
Review

The shadow of unfairness: A plebeian theory of liberal democracy

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The provocative, compelling, and sobering central argument of Jeffrey Green's timely book is that liberal democracy has been and remains trailed by a shadow of unfairness, the sense among ordinary citizens that arrangements are not just, despite liberal democratic ideals of free and equal citizenship. In Green's telling, the shadow is not merely a present reminder of a yet-to-be-obtained goal; instead, the shadow is ineradicable, present even under the most progressive, well-ordered liberal democratic regimes. As he notes starkly in the introduction, 'the fact remains that no ordinary citizen in a liberal democracy, either today or in a more enlightened future, can be expected to feel fully free and equal. The structure of the liberal-democratic regime will not allow it. This is what the shadow of unfairness indicates and announces' (p. 3). For the vast majority of citizens, liberal democratic citizenship will always be second-class or *plebeian* citizenship, a notion Green develops with reference to the classical world.

Green argues that the political life of plebeian citizens is substantially defined by three features: remove, manyness, and plutocracy. Remove refers to their realization that they do not and never will hold high office or positions of political power. Manyness captures the fact that any power exercised by ordinary citizens will require attaching themselves to a large mass of like-minded others. Plutocracy, for Green, involves the awareness of ordinary citizens that one's economic resources are 'at least somewhat determinative' (p. 29) of the power and efficacy of one's political voice. More generally, Green argues, the phenomenological experience of plebeian democracy is one of indignation caused by the gap between the ideal of equal dignity and the actual ignobility caused by remove, manyness, and plutocracy. A civic life of indignation serves as warrant and motivation for Green's three proposed plebeian responses: (1) reasonable envy against the privileged, leading to unique burdens placed upon them; (2) plebeian political activity marked by principled vulgarity, especially by violating deliberative norms; and (3) solace through retreat from the political into the private sphere.



Green defines reasonable envy as the desire to impose unique burdens on the most advantaged class, even when those burdens may have negative material effects on society as a whole. He takes this idea from the burdens placed on elites in classical Athens and Rome (for example, the funding of public banquets, games, buildings, and food supplies), but he does not develop specific proposals for contemporary liberal democracies. Instead, his concern is to justify such burdens as compatible with, rather than a departure from, liberal democratic principles, which he does through a nuanced engagement with Rawls' difference principle. The welfare of the most advantaged, like that of the least advantaged, Green claims, is heuristically useful in evaluating and enacting just social policies in liberal democracies. Similarly, while Rawls justifies a floor on income and wealth in order to protect basic liberties, Green argues that income and wealth ceilings can be similarly justified. Finally, just as Rawls singles out the least advantaged for special compensation because of arbitrary disadvantages, so Green claims should we single out the most favored for special burdens because of their arbitrary advantages.

Imposing these burdens on the privileged will likely require what Green calls 'principled vulgarity.' Embracing the reality of their second-class citizenship, plebeians must strategically abandon liberal obligations to treat others as free and equal, to make public arguments according to deliberative standards, and to promote civic friendship. Instead, plebeians should act uncivilly and engage in disruptive speech and action – heckling, shouting down, interjecting, and generally provoking disorder – in order to move beyond their prescribed roles of silent onlookers or those permitted tightly circumscribed forms of expression. Green grounds this vulgarity in the indignation, ingratitude, and 'quasi-vindictive desire to see the powerful specially burdened' (p. 122) that comes from facing the hard reality of plebeian powerlessness. Green defends this vulgarity against a charge of childishness by arguing that it instead reflects the political maturity necessary to overcome 'infantile fantasies of omnipotence' fostered by the presumption of liberal autonomy (p. 128).

Since the shadow of unfairness clouds political life, Green argues in his final chapter, plebeian citizens must protect their happiness by fostering a critical indifference toward political life. This is not, he contends, a rejection nor a lack of interest in political notions but rather the pursuit of such notions outside conventional political spaces – hence his label extrapoliticism, rather than antipoliticism or apoliticism. Critical indifference involves learning to care and not care about politics in turn, ensuring that one's unhappy political existence be complemented by the development of private happiness, based on Epicurean insights about the inherent limits in life. The inherent tendency of politics is to exceed all limits, promising power and immortality as a means of escaping human finitude. Contemporary plebeians must cultivate a wariness toward these tendencies and instead embrace finitude by pursuing a measure of equality and happiness



outside of political life, primarily through relations of friendship and the internal regulation of desires.

Written in clear, lively prose, Green's book bursts with theoretical insights into our present political condition. The concepts he deploys to describe the experience of modern citizenship offer a revealing, critical, and grounded framework for diagnosing some of the challenges facing liberal democracies in the west. His proposed responses to these challenges on the part of plebeian citizens follow convincingly from his diagnoses. Although some might view these responses as too tepid, they represent feasible, justifiable changes that could improve the plebeian experience to some degree. Green has done a tremendous service by placing these concepts, categories, and responses on the agenda of democratic theory.

Its many virtues notwithstanding, Green's book is shadowed by a couple of recurring issues. First, he tends to write about contemporary plebeians as a group with a similar phenomenological experience of political life and, thus, with at least some degree of solidarity and shared interests. And yet, as has become clear in recent elections in Europe and the United States, plebeian citizens themselves are deeply divided both in how they interpret their experiences and in how they think political and economic problems ought to be addressed. In other words, the very nature of the shadow of unfairness and the best ways to respond to it are deeply contested among plebeian citizens. These divides are skipped over in Green's narrative. This is unfortunate, given that his concepts of remove, manyness, and plutocracy offer potentially fruitful means of coming to better understand the divides among those who may in fact be similarly powerless.

The second issue has to do with framing plebeian democracy not as an alternative to liberal democracy but as a 'further theoretical and institutional development of the liberal-democratic regime' (p. 71). Green's defense in the opening chapter of holding onto (while developing) liberal democracy is persuasive, and this framing of his project contributes toward its timeliness and importance. However, what Green takes to be central to the liberal democratic project is not always clear and shifts throughout the book. The opening chapter presents a minimalist version (political and civil rights, competitive elections, private property), but by the end of the book the liberalism at issue has become much thicker. When Green wants to show that reasonable envy is compatible with liberalism, Rawls' difference principle becomes the standard, even though the compatibility of the difference principle itself with liberalism is often disputed. In the subsequent chapter on principled vulgarity, Green identifies civility as a 'core value of liberal democracy' (p. 110) and then parses the obligations of this civility in the terms of the strictest version of deliberative theory: treating others with respect, offering reasons all can accept, adhering to rational norms in speech, and actively promoting civic friendship over rancor. Although deliberative approaches dominate democratic theory, they are not equivalent to, nor a necessary feature of, liberal democracy. In the final chapter, Green's argument for finding



solace outside of politics is presented in opposition to the civic demands of liberal democracy. But the liberal tradition has long rested on a public–private distinction and the presumption that happiness is found on the private side of the divide, not the public. To present an argument for finding private solace as a critique or modification of liberal democracy seems to mistake liberalism for something closer to classical republicanism.

This lack of clarity about the key features of liberal democracy does not substantially undermine the book’s contribution to democratic theory. What it suggests, instead, is that going forward Green should develop a fuller account of plebeian democracy on its own terms, maybe in conversation with more radical strains of democratic theory, rather than trying to cast it as development of liberal democracy. Indeed, I hope he does this, since there are no indications that we will emerge from the shadow of unfairness into the sun anytime soon.

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