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## Review

# The Democratic Horizon

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There have always been reasonable doubts about the actual political relevance of Rawls' philosophy. But the sinister conditions of early 21st century can only exacerbate them. How could the neo-Kantian rationalism of the *Theory of Justice* and the still idealistic approach of *Political Liberalism* and its 'Idea of Public Reason' come to grips with the rule of corporate and political elites, the weakening of nation states, the dominance of financial capital in neoliberal globalization, popular disaffection with politics, increasing social fragmentation, dramatic global inequalities, expanding migration flows, the rise of racism and xenophobia, divisive and expansive cultural diversity, climate change? Alessandro Ferrara's *The Democratic Horizon* is a thoughtful and imaginative attempt to situate political liberalism in this context and to renew Rawls's legacy so as to address the predicament of democracy in our late modern times. To this end, Ferrara draws on an admirable diversity of sources beyond political liberalism itself – from Thomas Kuhn and Hannah Arendt to Karl Jaspers and Cornelius Castoriadis – exemplifying the very spirit of openness to plurality which animates his intellectual enterprise.

The author understands political liberalism 'as a normative account of what a liberal-democratic polity ought to be like' (p. 219) and an open project which can be re-elaborated in a variety of potentially conflicting ways (p. 211). He is driven by the conviction that Rawls' *Political Liberalism* contains treasures for a contemporary rethinking of democratic politics:

*Political Liberalism* still offers the most innovative political-philosophical framework for making sense of how a not oppressive democratic polity can come to terms with diversity and pluralism without giving up the distinction between the force of legitimate law and the force of power and hegemony (p. 212).

This is the crucial difference that marks out political liberalism from one of its main contenders in contemporary democratic theory: 'agonistic democracy' championed by Chantal Mouffe, Bonnie Honig, James Tully and William Connolly, among



others. *The Democratic Horizon* engages with this body of thought (pp. 92–100), appreciates the role of conflict in democratic life (pp. 137–139) and shares a key insight of agonistic democrats. Openness, contestation and reflexivity are, indeed, core features of democratic politics through which it could confront daunting challenges today, such as the fact of ‘hyperpluralism’ (p. 218). Although Ferrara’s take on political liberalism moves quite far in combining the two contending accounts of democracy, he holds on to the distinction between the force of legitimate law and the force of power. This is taken to be the defining trait of political liberalism, which sets it apart from ‘sheer’ agonistic politics and grounds its presumed superiority as a political philosophy for our democracies (pp. 219–220). Hence, it is worth reflecting on this difference after providing an outline of Ferrara’s reformulation of the Rawlsian legacy.

Ferrara sets out from a conception of politics which is informed by the potential conflict of publicly relevant ends and upholds ‘the autonomy of politics’ from philosophy, morals or metaphysics (pp. 28–30). Rawls’ public reason strives to distinguish better from worse in the sphere of politics itself. For political liberalism, the priority of certain ends is decided through the force of reasons that are exchanged in public, under conditions of reciprocity and equality. Legitimate power is premised on the consensual prioritization of collective ends (pp. 32–36). Of course, politics cannot be fully shielded from power as *Macht*, but Ferrara chooses ‘to keep this fact at the semantic margins of politics’ (p. 37). This is worth noting.

His approach to democracy faithfully reflects the political liberalism of later Rawls, but Ferrara breaks new ground, first, when he also brings in vision and imagination as integral parts of politics ‘at its best’ (pp. 37–43); ‘politics at its best is the prioritization of ends in the light of good reasons that can move our imagination’ (p. 38). This captures the critical and transformative potential of extraordinary political activity at the moments of constitutional amendment, the disclosure of new political worlds or the exemplary enactment of long established principles. By drawing on Castoriadis, Kuhn and Arendt, Ferrara proposes a political liberalism which can appreciate the contribution of imagination to renewing liberal democracy in ways that were ignored or underdeveloped by Rawls (pp. 39–43, 65).

Second, while he follows Rawls in insisting on the value of political culture, Ferrara places an original emphasis on the ‘passion for openness’. A will to explore new possibilities distinguishes the ethos of democracy, and it fosters pluralism, progressive change, contestation, generosity and hospitality (pp. 44–66). Third, Ferrara seeks to strengthen and enrich the liberal defence of pluralism by addressing non-liberal constituencies – not only religious, but also philosophical, political etc. – who claim to be in the possession of universally valid truths (pp. 67–87). To Rawls’ ‘public reason’, Ferrara adds ‘reflexive pluralism’ and



‘conjectural argument’. Reflexive pluralism applies pluralism to the very grounds for upholding pluralism, toleration and public reason: there can be many good reasons, some of which are immanent in religious, philosophical and other ‘comprehensive views’. Immanent arguments can take the form of a conjecture: because you (Christian, Muslim, Buddhist etc.) believe x, ‘you have all the reasons to accept pluralism, toleration and to abstain from imposing...your beliefs on those who reject them’ (p. 75).

Ferrara holds that conjectural discourses might help political liberalism to tackle a radical type of pluralism which exceeds Rawls’ ‘reasonable pluralism’, but is more realistic as an account of contemporary democracies: ‘hyperpluralism’. This implies the presence of diverse comprehensive views (religions, philosophies and political ideologies) which, in contrast to Rawls’ ‘reasonable’ conceptions, lead their adherents to endorse only a subset of the constitutional essentials of liberal democracy (pp. 91, 101). Ferrara acknowledges that under ‘hyperpluralism’ even conjectural reason may fail to sustain an overlapping consensus on the basic principles of political liberalism.

He proceeds then to a fourth, major revision of Rawls’ liberalism. He champions the idea of a ‘multivariate’ democratic polity, in which a sizable number of citizens endorse conceptions of the good that allow for an overlapping consensus on constitutional essentials, but there are also groups and individuals who accept the constitution on a variety of different grounds, including prudential considerations about the use of force (pp. 105–109). His embrace of late modern pluralism deepens philosophically and politically as Ferrara endorses even aspects of the postmodern turn, notably ‘a sense of the equal dignity of the frames which shape our understanding of the world’ (p. 124). The author is led thus to uphold the notion of ‘multiple modernities’ and to introduce the idea of ‘multiple democracies’ (pp. 118–125). To promote the globalization of democracy, political philosophy should flesh out versions of the democratic ethos which are compatible with different cultural configurations (p. 126). Ferrara argues thus that we can uncover a cross-cultural convergence on three core values democracy: the orientation to the common good, equality and the intrinsic value of individuality. At the same time, in non-Western and non-Protestant cultures it is hard to find equivalents for the value of agonism and the priority of rights over duties (pp. 126–140). Cultural consonances amid divergence enable us to consider the legitimacy of ‘multiple democracies’. They allow us to chart culturally different ‘developmental paths for the transition of decent polities towards full democracy’ (p. 141) in ways that transcend the bounds of universalist liberalism and of Rawls’ own work on political liberalism. The challenge of cultural diversity within the same polity prompts Ferrara to demonstrate the consistency of multiculturalism with liberal democracy, and to suggest a revision that he does not develop: the integration of a ‘normativity of [cultural] identity’ and a measure of legal pluralism within political liberalism (pp. 142–163).



The last two chapters undertake two further attempts to renew and extend Rawlsian liberalism. The first enlists *governance* – soft law, best practices and an open method of coordination among diverse actors – as a non-coercive mode of political regulation that can help to implement deliberative democracy on a supranational level. Processes of international governance are not shorn of democratic legitimacy on the condition that (1) they take place within the bounds of constitutional essentials to which citizens consent in some recognizable way; (2) some kind of accountability is still operative (pp. 164–185). The second attempt seeks to rehabilitate a viable notion of truth for a non-perfectionist liberal approach to democracy. Such a notion is deemed indispensable for a conception of democratic politics which does not reduce politics to a game of power, but it should be equally compatible with conflicting accounts of truth, mainly between the correspondence and the justification views (pp. 186–209).

Aside from the specific objections that one could level to this wide array of arguments and ideas, the crux seems to lie at a more fundamental level. Few would deny that legitimate democratic power should be grounded in an exchange of reasons which takes place under conditions of equality and reciprocity. But how many democratic states adequately meet these conditions today? Rising inequalities, exclusions, forceful power in the hands of financial and political elites seem to be the rule in the state(s) of democracy we are in (see e.g. Schäfer and Streeck, 2013; Brown, 2015; Crouch, 2004). How likely is it that these circumstances will change through reasonable dialogues with powerful interests that would consent to give up on their privileges, wealth and power convinced by good arguments under (non-existent) conditions of reciprocity and equality? If progressive democratic change is improbable via the exchange of reasons alone, the use of power will be required in order precisely to promote the ‘politics at its best’ favoured by political liberalism: democratic institutions, relations and culture(s) in which the ‘force of good reasons’ in the service of common goods will be able to prevail over other sources of unequal power.

No doubt, the power that could contest and transform contemporary relations of domination and injustice should be collective, democratic and non-violent rather than dictatorial and bloody. But political liberalism, in the work of Alessandro Ferrara and others, champions an idealistic conception of politics which simply opposes power politics in principle. Power relations, however, will not vanish just by wishing and thinking them away. In addition to normative philosophy, we need a more realistically inclined political theory which engages with power structures and investigates how collective subjects can be constructed that could effectively challenge elite domination and exclusions in favour of democratic justice. Without a cogent understanding of relations of force and effective modes of collective action, it is hard to imagine how actual capitalist democracies could attain a transition from the present circumstances of steep inequalities, fragmentation,



political cynicism and xenophobia to the democratic ideals envisioned by Ferrara and other political liberals.

The same lack of understanding becomes tellingly evident when Ferrara enlists neoliberalism's favourite administrative logic – governance – in his effort to renew contemporary democracy. He completely fails to recognize how the logic of governance serves today to depoliticize highly contestable policies, covering over inequalities and exclusions in a managerial language of soft, technical and devolved 'problem-solving' among 'stakeholders' (see Brown, 2015, pp. 115–150). It is precisely at this blind spot of political liberalism that the political theory of hegemony and agonistic democracy demonstrates its political value and relevance today, as it grapples with the question of pluralistic and egalitarian democratization from the standpoint of the collective struggles and subjectivities that could effectively pursue this project in our times (see, among others, Laclau and Mouffe, 1985; Mouffe, 2013).

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