
Review Essay

Popular politics in a realist key

Paulina Tambakaki

University of Westminster, London W1B 2HW, UK.

The Next Democracy? The Possibility of Popular Control

Tony Milligan

Rowman and Littlefield, London and New York, 2016, xii + 139 pp.,

ISBN: 978-1783480654

The Mask and the Flag: Populism, Citizenism and Global Protest

Paolo Gerbaudo

Hurst and Company, London, 2017, X + 318 pp.,

ISBN: 978-1849045568

The Shadow of Unfairness: A Plebeian Theory of Liberal Democracy

Jeffrey Edward Green

Oxford University Press, New York, 2016, xii + 252 pp.,

ISBN: 978-0190215903

Contemporary Political Theory (2019) **18**, S91–S97. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41296-017-0182-3>; published online 21 December 2017

Few would today deny that popular dissatisfaction with democratic governments is widespread. Whether we look at protests staged to counter neoliberal politics or at growing support for candidates promising another order, it is hard to miss the feelings of discontent that citizens express at every opportunity they have to voice their views on the way they are governed. This kind of discontent is troubling for it marries particular grievances over rampant inequalities with a critique of the democratic order that authoritarian forces are quick to exploit. It is also troubling because it reveals the little attention given to popular demands among democratic theorists. It adds urgency to the need to attend to these demands that give meaning to the idea of popular democracy.

The books under review respond to this urgency. Deeply concerned about the way in which citizens of liberal democracies have been marginalised, excluded and



impoverished by the consolidation of oligarchic politics, they set out to forge paths towards change. The category of ‘the people’ cuts across these paths, for all books under review propose that ‘rule by the people’ enlivens democracy. Of course, what the books understand by rule is, without doubt, different. But this difference does not in any way undermine the emphasis they all place on the need to attend to the popular dimension of democracy. Two aspects of this emphasis are particularly noteworthy. The first is that all books resort to the vocabulary of citizenship and tie citizenic politics with the popular dimension missing from contemporary democracy. The second is that, as a result of this focus on citizenship, they provide a realist trajectory for change that does little to disparage hopes for better democracy. The remaining of the review probes these two aspects, showing how they both enable *and* constrain our ability to reimagine democracy.

Citizenship, Legitimacy and the Unfairness Constitutive of Contemporary Democracy

The vocabulary of citizenship appears, at first impression, counter-intuitive. Citizenship has an institutional dimension that, to a degree, undermines or at least compromises, the intention to transgress the limits of contemporary democracy. Jeffrey E. Green gives, nonetheless, a reasonable justification for engaging with citizenship. The ideal of free and equal citizenship, he tells us, lies at the heart of liberal democracy and no attempt to probe the institutional limits of this democracy can afford to avoid the confrontation with the hollowness of this ideal. Green’s justification is instructive. It reveals that the references to citizenship, framed exclusively in the vocabulary of institutional politics, are fit for purpose. Citizenship is that political practice that simultaneously affects and is affected by what the books under review frame as a crisis of democratic legitimacy.

The crisis of democratic legitimacy that is central in Paolo Gerbaudo’s and Tony Milligan’s accounts of popular politics is evidenced in the intensification of protests since 2011. It brings into sharp focus citizens’ loss of confidence in governing institutions ‘more prepared to come to the rescue of banks than to struggling citizens’ (Gerbaudo, p. 30); their exasperation with economic elites; and their angst at the gradual erosion of their rights. Construed, therefore, as a crisis of citizenship, the legitimacy that Gerbaudo and Milligan invoke, homes in on matters of direct participation and popular control over the democratic process. It exposes a demand for further control of the governing process and this presses the need to revive – generalise (Milligan) and radicalise (Gerbaudo) – the practices of citizenship.

Jeffrey Green offers a different reading of the prospects for citizenship. While he agrees that this is a second-class status, he does not go as far as to entertain possibilities for its revival. For Green, it is enough to recognise and admit the unfairness at the heart of citizenship. Unfairness, he explains, is ‘the inescapable



sense citizens in any imaginable liberal democracy will have that its arrangements, however just, are not wholly so – or, more precisely, the sense that no matter how much the ideal of free and equal citizenship might inform the institutions and practices of a well-functioning liberal-democratic state, this ideal does not and can never fully describe political life even in the most advanced and enlightened liberal democracy’ (p. 1). Unfairness is thus constitutive of democratic life according to Green. It is embedded in the structures of remove, manyness and plutocracy that together underline the experience of citizenship (pp. 29–46).

Structures of remove prevent ordinary citizens from gaining access to positions of political power or exerting influence on the political process. If they do, that is, if they happen to experience some empowerment in a political sense, it will be as participants in groups of like-minded others – a situation that Green designates as manyness. Even in this case, however, structures of plutocracy will significantly curb the opportunities that they have to express their political voice. For differences in socio-economic status are so strongly sustained by the institutions of private property and the family, that they cannot easily be reformed or restructured.

Thus understood as a constitutive feature of democracy, unfairness is not correctible for Green. What is correctible is, instead, the way in which we approach it, namely, as something that *could* be reduced. Or to put the same point differently, the problem for Green is less that there is unfairness, and more the ‘sunniness’ surrounding this unfairness. This sunniness that is ‘found in the expectation that the obstacles to free and equal citizenship are in principle fully surmountable’ blinds and restricts progressive energies from developing accounts of democracy different from that of the present (pp. 6, 7). Of course, readers familiar with *The Eyes of the People* (2011), Green’s earlier work, will immediately recognize here the provocation to reconcile with the futility of wanting to expand participatory democracy – what he has previously termed the ‘vocal model of popular power’ (2011). Awakened to democracy’s non-perfectible nature, citizens need only resign themselves to their second-class political experience and abandon the desire to achieve full and equal citizenship.

However, it can be argued that it is precisely this desire for full and equal citizenship that animates activist politics. Paolo Gerbaudo’s *The Mask and the Flag* aptly illustrates this point. Drawing on an impressive body of interviews with participants in the array of protests occurring between 2011 and 2016 across the world, Gerbaudo shows that the desire to reconstruct the democratic order in a way that benefits citizens (more than elites) was what in the end produced notable effects on ‘the political landscape of the countries affected’ by the protests (p. 235). Two of these effects are particularly relevant here. The first is that the protests known as ‘movements of the squares’ brought visibility to the limits of the neoliberal discourse that accentuated the crisis of democratic legitimacy that I earlier noted. The second is that they introduced alternative democratic practices that showed that the way to reconstruct democracy is ‘through the empowerment of individual



citizens and their engagement in the most basic of political acts such as assembling in public space and discussing political issues face to face' (p. 62). In both respects the movements of the squares added new urgency to what, in another reading, appears as a constant or constitutive problem of liberal democracy – namely, exclusion and socio-economic unfairness.

No doubt, it can be argued that Gerbaudo's account of the indignant citizen, who reclaims control of the democratic process, corresponds to an especially optimistic and, therefore, sunny reflection on how it is possible to attain full and equal citizenship. But to insist on this argument is to miss the wider point that confidence in democracy, contrary to what Green argues, has its ebbs and flows. Democratic confidence is, in other words, variable depending on the achievements and dislocations transpiring in different socio-political contexts. Tony Milligan's *The Next Democracy* is especially attuned to these differences of context. Milligan argues that it is especially in the contemporary context that it is possible to imagine possibilities for a kind of democracy truer to the idea of actual popular control (p. 4).

What warrants Milligan's optimism? Much like Gerbaudo, Milligan is strongly influenced by the Occupy movements that gave focus on the legitimacy problem at the heart of contemporary representative systems. The Occupy movements, argues Milligan, managed to revive claims of popular sovereignty and, in so doing, build up the appetite for 'a model of political legitimacy which requires ongoing popular consent and more direct decision making' (p. 5). This model, pressed further by the rise of left populist parties, accentuates the 'de-absolutisation of the state' elicited by neoliberalism and further strengthens the commitment to reviving the shape of the system of representative democracy (p. 4). Indeed, if representation is alongside waning legitimacy and lack of popular control the problem for Milligan, the solution is a 'general direct democracy'. This is the next democracy that the book's title alludes to. The following section explains this type of democracy further.

Politics in a Realist Key: General Direct Democracy, Citizenism and Plebeian Theory

As we have already seen, the three books under review immerse themselves in the vocabulary of citizenship. Citizenship, they argue, constitutes both that which is missing from contemporary democracy and that practice which revives it. Of course, the way that the three books undertake this revision differs. Milligan speaks of a general direct democracy, Gerbaudo of the ideology of citizenism and Green of plebeianism.

Milligan's general direct democracy takes some of its cues from the consensus democracy of the Occupy movements. Consensus practice, he explains, 'pulls positions together into a cluster of views which might be of a sort that could be accepted by almost everyone who participates' (p. 36). Through an emphasis on the



reasonable and the useful, the consensus technique ‘puts into practice an acceptance that all views and all voices are not equal’ (p. 36). In so doing, it shows a way for reaching a position that, even though not perfect, everyone can live with. But this is not the only way to direct democracy. In his thoughtful consideration of its various forms – from council democracy to Gandhi’s *panchayat* system, Milligan offers a pragmatic review of the strengths and weakness of direct democracy that is less concerned with providing the blueprints for its final form and more interested in asserting its workability.

Thus, Milligan probes two of the longstanding charges against direct democracy – the danger of producing a tyranny of the majority as well as rule of the unwise – and he insists that far from being specific to systems of directness, these are problems of democracy and politics more generally (p. 137). Direct democracy for Milligan does not, in consequence, do away with the limits of democracy more broadly, nor does it replace representation. This is precisely why he insists it is workable. Understood as a hybrid system, general direct democracy fuses elements of directness (participation and deliberation) with representative democracy, ensuring that, whenever it is practical and necessary, the former will take precedence over the latter. This ‘compromise’, concludes Milligan, offers not just ‘a necessary precondition for a democratic, non-capitalist political system’, but also the most realistic way of bringing democracy closer to the citizens (pp. 138, 140).

Paolo Gerbaudo could not agree more with the emphasis that Milligan places on the need to combine representative and direct democracy (p. 245). But there is a difference between Milligan and Gerbaudo. Whereas Milligan sets out to rethink the prospects for direct democracy today and, thus, lay bare the ways to its realisation, Gerbaudo sets out to *re-cognise* democracy (a term I borrow from the work of Sheldon Wolin). Citizenism is his preferred way of capturing the emerging democracy that arises out of the ashes of protest movements and their demands for the flag and mask. In Gerbaudo’s words: ‘citizenism is the ideology of the indignant citizen, a citizen outraged at being deprived of citizenship ... It is a populist ideology but a very peculiar one... an “anarcho-populism”, which articulates the neo-anarchist method of *horizontality* and the populist demand for *sovereignty*, the mass ambition of populist movements, with the high premium placed on individual participation and creativity by neo-anarchism’ (pp. 7–8).

Citizenism is, in other words, the framework that Gerbaudo creates to capture the two political orientations that have informed the politics of the movements of the squares: left populism captured in the sign of the flag and neo-anarchism that is captured in the sign of the mask. Distinctive, then, of the ‘new battle lines of contemporary politics’ (p. 7), citizenism helps us grasp the transformations that protests have undergone since the days of the anti-globalisation movement – a transformation that Gerbaudo does an excellent job at elucidating. It also outlines a pragmatic way of reclaiming democracy. For citizenism does not gesture toward an abstract, yet-to-come democratic future. It presses the need to make sense of and



enliven the democratic present – where claims to popular sovereignty coexist with demands for spontaneity and autonomy, calls for horizontality with those of hierarchy and leadership, and anti-bank discourses with those of capitalism.

The Shadow of Unfairness is also no stranger to democratic realism. While Green does not explicitly engage with contemporary attempts to reclaim citizenship, his proposal for a plebeian democracy – that is, for a theory of democracy deeply rooted in plebeian theory – constitutes a realist attempt to specify both the limits and possibilities of the current democratic order (p. 9). Plebeianism for Green promotes three particular ideas: the first aims at the super-rich, the most advantaged members of society whose wealth must be regulated – once reasonable envy is accepted as legitimate reaction to permanent unfairness. The second is that an ethics of vulgar political discursivity constitutes a better way for advocating policies that favour the plebs (the ordinary second class citizens of liberal democracies) than an ethics of civility. After all, a principled vulgarity that manifests itself in non-deliberative, disruptive, discourses is in line with the displeasure of indignation that ordinary citizens always have. This permanent displeasure is also what explains the emphasis that Green places on the need to create space for solace. This is the third idea underpinning his plebeian theory of liberal democracy. Solace, understood as a democratic form of behaviour, is borne out of the frustrations that inhere in the pursuit of egalitarian politics and, in so doing, it encompasses an extrapoliticism that sanctions political withdrawal. So conceived, plebeian democracy looks ‘to clarify the limits’ of the commitment to full and equal citizenship, by showing ‘how an understanding of such limits might further, rather than detract from, what can be achieved’ (p. 12).

From Green’s perspective, therefore, a plebeian theory of democracy is realist. It recognises the imperfections of the world and, crucially for his account of democratic realism, it resists illusions of false ideals that ‘deny basic features of *actual existence*’ (p. 21). Actuality is a salient feature of this approach to realism. It informs Green’s method to read political theory alongside history, as well as his intention to confront and attend to the constitutive shadow of unfairness cast over ordinary civic life.

This realist approach to the very contemporary issue of unfairness is the strong point of Green’s book. It provokes a reconsideration of the reworkings (and projected solutions to the limits) of current politics. Together with Milligan’s and Gerbaudo’s citizenship, it prompts us to reimagine and, indeed, recreate the people who oil the wheels of the democratic order. If Milligan thus attempts to realise democracy and Gerbaudo to re-cognise it, Green attempts to renovate it. But, in the final analysis, it is in the nature of this *re-* that the limits of the three books precisely reside. Or to put the same point differently, it is the very vocabulary of citizenship, directness and plebeianism that risks undermining the democratic reworkings that the books call forth.



To grasp the claim that I want to advance here I want to begin by noting that by vocabulary I understand sets of words, thoughts, principles, practices and processes that help us find our place in the world. Vocabularies orient our thinking and acting in the world. By so doing, they enable and limit our thoughts and actions. They enable them by helping us to find our way around plural practices, negotiate their meaning to the point that we begin to understand and evaluate what goes by the name of abstract terms such as democracy. But vocabularies also limit our thoughts and actions. They orient us toward a particular practice and make it, as a result, difficult to call this practice into question. James Tully, whose work inspires this argument, suggests that, to open up our thinking, we need to use ‘situated practices’ as anchors that lead us to articulate and, ultimately, redescribe that which dominant vocabularies, such as that of citizenism, delimit and exclude (2008).

Gerbaudo’s citizenism, Green’s plebeianism and Milligan’s direct democracy take a solid step in this direction. They start from the situated practices of ‘second class citizenship’, ‘representation’ and citizen marginalisation, and they equip their reader with conceptual tools that elicit this re-description. Yet, they stop short of mining an analysis that inspires enough to begin to reimagine democracy. For the vocabulary they use charts such well-trodden territory that the attempts to reimagine – and not simply strengthen existing – democracy never take off the ground. Perhaps they are not supposed to – given the pragmatic and realist dimension of these books. But, if the argument they propose is right, and I think it is, then the issues that citizens press forth, issues that all books brilliantly dissect, must not just be apprehended, but also cast anew.

References

- Green, J.E. (2011). *The Eyes of the People: Democracy in an Age of Spectatorship*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Tully, J. (2008) *Public Philosophy in a New Key, Volume I: Democracy and Civic Freedom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.