
Review

Solidarity across divides: Promoting the moral point of view

George Vasilev (ed)

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Judging from the title, one opens Vasilev's book expecting a discussion on solidarity as we use it our political discourse – for example, when we refer to solidarity among workers, women, or the victims of colonialism. Political theorists might even expect an abstract discussion that goes to the core of what unites these groups around particular identities and struggles. No such discussion is to be found in this volume. As Vasilev makes clear, this is a book on solidarity in ethnically divided states, “where people conceive obligations of justice to begin and end strictly at the boundaries of their own group identity” (p. 3). And as we make our way through the introduction, we also come to understand that there is no such thing as solidarity *per se*. Solidarity connects specific people in specific contexts. It is, as Vasilev rightly observes, a context-dependent and highly contingent concept (p. 8). Accordingly, the book spends very little time examining how the concept of solidarity figures in the works of other political theorists. Instead, he plunges straight into the heart of the matter with vivid examples of collapsed solidarity taken from Northern Ireland, Macedonia, Bosnia, and Lebanon.

Vasilev uses the concept of solidarity in the Durkheimian sense to refer to the ties of society. Taking the case of ethnically divided societies as his point of departure, he asks: “what is it that keeps a political community from fragmenting into its constituent cultural parts? What compels its members to approach common problems in terms of ‘what is good for my society’ as opposed to ‘what is good for my group’?” (p. 11). The first chapter argues against a monist model of solidarity that posits a shared public culture as the necessary precondition for individuals to extend moral obligations beyond their particular groups. Vasilev has in mind liberal nationalists such as David Miller and Yael Tamir who maintain that national identity is *the* cohesive medium for wider social affinities and the functioning of a social democracy. The monist position, he argues, is untenable because collective identity, especially in cases of divided societies, always means the promotion of one identity at the expense of another. Instead, he defends a pluralist account. For



Vasilev, solidarity does not require a shared national culture; rather, differently situated actors are responsive to three fundamental aspects of collective existence: freedom (self-determination), recognition (the respect people believe their identity is due), and redistribution (the material conditions that enable people to live dignified lives). If these three conditions are met, then solidarity across ethnic divides is secure; if they are missing, solidarity collapses, and with it the very fabric of society.

What political arrangements can guarantee these three aspects and secure solidarity amongst ethnic groups? The second chapter evaluates three possible candidates: liberal multiculturalism, consociationalism, and deliberative democracy. While the first two seem obvious candidates, Vasilev ends up arguing for the third. Liberal multiculturalism, he argues, suffers from being too moral, while consociationalism suffers from being too functional. Liberal multiculturalism is too moral because it preassigns moral value to a cultural group by virtue of their cultural distinctiveness. All ethnonational groups can make claims for group-differentiated rights on the basis that they are ethnically different. But, for Vasilev, we cannot a priori argue for group-differentiated rights without considering how ethnic groups are faring today. Therefore, “a more careful and precise rationale for the distribution of nation-building powers is required than Kymlicka’s liberal multiculturalism” (p. 52). Consociationalism, on the other hand, suffers from the opposite weakness. Rather than being too moral, it is too empirical and “surrenders too much to existing practice” (p. 56). Consociational arrangements are made for the sake of political stability, not because ethnic groups are morally owed any kind of recognition. The risk, for Vasilev, is that consociationalism will prioritize groups that are already well organized (numerically, culturally, and, in many cases, militarily) in the name of stability, while ignoring ethnic groups that have a weak infrastructure and cannot weigh in on political negotiations. The “gain in democratic functionality,” he argues, “is pursued by harnessing status quo relations of power, rather than redefining them with a view to making societies more just” (p. 56). The Roma are emblematic of the kinds of groups that consociational arrangements are most likely to ignore. The chapter concludes by favoring deliberative democracy as the most appropriate theory capable of guaranteeing the self-determination, recognition, and redistribution of ethnic groups.

That Vasilev opts for deliberative democracy is, at this point in the book, surprising. Deliberative democracy has been criticized on the grounds that it cannot accommodate cultural differences. Moreover, comparing it with liberal multiculturalism and consociationalism on the grounds that it fares better at cementing solidarity is unanticipated. The first two have real world equivalents, while deliberative democracy remains an ideal theory. We know how deliberation looks in specific settings, but we have no idea how it works at the level of a state. Should not a theory have proven to be solidarity-maximizing in practice before it qualifies as a contender?



Vasilev is aware of this problem, which is why he spends the rest of the book – especially chapters three, four, and five – clarifying his account of deliberative democracy. These are the most interesting and original chapters of the book. To advocates of deliberative democracy, they might even be surprising. From the onset, Vasilev is clear that he does not adhere to the “overly pious views” within deliberative theory (p. 146). In fact, an unrevised theory of deliberative democracy that does not pay attention to the political and sociological realities of divided societies will have the adverse effect of more division rather than more solidarity. Certain mechanisms need to be put in place so that majorities do not oppress the deliberative capacities of minorities. To this end, Vasilev challenges some of the basic assumptions deliberative theorists take for granted.

For example, deliberative democrats have accustomed us to view strategic interaction and instrumental reason as improper for deliberation. Vasilev argues that strategic interaction should not be rejected in principle. A rejection of strategic action on moral grounds can be politically counterproductive. On top of that, reforms initially adopted on self-interested grounds can subsequently be accepted on principled grounds. Moreover, deliberative democrats have taught us to be suspicious of power (except for the power of the strongest argument), but Vasilev argues that, if harnessed for proper ends, power should be embraced. For example, he defends the influence of external agents such as powerful states and international organizations because they can “tip the balance dramatically in favour of subordinated groups, imposing far greater costs on their oppressors than if they merely acted on their own” (p. 118). He also endorses the role of charismatic leaders who can be beneficial for interethnic solidarity. Finally, Vasilev challenges a basic premise of deliberative democracy by favoring in-group over inter-group deliberation. Traditionally, the value of deliberation is thought to improve the more varied the group. In the case of divided societies, however, inter-group deliberation can lead to worse rather than better effects (p. 149). In its stead, Vasilev defends in-group deliberation on the grounds of its pre-existing discursive infrastructure, the high level of trust amongst members, and its significant and unacknowledged “generation of tolerance both qualitatively and quantitatively” (p. 153).

At this point in the book, one might wonder what is left of deliberative democracy. But the final chapter seals Vasilev’s commitment to deliberation by defending the idea of consensus against agonistic critiques like Chantal Mouffe. But here again, his is a nuanced and fine-grained defense. It goes beyond a simplistic and idealized account of consensus and argues for consensus as a matter of degree. Vasilev’s arguments, although counter-intuitive, are convincing. But one is left with an uneasy feeling. Surely in-group deliberation, charismatic leaders, the influence of powerful governments, and international organizations play an underappreciated role and should be evaluated based on their positive contributions to deliberation and solidarity. However, and as we know all too well, they can also play a dangerous role. Defending them on the basis on their impact on deliberation



can go both ways, positive and negative. While Vasilev points this out, he does not provide us with enough tools to guard his version of deliberation from going astray. Either way, the book is provocative, clearly written, and well-argued. It will be of great interest to researchers working on divided societies, solidarity, and deliberative democracy.

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