a descriptive and normative framework for the development of moral reasoning, but also to suggest ways by which the *development* of moral behavior can be *enhanced*. Since an important part of the moral development of a person takes place during infancy and youth, his pedagogical methods – dilemma discussions and just community – are designed for *school settings*.

In *dilemma discussions*, students are confronted with a hypothetical moral dilemma and are asked to express their views on how the dilemma could be solved in a just way. Since groups normally consist of individuals who have developed to different stages, the students experience in dilemma discussions the strengths and weaknesses of their own moral reasoning and learn to take different perspectives. According to Kohlberg, an individual starts to develop into a higher stage once he has become aware that his current moral reasoning is not fully adequate. In dilemma discussions the focus is on issues and their underlying values and principles, not on persons. This does not mean, that emotions are to be ignored, but they should be attached rather to moral values than to individual persons. The effectiveness of dilemma discussions in enhancing the development of moral reasoning has been empirically proven. However, its main weakness lays in the nature of the method: discussions are limited to verbal interaction and are mostly based on fictional examples. The crucial and demanding transfer from words to actions is not envisioned.

The objective of the second method – *just community* – is to allow the practical application of actual moral choices. Students debate real problems derived from their school life and participate directly in the decision on how controversial issues are to be handled. Kohlberg suggests a set of institutions and procedures which establishes a just community as a small-scale democracy within a school. The main elements are as follows:

- *preparatory committee*, consisting of students and teachers, which prepares the community meetings; dilemma discussions are held in class to prepare the community meetings as well;
- regular *community meetings*, which are attended by all students, teachers and administrators and in which controversial issues are debated and decided on according to the principle of one man, one vote;

- *discipline committee*, which enforces the established rules and supervises the overall process of the just community. It consists of students, teachers and administrators.

For obvious reasons, a just community is a *challenging undertaking*. First, because issues which in traditional schools remain in the hidden curriculum, are now debated openly; this may lead to escalations. Second, just communities do not happen within a vacuum: values and expectations of the outside world (e.g. parents, politicians, media) may have an influence on the moral reasoning and behavior of the members of the just community, which is beyond their reach. The measurement of the effectiveness of just community is not an easy task either, in particular, since it would be interesting to know how it affects the moral behavior of students outside of the school. *Empirical* examples show that with considerable efforts, positive effects both on moral reasoning and behavior can be attained.

3 Moral and political culture

Initially, Kohlberg's focus was purely individualistic – consider the individual stages of moral reasoning. However, with the implementation of just communities, it became clear that the cognitive capabilities for moral reasoning are quite distinct from other cognitive skills. For example, mathematical problem solving is a solely individual task, whereas moral reasoning is always a social endeavour and requires some interaction with others. That is why the *quality of these relationships* became a pivotal matter for the understanding of moral development. It was found that a person may have developed to a high individual stage, but due to a certain quality of the relationship with others, this person was not able to perform on his high stage; subsequently, others on a lower stage had no incentive to aspire to a higher stage either. To substantiate the quality of these relationships, Kohlberg introduced the concept of collective stages of moral culture.

The nature of *collective stages* differs from individual stages: collective stages do *not* follow an *invariant* sequence. The moral culture of a group may start at any stage; this depends on the individual stages of the group members and on other circumstances. Regress to lower collective stages occurs more easily than in the case of individual development. Collective stages are *not structural wholes*: individual stages describe only the cognitive aspect of moral reasoning where some consistency can be expected. Collective stages of moral culture do not refer to a "group mind," even though it is maintained that individuals interacting in groups construct common norms, which in turn influence their thinking in the group. Furthermore, we need to

take into account that most groups consist of individuals who have developed to different individual stages. Below, I provide an idealized description of the pre-conventional and conventional collective stages:

Collective Stage 1 – *Moral culture of authority*: Kohlberg does not provide a description for stage 1 and one might rightly argue that on this stage, there is no moral culture to be observed. Behavior is oriented towards the dominant authority, all relationships between group members are a product of (physical) coercion and vanish into thin air as soon as the authority loses ground.

Collective Stage 2 – *Moral culture of exchange relationships*: Stage 2 consists of a market culture – one enters into a relationship to conduct exchanges. Needs of others are a concern as far as their fulfillment gives right to satisfy one's own desires, they are processed in an ends-justifies-the-means-logic. Moral culture at stage 2 is not able to capture the complexity of an individual as an end in itself. Community is valued as far as it allows one to satisfy one's own needs, but it has no merit in itself. Democracy is limited to the point that everybody has a right to make claims. Claims are considered individually and handled bilaterally. Collective needs are not present or not perceived as such.

Collective stage 3 – *Moral culture of being in good hands*: It is only from this conventional stage on, that substantive moral culture is generated. On stage 3, community is experienced through a network of strong relationships with other members. Closeness, friendship and consideration help to forge intimate links. The community is viewed as a vehicle to pursue common goals and values, something which would not be possible on a stand-alone basis. Democracy gives the right to speak out as well as to be heard. There is a sense for collective objectives; they are derived by majority vote and respected even to the detriment of one's own interests.

Collective stage 4 – *Moral culture of stabilization and identification*: On stage 4, community is more than the sum of the personal relationships – it is a value in itself. Being a member of a community implies rights and duties. Relationships with other members can now be stabilized, as they are no longer a product of affective bonds but of the rules of the community. At the same time, identities are more and more disengaged from personal relationships and based on ideas, values and pertinent institutions. As a consequence, communities serve as a pole of identification. Democratic processes at stage 4 aim at the expression, perception and consideration of everybody's concerns so that the majority represents the general will. The

benefit for the community is decisive.

Kohlberg's description of moral culture ends on stage 4. Why is that so? There are two explanations: First, he focused his observations of moral cultures to *school settings*. As it is a common fact that individual postconventional moral reasoning (stages 5 and 6) occurs normally only beyond adolescence (if at all) and as the collective stage never exceeds the individual stages represented in the group, it is a logical consequence that postconventional levels of moral culture cannot be identified among pupils. However, there is a second and even more fundamental reason: Kohlberg regarded exclusively just communities. In *communities*, all members know each other, at least superficially. Due to their small size and simple structure, communities lack the complexity which is required to engender the necessity for postconventional moral reasoning. In other words, (just) communities do not require and therefore do not allow for the development of postconventional moral reasoning. Hence, there is no postconventional moral culture in (just) communities.

It is at the juncture between communities and societies where *theories of deliberative democracy* come into play. They provide a framework of democracy in the context of *complex societies*. To advance the reflection on collective stages of moral culture in the realm of complex societies, I rely on the theory of deliberative democracy by Habermas.³ Habermas and Kohlberg are guided by the same normative thinking. Habermas' deliberative democracy is the result of the integration of his discourse ethics into his theory of communicative action. Kohlberg views Habermas' discourse ethics as the most adequate philosophy to support his psychological theory; Habermas reckons the same the other way around: discourse ethics require postconventional moral reasoning.

What I would like to suggest in this paper is, that we can link Kohlberg's *moral culture* to Habermas' *political culture*. According to Habermas, political culture is a

³ Jürgen Habermas was born in 1929 in Gummersbach, close to Düsseldorf, Germany. His father was a NSDAP-member and Habermas served at the end of World War II in the Hitler Youth. After the war, he started his studies in philosophy, psychology, German literature and economics. In 1961, he became professor for philosophy in Heidelberg. From 1964 to 1994, he was professor for philosophy in Frankfurt on the Main. This function was however intercepted by a number of important academic engagements in Germany and abroad. Habermas has gained an important posture as an intellectual in Germany (student revolts, historians' quarrel). Even more influential are his theoretical contributions to contemporary philosophy and social sciences (theory of communicative action, discourse ethics, theory of deliberative democracy). He was a personal friend of Lawrence Kohlberg. He lives in Frankfurt.

netting of mentalities and convictions, which is silently present in the hearts and heads of the citizens. It forms the basis for spontaneous associations of unorganized political actors in order to initiate deliberations of issues so far neglected by the institutionalized political arena. However, due to political culture, the initiation of new deliberations is not only motivated by self-interest, but also by the keenness of the public use of reason and the readiness for solidarity. The exercise of political culture requires the ability for perspective-taking, abstraction and reflection. Political culture cannot be the result of state coercion, but must be learned cognitively by the citizens. It is the result of political socialization and familiarization with freedom and the knowledge of its limits and duties. In itself, political culture is not a fixed or even specific programme, but a procedure, which allows one to shift horizons hermeneutically, as citizens interpret their constitution and their lifeworld.

While Habermas' description of political culture contains a number of elements with a Kohlbergian touch (Habermas even suggests that political culture can be understood in the sense of postconventional morale [Sittlichkeit]), he does not make any explicit reference to Kohlberg and the notion of moral culture, represented in collective stages. However, *incorporating* the latter into the notion of political culture leads to a more tangible conceptualization of political culture and it allows us to differentiate political cultures as well as to show the disparity between the real life phenomenon and normative exigencies of the theory of deliberative democracy. Below, I propose brief descriptions of the collective stages 5 and 6.

Collective stage 5 – *Moral culture of constitutional state, human versus civil rights*: Moral culture at the first postconventional stage embraces the fact that individuals are members of a complex society. However, society is not a given, but the product of innumerable contributions of all members. The main contributions are respect for and the exercise of fundamental rights; the rule of law and the constitutional state operate as a facilitator. Minorities are paid special attention, although they are perceived as minorities. This differentiating perspective is even more clearly expressed in the distinction between human rights (benefitting all members of a society, potentially humankind) and civil rights (benefitting only the citizens of a society).

Collective stage 6 – *Moral culture of universalization of cosmopolitan rights [Weltbürgerrecht]*: Moral culture on stage 6 is universalizing cosmopolitan rights. From a moral point of view, no difference is made between a citizen and a non-citizen of a given society, nor between members of different societies. In a moral

culture at stage 6, individuals are conscious about the fact that such distinctions undermine the core of their moral principles and subvert them to ideology. Moral culture at stage 6 is not defining a certain type of good life but rather the form of an egalitarian and communicative coexistence of multiple ideas of good life. The communitarian concept of the good life in politics is definitely abandoned, yet the participation in democratic processes always aims at the co-existence of diverging ideas of good life. Society is as complex as it is fragmented; this fragmentation is also reflected in the fragmented identities of the individuals. However, fragmentation is cultivated, as on stage 6, individuals are aware of the existence of unresolvable differences. They cope with them peacefully and for that reason, they are able to enjoy diversity.

Moral culture is not synonymous with political culture. From a cognitive point of view, moral culture is the *core element* of political culture. It implies the cognitive patterns, which also apply in ethical and pragmatic considerations, the other elements of political culture. Pragmatic issues refer to socioeconomical fundamentals, which may or may not produce an environment of equality and allow development; ethical issues refer to the concept of good life. It goes without saying that moral, ethical and pragmatic issues are interrelated in a complex manner, the distinction is purely analytical.

4 Processes of direct democracy

One of the basic assumptions of Kohlberg's theory is that development to a higher stage is the result of a learning process. *Learning* depends on individual factors and on the presence of external stimulations. By evaluating dilemma discussions and just communities as ways of providing external *stimulations* for moral development, we have seen that dilemma discussions help to develop moral reasoning on a higher stage, but they do not imply a transfer from thinking to doing. The just community approach overcomes this weakness by allowing debates on real life issues and everybody's participation in the decision process. Since this approach operates only on a community level, it is not able to provide complex stimulations that are required for the development of postconventional stages. From these insights, we can draw the conclusion that an instrument is needed which goes beyond the level of community to the level of *complex society*.

But how can we achieve the transition from the community level to the level of complex societies? Above, just communities were characterized as small-scale

democracies. Evidently, we cannot simply inflate this model to societal magnitude; the sheer number of citizens of a complex society does not allow the physical meeting of all people. Nevertheless, the basic idea of including everybody in the deliberative process shall be maintained, as we assume that postconventional moral culture develops only when an important part of the population has reached postconventional stages individually. When looking for solutions to this problem, it becomes clear that only *processes of direct democracy* meet these requirements. From a point of view of developmental psychology, they include the following features:

- Processes of direct democracy are the result of and the basis for *discussions*. These debates take place on all possible levels: in informal settings, in the general public and in formal political institutions. While the impact of the different debates may vary, their formal importance is the same as the only decisive moment is the ballot, in which each citizen has one vote.
- Processes of direct democracy are the adequate framework for debating and deciding on issues engendered by *complex societies*: matters of fundamental rights can be ruled legitimately only under the condition that everybody has a say.
- As all citizens have the right to vote, all debates definitely lose their hypothetical nature. Processes of direct democracy are not simulations. This *realness* is an additional motivation for participating in deliberative processes.
- Actual participation in political action, deliberation and conflict make citizens aware of their more remote and indirect connections with others, the longrange and large scale significance of what they want and are doing. In that sense, processes of direct democracy provoke *perspective taking on a societal level*.

One might critically argue that processes of direct democracy are similar to dilemma discussions, as debating and voting have no direct influence on moral behavior. This is a limited view, *as in ballots, moral attitudes of the majority become enforceable law*: it is to be expected that those who vote for a certain rule will behave accordingly or are willing to bear the juridical consequences. Dilemma discussions lack the vital enforcing mechanism.

It is interesting to note that Habermas does not mention processes of direct

democracy as a means for deliberation; to me, it is not yet clear why. In his deliberative model, parliamentary processes play the key role and the general public intervenes only via elections and in extraordinary situations. In that context, I would like to highlight that in my understanding, processes of direct democracy cannot fully replace representative mechanisms. However, from a moral point of view, the existence of processes of direct democracy have an *equalizing effect* between voters and political office holders, as for important issues everybody has an equal right to vote. By that, the authoritative status of a political office is mitigated and the ideal of non-hierarchical discourse [herrschaftsfreier Diskurs] closer to realization.

When processes of direct democracy are applied to facilitate *postconventional moral reasoning and culture* and not to produce political decisions only, the following points may be considered:

- Dilemma discussions and the just community approach show positive effects on the moral development only if they are implemented in a *regular fashion*. The same applies to processes of direct democracy. Once-in-a-lifetime ballots may be spectacular but their impact on moral reasoning and culture is negligible.
- The *moral impact* of different processes of direct democracy *varies*. Petitions, in which citizens are allowed to express their claims without any obligation of the political offices to react, as well as consultative ballots, which are not binding for the legislator or government, perpetuate a hierarchical relationship; these instruments operate below postconventional stages. When citizens are allowed to initiate or stop political decisions, postconventional reasoning and culture is able to develop.
- Obviously, postconventional reasoning and culture are not fruits of processes of direct democracy alone. Besides individual factors, *ethical* and *pragmatic* issues play a role. Nevertheless, it is to be expected that processes of direct democracy help to clarify ethical questions and that they lead in the long run to more pragmatic settings, in particular higher socioeconomical equality, which in return enable more citizens to develop to a postconventional stage of moral reasoning.

Conclusion

In this paper, I argue that the concept of political culture can be meaningfully differentiated by incorporating Kohlberg's collective stages of moral culture. This leads to an expansion of the concept of moral culture to the postconventional level. It also leads to the insight that when issues of a complex society are to be addressed in a deliberative process, postconventional moral culture is required. Revisiting Kohlberg's pedagogical methods of dilemma discussion and just community leads us to processes of direct democracy as a powerful means to generate postconventional moral culture.

My *contributions* to the debates of political culture and of processes of direct democracy are therefore the following:

- Differentiation of *political culture* along the collective stages of moral culture and introduction of postconventional collective stages of moral culture, and
- Demonstration of the importance of *processes of direct democracy* from a point of view of developmental psychology.

With these contributions, I have radicalized Habermas' theory of deliberative democracy twofold: the *first radicalization* lies in pushing democracy to its extreme by suggesting processes of direct democracy as important means of deliberation. The *second radicalization* lies in giving the psychological roots of deliberative democracy visibility.

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Rolf Rauschenbach is working on a Ph.D. thesis with the working title "Processes of direct democracy and morality. Considerations based on the discourse ethics and the developmental psychology by Jürgen Habermas and Lawrence Kohlberg" at the University of St.Gallen, Switzerland. His research is being supervised by Prof. Dr. Philippe Mastronardi and Prof. Dr. Peter Gross. He graduated in 1997 at University of St.Gallen from political science and international relations; additional studies in political science, economics, business administration, philosophy and history at Université Catholique de Louvain, Belgium, New York University, USA, Institut des études politiques de Paris, France and University of Basel, Switzerland. Rolf Rauschenbach has worked as a strategy consultant and as a manager of mergers and acquisitions. Rolf Rauschenbach was born in 1971 in Basel.