Reviews

The Democratic Horizon - Hyperpluralism and the Renewal of Political Liberalism
by Alessandro Ferrara
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In *The Democratic Horizon* (Ferrara, 2014) Alessandro Ferrara ventures to reinterpret and expand upon John Rawls' seminal rendering of political liberalism in a way best suited for the 21st century and the fact of *hyperpluralism*. Ferrara's method consists in employing his particular use of aesthetic judgment to ground normativity. Another commendable objective is the effort to separate democratisation from Westernisation so that the former can be more easily accepted by societies in which comprehensive doctrines, such as religion, play a major role. This is achieved via an expansion of the notion of democratic ethos.

In the introduction, a plant/soil metaphor is introduced to explain what is misconstrued about the often proclaimed *crisis of democracy* in states long accustomed to this particular form of government. According to Ferrara, '[o]ur attention needs to be directed more to the qualities of the soil than to an intrinsic genetic weakness of the democratic plant' (Ferrara, 2014: 6) when trying to comprehend the difficulties of engaging voters, and thereby legitimising democracy, in late modern societies. New challenges posed to the flourishing of the democratic plant within the broader societal context in which it grows include: 'the prevailing of finance within the capitalist economy'; 'the generalized acceleration of societal time'; 'supranational integration, transformation of the public sphere by economic difficulties of traditional media and the rise of the new social media', and the 'generalized use of opinion polls and their influence on the perceived legitimacy of executive action' (Ibid.: 8). These challenges add to more classical ones facing democracy, such as the extension of the electorate, the institutional complexity of contemporary societies, and the increased cultural pluralism of constituencies – termed *hyperpluralism* by Ferrara (Ibid.: 6-7).

On the other hand, in the West and elsewhere, democracy has become a *horizon* embedded in our understanding as the basis of legitimate political

rule, something strived for by (almost all of) those who do not have it. Moreover, the mere label of democracy is pursued by more questionable regimes due to the related monetary and political advantages associated with being recognized as a democratic state. Since the mere forms of democracy – e.g. procedures such as recurrent elections – are in themselves no guarantee for real democratic content, Ferrara poses the question of what the purpose of political philosophy is. He provides an initial normative answer, which is that political philosophy should provide us with 'yardsticks'. In this particular case, to assist us in ascertaining whether a regime is, in fact, a legitimate democracy. The political philosophical question then becomes: what *should* we mean by a democracy? How can we define the *democratic ethos*, and can this be expanded to accommodate non-Western cultures?

Consequently, as a response to the aforementioned challenges, Ferrara develops the framework of John Rawls' *Political Liberalism* (Rawls, 2005). For this purpose, he utilises concepts originating in his own earlier work, such as the normative force of identities showing exemplary self-congruence (Ferrara, 2008), with a special focus on hyperpluralism both within a national and within a global context.

The first chapter (Ferrara, 2014: 23) discards the dictionary definitions of politics and instead introduces *imagination* alongside the central Rawlsian principle of *public reason.* Imagination is needed in order for us to allow for innovations within politics and to be able to envisage the superordinate identity of ourselves as a polity – an identity that can be realized to a greater or lesser extent. An additional aim is to be able to define democratic politics *at its best*, as opposed to its routine workings. The latter is defined as:

> […] the activity of promoting, with outcomes purportedly binding or at least influential for all, the priority of certain publicly relevant ends over others not simultaneously pursuable, or of promoting new ends and promoting them in full autonomy from both morals and theory within a horizon no longer coextensive with the nation-state. (Ibid.: 30)

The concepts of *discourse, judgment, recognition* and *the gift* are then introduced as 'the building blocks of politics' (Ibid.: 30). *Discourse*, or the 'exchange of reasons' (ibid.: 32), is fundamental for a constituency if it is to be perceived as decent since it is a precondition for defining and thus being able to promote public ends. In the Rawlsian sense, decent people(s) are those who do not adhere to democracy or political liberalism but are 'decent' enough so as to allow for peaceful interaction or *discourse*. Without the exchange of reasons, the only way to interact would be through the mutual

use of force. *Judgment* is necessary in order for us to extend the Rawlsian notion of *overlapping consensus* as far as possible, while also securing that said consensus is able to maintain its ability to exemplarily reflect '[…] the superordinate identity, which includes the conflicting parties' (Ibid.: 33). Furthermore, judgment is essential in order to decide when discursive deliberation must turn into decisions. Primarily, the element of *recognition* is needed in order to understand 'the other' as a political subject akin to oneself, intentionally seeking his or her own ends, as a requirement for political action. Lastly, the concept of *gift-giving* incorporates the fact that in a democratic process you must sometimes be willing to give up your own priorities for the sake of the greater good while also being able to give the gift of trust to others. This is a necessary precondition for engagement in the political process (ibid.: 35-36).

The archetypal image of Plato's cave is invoked as a way of explaining the normative use of Kantian aesthetic judgment to overcome the problem that, due to the fact of hyperpluralism and the philosophical linguistic turn, no principle grounding (political) truths – no idea of the Good – can possibly be said to have normative force within a particular context or language game if it itself does not originate from there. Public reason is thus best understood as:

> […] a subspecies of a deliberative reason that neither surrenders to the world of appearance, to doxa, to remain within Plato's vocabulary, nor presumes that salvation can originate from without, but instead tries tenaciously to distinguish better and worse, what is more just and what is less just, what is more reasonable and what is less so, within the conditions of the cave (Ibid: 28).

Ferrara relies on the aforementioned elements in order to explain the normativity of public reason through the Rawlsian notion of *overlapping consensus* with regards to democratic laws. This, in turn, is related to our understanding of our own identities as democratic citizens and the concept of exemplarity - in this case concerning the superordinate identity of ourselves as polity comprehendible with the utilisation of imagination. This is used to bypass the need for 'external' principles for the grounding of public reason and leads to a conception of democratic politics *at its best* as 'the prioritization of ends in the light of good reasons that can move our imagination' (Ibid.: 38). These rare moments often lead to constitutional changes as opposed to politics in its routine operation. Equally important, is the distinction concerning populism, which moves the imagination

without being reasonable, thus often leading to unreasonable or palpably terrible outcomes. Politics at its best – including the formulation and implementation of human rights and the Welfare State – realises the *democratic ethos* comprising of three 'passions': 'the passion for the common good, the passion for equality and equal recognition and the passion for individuality' (Ibid.: 48). Our imagination is moved by the innovative gesture within the context of democracy, inducing in us the feeling of the 'enhancement of life' (Ibid.: 38). A similar feeling to that of experiencing great art but within a different context.

Within this spectrum, we find the means to measure the extent to which a regime in fact realises the democratic ethos. However, in the face of hyperpluralism, Ferrara adds the virtue of *openness* (Chapter 2, ibid.: 44). This virtue best captures the Kantian notion of furtherance or *enhancement of life,* related to the abovementioned exemplary fulfilment of democratic identity. Thus, Ferrara argues, it facilitates the flourishing of democracy in a more effective way than central concepts from other theorists such as Charles Taylor's *agape,* Jacques Derrida's *hospitality* and Stephen K. White's *presumptive generosity* by being 'an attitude of receptiveness to novelty, of exploration of new possibilities for a life form, for a historical horizon, for a social configuration' (Ibid.: 49). This notion of openness is rather different from the one promoted by Karl Popper (Popper, 1971), in that hyperplural societies also include, and should respect, people with religious or other comprehensive worldviews. Indeed, Popper's view regarding the ideal society, as well as the development of science, is rejected in favor of the Kuhnian notion of paradigmatic shifts, exemplified in the aforementioned examples of politics at its best. In an effort to stabilise democracy as a valid form of government for the right reasons, the grounding of democracy, as well as that of political liberalism as such, has to adapt to the changing conditions of its context.

In chapter 3, a 'conjectural turn' (Ibid.: 67) is thus undertaken by Ferrara. This is done to address the problem of the justification of political liberalism through an overlapping consensus of public reason in hyperplural societies, in which minorities of people adhering to 'comprehensive doctrines' may not initially share political liberalism's view of individual autonomy or tolerance. These people, while unquestionably part of society, are thus seemingly not included within the sphere of the overlapping consensus of public reason. Ferrara attempts to answer the question why religious or secular groups adhering to comprehensive doctrines should 'settle' for anything less than dominating the rest of society with their religion or ideology if they had the strength to do so**.** This way, he escapes the dual trap of altogether banning pragmatic reasons for accepting

pluralism (e.g. reasons that emphasise the potential of pluralism to protect us from conflict) – and of 'liberal oppression' or 'liberal monopluralism' (labels for the paradox that the political-liberal answer to hyperpluralism seems to be plural in every other respect than its own justification).

Ferrara's approach, *reflexive pluralism*, pursues the overarching aim of sustaining democracy as the basis of warranted government through its justificational renewal. Reflexive pluralism is the notion that the acceptance of hyperpluralism and the devotion to political liberalism need different justifications for different people in different contexts. The idea is to include as many as possible within public reason, or at least to widen the circle of 'reasonable' people. This is initially applied through the utilisation of the Rawlsian concept of 'conjectural arguments'. As one three-part example of this, Ferrara aims to show, through short interpretations of scriptures and drawing upon different theorists, that the comprehensive doctrines of Christianity, Judaism and Islam all inherently contain justifications for accepting pluralism and political liberalism. Ferrara emphasizes that adherents of these three world-religions cannot be true to the roots of their doctrine if they do not 'self-limit' and grant their respect to other people, which includes affirming the right to hold a different belief or opinion. This argumentation is related to the fact that believers are themselves only human and can thus only claim to possess a finite and imperfect understanding of the will of their respective deity. Further elaboration is needed with regard to this work, which will hopefully also be advanced by authoritative voices from within these and other religions. In our present situation, however, there can be no question regarding the importance of providing the world with the possibility for a plurality of legitimisations for democracy. That is, if it is to avoid being confused with Westernisation, thereby making it easier for despotic regimes to reject by appealing to anti-western sentiments.

In chapter 4, Ferrara attempts to provide a positive answer to the question whether it is possible to include the 'partially reasonable' within the circle of political justification even if conjectural arguments should fail. This expansive reading of Rawls employs a central insight from his later work concerning international cooperation (Rawls, 1999). Ferrara uses this in order to modify the intra-national understanding of *Political Liberalism* (Rawls 2005) and to allow for the idea that the development of democratic societies does not have to move forward from religious conflict via modus vivendi to overlapping consensus in a unilinear way. The idea of the *multivariate polity* embraces this notion and thus transcends the strict mutual exclusion of overlapping consensus and modus vivendi, by allowing for 'the partly reasonable' to accept some elements of the constitution through overlapping consensus, and other parts due to more pragmatic reasoning.

Chapter 5 expands the discussion further by suggesting that different paths to democratisation need not result in a Westernisation of society. Also in this respect, the expansion of Rawlsian theory becomes relevant. Ferrara argues, as was the case with the aforementioned conjectural arguments pertaining to minorities within liberal societies, that even though some cultures do not share the intuition inherent in most Western democracies – especially those of Protestant origin – of placing individual rights over duties and valuing agonistic contestation in the public realm, nonetheless '[…] adequate consonances can be found in all historical religions for most of the major components of the "spirit of democracy"' (Ibid.: 140). Moreover, Ferrara maintains that both the priority of rights over duties and agonism are contested within the Western tradition as well, and cannot, therefore, be taken as indicative of a rift between the West and the rest of the world. Multiculturalism is defined by Ferrara as a 'discourse on the acceptability of differentiating some of the rights and duties of the citizens on the basis of their cultural affiliation' (Ibid.: 163). He contends that it is related to the flourishing of different cultural identities within hyperplural societies and thus the overall flourishing of society. Chapter 6 argues that this is part and parcel of the described 'intra-cave' justification for public reason and the normative force related to this.

Chapter 7 addresses the perceived 'democratic deficit' when democracy expands from a national to a supra-national or global context. The concept of *governance* is defined as *'the coordination and regulation of political action in the absence of a capacity to impose sanctions for noncompliance'* (Ibid.: 173), and Ferrara aims to convey that a deficit need not be the case. As Rawls relaxed Locke's concept of consent so that citizens are no longer required to be the authors of all legislation, but only have to subscribe to the constitution, Ferrara argues that:

> […] in supranational contexts structures of governance that coordinate political action via soft law, best practices, benchmarking and moral suasion, do not necessarily generate democratic deficits if and only if (a) they respect those "constitutional essentials" to which free and equal citizens have consented in referenda or in more indirect but still recognizable ways and (b) some form of accountability of those who coordinate political action via governance remains in place (Ibid.: 218).

In the eighth and final chapter of the book, Ferrara returns to Plato's image of the cave as a way of introducing a dual 'political' conception of truth in

order to equip political liberalism with one more tool for engaging with the challenge of hyperpluralism. This duality should be seen in light of us having to assert and discuss assertions of both an 'intra- and interparadigmatic' nature. The first kind of statements concern an already agreed upon context of reference or an '*unquestioned* conceptual segmentation of the world' (Ibid.: 218) – e.g. that 2 + 2 equals 4 within the context of mathematics. Here, the relation to truth can be described without difficulty along realist lines. To explain the nature of interparadigmatic truth, Ferrara again returns to his use of the Kantian notion of 'furtherance of life' as a ground for reflective judgment. When asserting something that 'presuppose[s] a disputed segmentation of the world' – e.g. that the laws of a certain deity, as described in a certain book, as interpreted by a certain group of people, must be taken into account in the judicial practice of a society – truth must be understood along 'justificationist' lines, since truth is here 'indistinguishable from justification' in its paradigm-grounding capacity (Ibid.: 208).

With this addition to his production, Alessandro Ferrara offers an original renewal of Rawlsian theory, which addresses current challenges facing democracy and political liberalism on a global scale. *The Democratic Horizon* is likewise an important expansion of the scope and depth of Ferrara's own work, as it poses and attempts to answer complex questions offering the groundwork for justifying democracy universally despite the fact of hyperpluralism. This effort, in turn, provides us with some of the language and theoretical concepts necessary for a worldwide exchange of reasons revolving around the urgent question of what kind of world we want to inhabit as a global community.

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