
Critical Exchange

The Democratic Production of Political Cohesion: Partisanship, Institutional Design and Life Form

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What binds a democratic society together? This would seem a well-rehearsed topic in modern political theory, but on closer scrutiny, it may appear less so. If we reformulate the question, it may become clearer why: what binds *democratic* society together? The emphasis on ‘democratic’ is the clue here. Much recent discussion on the cohesive force in democracies has been parasitic on other debates, such as that between cosmopolitans and communitarians on justice as the first virtue of society; that between nation-state-based and post-national views of contemporary politics or that about the cultural aspects of democratic citizenship as the glue that makes democracy work. All such views and debates tend to assume a somewhat ‘externalist’ perspective, so to speak, of the problem of cohesion in democracies. Cosmopolitans and liberal communitarians have argued over the relative importance of values and identity as the basis for the stability of a just society, whose legitimate political arrangements they generally agree must be democratic, so as to reflect the demands of equality and self-government. Disputes over whether the institutions of democracy still require the background conditions provided by the nation-state, with its consolidated networks of party system, solidarity, civil society organisations and public opinion formation, or whether similar conditions can be reproduced at a more trans- and post-national level, are very similar in scope to those between cosmopolitans and liberal communitarians. Both these disputes concern the social, institutional, ideal or identitarian pre-conditions of democracy, which help it to work with a modicum of stability, in so far as they guarantee the political cohesion of either the *demos* or the regime itself. Discussions over the quality and competence of citizenship look at democratic culture as an important condition for democratic institutions and procedures to function smoothly and effectively. Debates over the ‘civic culture’ in the 1960s and more recently on ‘social capital’ lay emphasis on a mixture of attitudes, practices, participation in associational networks and consolidated norms of sociability as formative components of democratic citizenship, on which the working of democratic institutions and rules depends. This suggests something more internal, or at least a virtuous circle between the culture and the institutions of democracy. But is democracy itself capable of producing political cohesion, and on what basis?

In addressing this more ‘internalist’ question, this Critical Exchange explores three different perspectives, which follow from the work of three of the participants, who have recently contributed to new developments in the democratic literature. Matteo Bonotti (2017) has written on democratic partisanship from the perspective of political liberalism; Joseph Lacey (2017) on the institutional dynamics of democracy in diverse societies and Sofia Näsström (unpublished ms) on the theory of democratic peoplehood. Each of them reflects on how, from their own democratic perspective, one can make sense of political cohesion as a product, rather than as a pre-condition, of democracy and of its practices. The emphasis on the internalist view does not necessarily exclude that political cohesion is also the product of other more external conditions, but the aim of this Critical Exchange is



to press the internalist argument and to assess how each of the perspectives proposed by Bonotti, Lacey and Näsström fare in contributing to such a task. Their interventions are followed by several critical reflections, respectively, by Jonathan White, Richard Bellamy and David Owen, who offer their own view on how successful each perspective is in promoting political cohesion.

The particular positions defended by Bonotti, Lacey and Näsström in some way parallel the three externalist perspectives on which political cohesion is normally predicated, emphasising, respectively, more ideal-regarding, more institutional and more substantive conceptions of democracy. As they argue in their own interventions, the features of democracy to which they give priority offer distinctive resources for political cohesion. Building on the recent normative literature on partisanship, Bonotti proposes a revised view of normative consensus in political liberalism. Overcoming the tensions that the fact of disagreement and different conceptions of the good necessarily produce in modern societies is a central tenet of political liberalism. Ideas of overlapping consensus and public reason have been offered as the basis for a well-ordered society. Bonotti's specific contribution is to show how partisanship, as a core aspect of the political system of democratic societies, can have a reconciling rather than divisive effect on normative agreement, thus contributing to the formation of consensus and a sense of obligation towards just institutional arrangements and to political cohesion. The two main ways in which Bonotti thinks partisanship can contribute to this are, first, its role in creating a two-level system of political inclusion, so that allegiance to political parties, which operate within and are supportive of the political community, also transfers into allegiance towards the political community itself. Secondly, parties and partisanship can reduce the 'justificatory burden' that public reason demands by filtering the discourses and preferences that ordinary citizens articulate more directly through the values and doctrines of their own comprehensive view of the good, and giving it a form more amenable to public reason, so as to produce an overlapping consensus on which the law and general policy making can be justified to the entire political community. According to such a view, allowing and promoting democratic partisanship has the paradoxical effect of binding the community together in spite of the fact that partisanship itself is an expression of the division intrinsic to the political community. In his comment, Jonathan White elaborates on the capacity of partisanship to help public discussion in democratic societies by formulating the particular demands and reasons of citizens in generalisable ways, so making partisanship and public reason not just compatible, but, in Bonotti's view, 'mutually dependent'. But he also raises the question of whether such a view of partisanship may rest on an unduly idealised conception of parties, which may be easily dismissed by those critics who point to the widespread process of bureaucratisation of parties and the declining trust that citizens have in them and the political system in general. White's own view, however, is that empirical reality presents a motley panorama, and that in such a reality there are



examples that can be used as normative-generating standards. Besides, in Bonotti's argument he finds not only an indication of what normatively exemplary parties should look like, but also of a normatively exemplary party system on which it may be possible to rebuild the trust in parties and promote the cohesive functions of partisanship.

Although the context of Joseph Lacey's contribution is also democracy in diverse societies, his focus is more on the way in which democratic institutions can have a 'centripetal' function supportive of political cohesion in conditions of diversity. As with Bonotti, partisanship plays a role in couching citizens' particular claims and demands in the more general language of the common good. But this process is only part of a more general opportunity structure that democratic institutions offer, in Lacey's view, to 'maximise equal opportunity for control'. This he regards as the proper purpose of modern democracy. In the conditions of modernity, where ordinary citizens have limited time for politics, where decisions are complex and where territorial dimensions make impossible a forum-style decision-making process, Lacey thinks that democratic institutional design needs to follow what he calls, along the lines of Rawls' equivalent principle for justice, the 'democratic difference principle'. In other words, the distribution of citizens' opportunities in controlling and directing the decision-making process must be such that any increase for some citizens must bring with it an increase for each citizen. Lacey thinks that, properly designed, the representative system meets such a criterion without taxing too much the capacities of the citizens in modern democracies, but that such a system should be complemented by a number of more direct opportunities for citizens to express their first-order choice over certain policies and issues. In diverse societies, opportunity for bottom-up direct democracy would have the advantage of offering definite chances for people to feel they are controlling and directing decision-making, and for them to find themselves on certain issues on the winning side, as a consequence of the formation of multiple majorities across a variety of issues on which citizens decide without the mediation of parties or the political class. Both opportunity structures would increase the sense of recognition felt by citizens across the social and cultural divides of society, thus increasing their political allegiance to the democratic system. The combined operations of decision-making through representative elections and direct voting is what, according to Lacey provides a structure for the functioning of the public sphere and producing a centripetal effect through a form of 'discursive integration', which he characterises more as a process (hence akin to people engaging together in democratic control) than an outcome in the form of achieving consensus. For Lacey, the ability of engaging in this form of discursive integration is essential for overcoming deep diversity in society, and this is also why societies that lack the conditions for the exercise of discursive integration may find it difficult to develop political cohesion. As Richard Bellamy recognises in his comment on Lacey, the latter's institutional view of political cohesion as the



product of the democratic opportunity structure is an interesting and fruitful one. But his main concern is that this tends to define the problem as mainly 'vertical', in the identification of the citizens with authority and the political system, while neglecting the important 'horizontal' dimension of the way in which citizens relate to each other in the decision-making process. The nature of the relations and the divisions between citizens is for Bellamy a crucial issue in determining the centripetal and/or centrifugal nature of the political system. In this respect, as he says, the problem of cohesion in democratic societies remains as much social as political, or, in other terms, as much external to the political process as internal to it.

Sofia Näsström's conception of democracy brings the social to the core of it. For her, democracy should be seen as a 'political lifeform', whose directing principle in modern times is social emancipation. Democratic governance is therefore more than reconciling different world-views or finding appropriate institutional arrangements for collective decision-making, but also, as she says following Brian Singer, a social project that involves a 'struggle *over* society' so to give it *form*. The principle or 'spirit' (in the sense that Montesquieu uses it to define different political forms) of modern democracy consists in its capacity to emancipate its citizens. There are two characters that such spirit takes, according to Näsström, one is its open nature, which also implies that the democratic sovereign ('we the people') is never definitive, so leaving the *demos* open to constant re-definition; and the other is the importance that social policies regarding the organisation of society (housing, work and welfare) or the wellbeing of the citizens (education, health) have for the fulfilment of the project of democratic emancipation. From such a perspective, the social and the political questions are strongly linked to each other, and therefore political cohesion is the effect of the way in which both combine. As Näsström observes, this, for instance, makes the dominant neo-liberal drive towards privatisation inhospitable to the very project of democratic emancipation by undermining it at its very foundations. The privatisation of social services and of public spaces is both divisive and anti-egalitarian, finding inspiration in principles of socio-political organisation that are alien to emancipation, and which envisage instead a political community consisting of 'winners' and 'losers'. In his comments, David Owen finds Näsström's update of Montesquieu's idea of an animating principle at the core of different political forms a powerful way of capturing what he calls the 'infrastructures of democratic life'. But he also finds a certain ambiguity, and circularity, in her definition of the democratic people who are the subject of the emancipatory project at the core of her conception of democracy as a lifeform. According to Owen, the ambiguity consists in the fact that the question of 'who the people are' can be asked in terms of its 'scope' (the boundaries of the democratic people) and of its 'character' (what makes a people *democratic*). Because the questions of scope and character are inextricably linked, the question of the territorial boundaries of the project of emancipation (and its



effect on socio-political cohesion) cannot be entirely avoided. For Owen this raises questions on how the principle of democratic emancipation can be made to work, or tested, either in sub-state, municipal contexts, or in relation to non-state associational networks. More to the point, the question arises whether in the present conditions of increasing globalisation and international interconnection, the principle of emancipation can animate democracy not just within the state but also across states and in a more mobile world.

We seem to have come full circle. The starting point of this Critical Exchange was whether democracy is capable of generating political cohesion from its own internal mechanisms and principles; but at each stage, the question has re-emerged whether for democracy to work and to be able to bind people together it also needs certain external conditions to be in place, or at least it needs its mechanisms and principles to partly adapt to them.

Dario Castiglione

Partisanship and political cohesion

Political cohesion, as understood in this Critical Exchange, is the commitment to a common political project. In increasingly diverse societies, where citizens (and non-citizens) are often driven apart by their diverse ethical, religious and political beliefs, guaranteeing some degree of political cohesion is becoming ever more challenging. And nowadays this is true not only of societies which have historically been deeply divided, such as Northern Ireland or South Africa, but also of liberal democracies which while not having experienced deep levels of division in the past, are now becoming increasingly polarised (e.g. Muirhead, 2014).

In this contribution, I intend to examine the issue of political cohesion from the perspective of the concept of partisanship. This is a concept which, while having traditionally been central to much political science, has only recently been discovered by normative political theorists (Bonotti and Bader, 2014; Muirhead, 2014; Rosenblum, 2008; White and Ypi, 2016). Or, it would better to say, *re-discovered*, since the idea of partisanship has a long pedigree in the history of political thought, and has often been central to the analysis of the distinction between ‘factions’ and ‘parties’ (Ball, 1989; Sartori, 1976; Scarrow, 2006; Rosenblum, 2008; White and Ypi, 2016), where the latter are sometimes (but not always) considered more committed to the public interest than the former.

One of the claims often advanced in the recent political theory literature on parties and partisanship is that the ethos of partisanship involves a willingness to compromise and not to resort to violent means in order to advance one’s political cause (Muirhead, 2014; Rosenblum, 2008). Sometimes this line of argument is accompanied by the more empirical claim that partisanship can lead to processes of ‘democratic acculturation’ (Rosenblum, 2003) through which individuals and



groups that might represent a threat to political cohesion can in fact become supportive or, at least, respectful of democratic norms and institutions, by being involved in partisan politics. These kinds of argument undeniably constitute a re-evaluation of parties and partisanship within the context of contemporary political theory, which has traditionally considered parties and partisanship inherently divisive and not worthy of much consideration.

Yet an ethical appreciation of parties and partisanship cannot be limited to the idea of non-violent resolution of conflicts. And indeed some authors have recently focused on a deeper contribution that parties and partisanship can make to political cohesion, a contribution that is centred around the idea of political justification (White and Ypi, 2011, 2016). What renders ethical partisanship conducive to political cohesion, according to this view, is a commitment to the common good that is manifested through a commitment to publicly justifying parties' proposed policies and manifestos on the basis of reasons that all members of the public (and not only one's constituents) could accept.

It is within this narrower approach to political cohesion that my recent book *Partisanship and Political Liberalism in Diverse Societies* (2017) is located. More specifically, the book examines partisanship's contribution to political cohesion by focusing on John Rawls's influential theory of political liberalism (Rawls, 2005), and illustrating the different ways in which parties and partisanship can contribute to the public justification of laws and policies, thus integrating citizens who endorse diverse conceptions of the good within an overlapping consensus and guaranteeing both the political legitimacy and the stability of their societies. The book's central argument is that Rawls's political liberalism fosters parties and partisanship by leaving many key policy issues open to democratic contestation and justificatory disagreement, but that it also needs parties and partisanship, as the latter can play a key role in the articulation of public justifications. Within this political liberal framework, there are three ways in which I believe partisanship can contribute to political cohesion.

First, political cohesion is about overcoming normatively relevant differences within diverse societies. It is therefore about overcoming the tension between citizens' political and non-political obligations. If citizens have a moral duty to obey the law of their state (a claim that I take for granted for the sake of argument) but also have moral duties associated with their ethical or religious doctrines (a claim which, I believe, is sociologically uncontroversial), that tension may be deleterious for political cohesion. Many citizens, that is, will be pulled in different directions by their diverse conceptions of the good, rather than being drawn towards a shared political project. This will undermine both their political obligation (i.e. their moral duty to obey the law) and, consequently, the political legitimacy of the state and its laws. What is to be done?

In my book I defend the view that partisans have special political obligations, i.e. a special moral duty to obey the law. These obligations are grounded both in the



idea that normally partisans voluntarily consent to undertaking the duties of partisanship, which include the duty to obey the law (which is often legally codified), and in the view that partisans enjoy special benefits in liberal democracies, and have therefore a fair play-based moral duty to contribute to the production of those benefits, by obeying the law. But what if a political system is unfair? What if, even in the presence of broadly liberal democratic institutions, certain individuals and groups are systematically excluded from political influence? Can partisanship, in these cases, still generate any special political obligations?

One of the key aims of this symposium is to show how political processes can embody values *and produce norms* that may legitimate the political system and contribute to political cohesion in a way that goes beyond the avoidance of violent conflict. With respect to political obligation, one of the key ways in which this can be realised is by rendering the political system more inclusive towards the diverse values and demands advanced by the members of a political community. This can be done not only by avoiding laws that directly discriminate against certain political parties but also by providing parties with public funding, in order to prevent economic inequalities from translating into unequal influence on the political system, and especially by encouraging the formation of a diverse multi-party system through the adoption of proportional representation (PR). PR can enable a greater variety of citizens and groups to influence political decisions, compared to first-past-the-post electoral systems. All these reforms ought to be guided by the idea of public reason, i.e. they ought to be publicly justified by appealing to reasons that all members of the public could accept at some level of idealisation. Overall, a fairer political system reduces the tension between citizens' political and non-political obligations, by enabling them to shape the political system based on their non-political commitments. Moreover, as empirical research has shown (e.g. Tyler, 2006, 2011), a fairer political system also more strongly motivates citizens to obey the law.

But there is a second way in which political processes and institutions can produce norms that may legitimate the political system and contribute to political cohesion. A key way in which PR, as a form of electoral design, contributes to creating a fairer political system, is by providing different parties and partisans with what I call 'justificatory pressure potential' (Bonotti, 2017, p. 34). Even though some parties and partisans may never be able to directly influence laws and policies, e.g. because they may not have sufficient presence within the legislature and/or the executive, they may still have the ability to exercise pressure on those who do have the power to make laws and policies, by demanding justifications for their decisions. A legislature in which a greater variety of parties (and, therefore, of societal interests) is represented, that is, is more likely to provide a platform in which minority and/or marginal voices can express their opposition to proposed laws, and demand that such laws be justified based on reasons that take their interests into account. In this sense, the apparent political fragmentation of a more



diverse party system can in fact contribute to greater political cohesion, a cohesion grounded in shared norms of political justification.

Finally, partisanship can contribute to political cohesion by carrying the bulk of the justificatory burden demanded by political liberalism. Here it is necessary to take some distance from Rawls's (2005) ambitious demand that all citizens, whether politically engaged or not, ought to justify their proposed laws and policies by complying with the same standards of justification that apply to politicians and public officials in general, at least when they vote on fundamental political matters, or when they debate such matters in the public political realm. Rawls's demanding standard of political justification can be dangerous for political cohesion. As numerous critics of Rawls have observed, asking citizens to translate their non-political values and doctrines into the language of public reason may alienate them from the political system. This can hardly be considered positive for political cohesion.

Parties and partisanship can play a key role in this context. By carrying the burden of political justification on behalf of ordinary citizens, they can relieve the latter of such a burden, and allow them to support their preferred laws and policies on the basis of their values and doctrines, whatever the latter might be. While this proposal distances itself from the Rawlsian framework, and while it may appear, once again, to hinder rather than foster political cohesion, in fact this is not the case. To understand why, we should remember that the Rawlsian overlapping consensus, despite its name, is not only about consensus. It is, also, about diversity. More specifically, the aim of the overlapping consensus is not only to ensure that laws and policies are justified on the basis of widely shared public reasons, but also that the same laws and policies are justified on the basis of citizens' diverse *non-public* reasons. This is also crucial, according to Rawls, in order to guarantee the stability of diverse liberal societies over time. And it is another way of saying that political cohesion in such societies also requires a differentiated process of political justification. Once again, apparent fragmentation can be conducive to political cohesion.

The role of parties and partisans is crucial, in this context, because parties and partisans can both carry out the (directly cohesive) process of public reason justification, by advancing and debating public reasons in the public political realm (e.g. in the legislature, where this process can be favoured by a more fragmented party system, as previously argued) and the (indirectly cohesive) process of non-public reason justification, by being responsive to the non-public reasons of their constituents. In summary, partisanship can contribute to political cohesion in diverse societies, when it is grounded in the ideal of public justification and when it is accompanied by political institutions and processes that favour (rather than hinder) the expression of diverse societal demands.

Matteo Bonotti



Partisanship and its exemplary force: a comment on Bonotti

There are at least two perspectives from which to defend the value of partisanship – that of the politically committed individual, for whom it may be a way to advance a particular cause, and that of the unaligned observer, who may see in it a political contribution beyond the specific goals of its agents. Recent books have explored both viewpoints (Muirhead, 2014; Rosenblum, 2008; White and Ypi, 2016); Bonotti's is mainly of the second kind. It describes the constructive effects of party competition, not just as a means to contain social conflict but as a practice that gives life to the ties of citizenship. In the terms of this Critical Exchange, partisanship can foster the cohesiveness of diverse societies. By generating common processes of justification that citizens of differing views can connect to, building thereby the conditions for the exercise of public reason, party-based modes of participation serve to integrate political communities in desirable ways.

The relationship between Rawlsian public reason and the practices of partisanship is a recurrent theme of the book. Different kinds of argument are possible here, the mildest of which is to stress the compatibility of the two. As Bonotti shows, despite the circumspection with which Rawls viewed comprehensive doctrines in politics, practices of partisanship are structured so as to encourage the formulation of political views in generalisable ways. Seeking to win elections typically means articulating a programme that appeals to the many, and conveying it in widely accessible terms. More boldly, Bonotti suggests that partisanship and public reason are not just compatible but complementary. By connecting comprehensive doctrines to institutionalised processes of deliberation, parties bring doctrines into contact with each other and enable the identification and construction of overlapping consensuses. This, he suggests, is not just the effect of large parties with a real prospect of entering government: even small parties draw their followers into the political system and allow them to influence the exercise of public reason through the pressure they exercise on others to justify themselves.

The strongest claim of the book is that partisanship and public reason are not merely compatible or complementary but ultimately mutually dependent. Partisanship is what makes public reason viable in diverse societies. Partisans speak both the language of public reason and of comprehensive doctrines – enough of the former to be good political liberals, enough of the latter to keep citizens engaged. Without such mediating agents, Rawls gives us a model that seems to ask too much. (Likewise, without an anchoring in public reason, partisanship tends towards a politics of interest-group bargaining.) Such claims concerning the mutual dependence of partisanship and public reason lead Bonotti to advocate political measures that support and deepen the place partisanship in public life, from state funding for parties to the embrace of electoral systems of PR that allow a broader range of partisan views to find expression in representative chambers.



The book presents a defence of the worth of partisanship that is distinctive relative to other recent accounts of this kind, emphasising parties as elements in a nearly just society rather than as agents of political transformation. A question that all democratic defences of partisanship are likely to face however is whether they rely on an idealised notion of the party. A familiar methodological challenge, accentuated perhaps for those who want to emphasise the deliberative qualities of partisanship and its potential to foster cohesion, is how to pitch a concept of the party that is recognisable in contemporary practice yet not laden with the worst features of electoral politics. Does Bonotti's account rely on too normativised a conception of partisanship, addressed to parties as he would like them to be and insufficiently attentive to their real-world deficiencies? By emphasising the orientation of partisans to liberal democratic norms, reasonability, political obligation and the like, does he simply define the negative features out of the picture?

In *The Force of the Example*, Alessandro Ferrara argues against the tendency to counterpose things as they are and things as they should be (Ferrara, 2008). Such a dichotomy overlooks a third possibility: things that are as they should be. For the critically minded scholar, the aim should be neither to catalogue the world in its imperfections, nor to prescribe what does not exist but ought to, but to reflect on the normative potential embodied in existing practices at their best. This seems a helpful way to think about contemporary accounts of the place of partisanship in political theory, including Bonotti's. Such accounts plausibly combine normative and empirical elements to the extent that there exist real-world instances that give credence to their stronger claims.

There are historical examples that can support normative readings of partisanship, as found for instance in some of the large mass parties of the twentieth century. In contemporary contexts one might look to the parties emerging out of social movements in the Mediterranean and beyond, as well as to ongoing efforts to democratise and revitalise established organisations such as the UK Labour Party. Such associations, linked to mass movements on the one hand and institutions on the other, recapture some of the 'bifocal' qualities long associated with the party as an intermediary agent which Bonotti rightly emphasises. Experiments in intra-party deliberation hold the potential to develop the model further (Invernizzi Accetti and Wolkenstein, 2017). There is also research that suggests normative conceptions of partisanship can be usefully deployed to the analysis of contemporary parties in some unlikely settings (Herman, 2016, 2017).

Bonotti's argument would seem to rest not just on there being exemplary parties but exemplary party systems. Public reason is exercised through an interplay of agents rather than the contribution of one. This is a demanding thought, perhaps especially in times of political volatility, but not a wholly implausible one. Examining the real-world cases that can support normative claims about partisanship looks like a valuable way to extend research on these themes.

Jonathan White



A democratic theory of political cohesion

Theories of justice and theories of democracy typically assume, at least implicitly, that they will in some way promote political cohesion in a political community by way of facilitating common commitment among individuals to a rightful political project. A standard view is that the rightfulness of democratic procedures and just institutions, respectively, will give individuals powerful reasons to give their support to the political community. This formulation, however, may be too cerebral. To understand how rightful institutions promote political cohesion, it is not enough to focus on an abstract endorsement of their rightfulness by individuals. It is also important to understand how the direct experience of these institutions and their processes generate political cohesion by promoting a more aesthetic sense among individuals that they are recognised by and belong to the political community. The ways in which a political arrangement facilitates cohesion in a political community may be referred to as its centripetal effects.

This contribution will be limited to focusing upon how the rightfulness of democracy in particular, and the forms of political action it engenders, can contribute to political cohesion. I will explore how partisan political representation operating in a competitive context framed by various types of voting opportunities are the main engines of political cohesion in a democratic society. Before doing so, I first attempt to explain the normative basis or rightfulness of such institutions. In my book, *Centripetal Democracy* (2017), I define the internal purpose of democracy (or what democracy aims at as a rightful ideal of self-rule) as maximising individuals' equal opportunities for control over the political power in which they have a stake as members of a collectively self-governing political community.

Control is the key term in this definition and should be understood in a nuanced way. Control is the capacity of an entity to have a direction guiding impact on some state of affairs. Following Philip Pettit (2012, pp. 153–155), we can distinguish in this regard between control that is active (by way of direct participation in actions that aim at a desired result); virtual (by way of refraining from action because the desired result is already being achieved) and reserve (by way of foregoing the possibility of acting because one is neutral concerning outcomes). What this multidimensional understanding of control demonstrates is that maximising citizens' equal opportunities for control is not about providing the conditions that ensure a perpetually active citizenry. Rather, democracy is about guaranteeing that citizens are provided with an opportunity structure that allows them maximum influence over the decisions in which they have a stake.

But what then counts as maximum opportunities? Any ideal that aims to have purchase in the real world must reconcile itself to certain realities that provide the context in which it is to be interpreted. In the present case, we may refer to these as



the ‘circumstances of democracy’, which consist in the fact that (i) the demands and enjoyment of private and commercial life will restrict the ability and willingness of citizens to be perpetually active in collective decision-making, (ii) the complexity of decision-making limits the extent to which citizens can make informed decisions unaided and (iii) forum-style decision-making that is readily open to the equal participation of all citizens is impracticable beyond a very small scale society.

Considerations of this sort are among common rationales for representative institutions, which have the virtue of disburdening ordinary citizens from high volume decision-making, while establishing a class of individuals that has the time to take decisions in a specialised forum and the resources to ensure that their decisions are informed by expertise. While we may agree with this rationale, what is almost universally lacking from normative accounts of representative democracy is a guiding principle for regulating the power differentials between ordinary citizens and their representatives. For this reason, I posit the democratic difference principle, which states that *all increases in control over the decision-making process of some citizens above others must contribute to an increase in control over this process for each citizen*. This principle is derived from the logic of the democratic purpose (stated above) when confronted with the circumstances of democracy. Effectively, individuals seeking to maximise their equal opportunities for control will only agree to give up some of their control to others if this will in fact increase their opportunities for political control.

As we have seen, representative institutions clearly meet this criterion. Rather than minimising democracy by taking decision-making into their own hands, they in fact make modern democracy practicable. Moreover, selecting these representatives at regular elections by way of universal suffrage gives citizens the power of both selection and sanction, while providing incentives for representatives in office to be responsive to citizens between election periods. The democratic difference principle has many more implications than this. Most noteworthy, and sufficient to detail for present purposes, is the endorsement of a scheme of direct democracy. Certainly, citizens seeking to maximise their equal opportunities for control would be unlikely to give their representatives more autonomy than what may be necessary to make democracy possible in the face of the circumstances of democracy.

At least three types of direct voting opportunities would be required to satisfy the democratic appetite of these citizens: mandatory referendums (whereby a government cannot change a law deemed to be of special importance without first seeking approval by the people); optional referendums (which allow for a threshold of citizens to call for a popular vote on an issue that has passed through parliament) and citizens’ initiatives (which allow for a certain threshold of citizens to propose new legislation for popular vote).



Important to note here is that the democratic difference principle does not make prescriptions concerning how active citizens ought to be in making use of these bottom-up voting mechanisms (the optional referendum and citizens' initiative), nor how much citizens should turn out to vote. In both cases, there is no democratic problem with citizens' lack of participation, so long as these phenomena are primarily due to a meaningful exercise of absentee citizens' virtual or reserve control (rather than due to socioeconomic factors that systematically discourage disadvantaged individuals from participating). The key normative demand is that citizens have an efficacious opportunity structure that allows them to become directly active in decision-making when they decide to do so. What the democratic difference principle does provide against, however, is oversaturating the *demos* with too many votes on a given day or throughout the year. Appropriate scheduling of votes and sufficiently high thresholds of citizens' support required to call a popular vote can easily address these problems.

When appropriately designed, and constrained (e.g. by prohibiting votes that would challenge the rights and liberties constitutive of democracy), we may expect direct voting opportunities to work in tandem with elections and representative institutions in developing deep forms of political cohesion within a political community. I now detail only some of the centripetal effects that these various institutions may be expected to engender.

A regularly noted centripetal feature of electoral democracy is the fact that the always forthcoming vote provides the electoral losers with good reason to maintain commitment to the political community in the hopes that they will fare better on the next occasion. More recent work in political theory has drawn positive attention to the fact that, due to the need to appeal to a wide voter base over time, elections incentivise partisan claims couched in the common good among political representatives vying for political power (see Matteo Bonotti's contribution to this Critical Exchange). Such a form of political discourse further facilitates electoral losers in their support for the political community: to the extent that the government is formed on a partisan basis framed in accord with relatively inclusive norms, electoral losers may not reasonably expect to fare too badly under rule by their political opponents.

Less recognised is the manner in which bottom-up institutions of direct democracy can reinforce the ability of democratic institutions to ensure political cohesion that extends to electoral losers. On the one hand, such institutions provide citizens (including electoral losers) with a direct route to contesting the government, thus ensuring that they have efficacious opportunities to influence representative institutions in between electoral periods. On the other hand, to the extent that different types of issues will be subject to popular votes over time, we can expect the formation of multiple majorities, thereby increasing the likelihood that individuals will find themselves on the winning side of a policy dispute on at least some occasions. Moreover, on some issues, at least some electoral opponents



are likely to find themselves allied, thus softening the division between electoral winners and losers.

Although voting is often viewed as a normatively shallow mode of decision-making when compared to a deliberative procedure aimed at mutually justified reasons, there are powerful centripetal effects laden in the former that often go unacknowledged. Two related events transpire around the ballot box – the asking and the voting. The asking transpires through political campaigning, where citizens at large are addressed directly and implored to help shape the future of the political community. This form of recognition provides the centripetal role of affirming to citizens that they belong to and count as part of a future-oriented political project. The act of voting itself is a performative act that sets in motion its own peculiar centripetal effect. By participating in an act that demands an answer to the question of what ‘we as a political community will decide and do together’, the citizen is implicitly affirming her belonging to and a recognition of the belonging of others in a political community whose future is collectively decided together on an equal basis. It stands to reason that when citizens are regularly asked to vote in both elections and referendums, and frequently take up that invitation, these centripetal effects associated with the ballot box will more deeply engrain themselves in the political culture and thereby help to establish a form of political cohesion that may not be easy to shake.

All of these democratic features – representatives engaging in partisan claims in the context of electoral and direct voting opportunities – provide a structure to the public sphere by setting in motion a centripetal process that may be referred to as discursive integration. This phenomenon does not describe a situation where political consensus is achieved, but rather denotes the experience of individuals being exposed to the same issues at the same time and in the same way. The importance of discursive integration to political cohesion becomes manifest in those political systems where it is hindered. In Belgium and the European Union, for example, citizens from the territorially and discursively delineated public spheres are called to vote together once every 5 years for different sets of territorially defined political parties. As a result, not only do citizens from different territories rarely share discursive themes in any kind of synchronised manner, but the existence of different party systems within each territory also ensures that issues are not systematically debated in the same way across the public spheres.

The problems with political cohesion in Belgium and the EU – both of which have to some degree suffered lack of support from citizens, including more or less serious demands for secession or fundamental reform – can to some extent be viewed as a result of the failure to implement a democratic process that sets in motion a robust process of discursive integration. The case of Switzerland, by contrast, demonstrates that a unified party system and a direct democratic opportunity structure can help to ensure that there are sufficient centripetal dynamics operating across several delineated public spheres. Much as with



democracies that have the advantage of operating with a singular public sphere, the developed nature of democratic process in Switzerland ensures that citizens become shaped by and recognise one another as part of the same political lifeworld. Its democratic institutions are an important reason, albeit not the only one, why Switzerland boasts the kind of political cohesion that is apparently lacking in Belgium and the EU.

This contribution has been a brief attempt to explain how a certain model of democracy, centripetal democracy, can contribute to political cohesion. I do not deny that there may be instances where the democratic process will fail to promote political cohesion – such as when partisanship become perverted by the worst kinds of populism, or when certain types of popular votes polarise the community in a deep way. However, a system of centripetal democracy is expected to perform well enough over time to weather these storms and maintain the common commitment of citizens to a rightful system of shared rule.

Joseph Lacey

The horizontal dimension of centripetal democracy: a comment on Lacey

Joseph Lacey's contribution to this Critical Exchange addresses the important, yet under explored, topic of the role institutional design can play in promoting political cohesion. Underlying his argument and the book on which it draws is a distinction between centripetal and centrifugal democracy, with Switzerland and Belgium providing exemplars of each model, respectively. He seeks to argue that certain types of democracy can facilitate the discursive integration of citizens by maximising the opportunities they have for influencing decisions in ways that enhance their identification with the collective policies of the polity. However, identification with a polity involves both a vertical and a horizontal dimension. It involves identification with a certain political authority as the appropriate locus to make decisions, on the one hand, and identification with one's fellow citizens as the appropriate members of the *demos*, on the other. In ways I shall detail below, I find that Lacey's suggestions largely tackle the vertical dimension without giving adequate consideration to the horizontal dimension. Yet, the former builds on the latter, and provides the motor of the centrifugal tendencies in Belgium and the centripetal possibilities in Switzerland.

Lacey notes that certain factors of time, complexity and scale constrain the operation of democracy, such as the demands of private and commercial life, the intricacies and technicalities of decision-making in advanced, complex societies and the difficulties of promoting meaningful deliberation among a group of people above a given size. He calls these constraints the 'circumstances of democracy'. However, this latter term suggests a parallel with what Rawls, following Hume,



termed the ‘circumstances of justice’: namely the circumstances of relative scarcity and limited altruism that make distributional principles necessary in the first place. The parallel circumstances in the case of democracy have been regarded as disagreement about the principles of justice, on the one side, and the inevitable partiality of each individual to his or her own interests and concerns given our limited knowledge and experience, as well as a certain selfishness, on the other side. If the first makes some political authority necessary to avoid continuous conflict as to who gets what, when and how, the second suggests that if that authority is to operate impartially it should be democratically organised so as to give all involved an equal say in the collective decisions impacting their lives.

To the constraints and circumstances of democracy we need to add the conditions for democracy. These relate to the ways the horizontal relations among a group of individuals make possible and appropriate their acceptance of a vertical relationship with a given democratic political authority. Broadly speaking, the different interests and views of a group of citizens can be distributed among them in ways that create either cross-cutting or segmental cleavages. In the former case, no sub-group of citizens will consistently line up against another group. The group may be divided on class, religious and ethnic grounds, say, but not all wealthy people will be of one ethnicity and religion with poorer people of another ethnicity and religion. As a result, majorities get made up of different groups of minorities on different issues. By contrast, in the latter case cleavages do line up in this way. As a result, shared values across all groups become less probable, so that disagreements are more likely to become polarised, with each group holding on to their own partial perspective. It also becomes more probable that not all groups will have an equal stake in the totality of collective decisions. Consequently, consistent minorities become more likely and the formation of a collective view that accommodates all perspectives harder to achieve. If the former case offers propitious conditions for democracy, the latter case makes it considerably harder.

Both cases can be prone to certain types of centrifugal forces. Both may suffer from a degree of disaffection with democracy stemming from what I re-named above as the constraints on democracy. That is, the demands of private life, the intricacies of the decisions and a sense of the insignificance of one’s own input, can – and in many democracies clearly do – all lead to political apathy and even disillusionment with the democratic process. Lacey makes some original and important suggestions with regard to this problem. He proposes that institutional design be guided by what, adapting Rawls, he calls ‘the democratic difference principle’, whereby ‘all increases in control over the decision-making process of some citizens above others must contribute to an increase in control over this process for each citizen’. He argues that the familiar forms of representative democracy have met this criterion by rendering democracy practicable in contemporary societies. Nevertheless, he acknowledges citizens have felt some loss nonetheless. He considers this loss can be partially rectified through the



introduction of an element of direct democracy similar to the referendums commonly employed in Switzerland. The claim is that participation in making a concrete decision collectively with others has a centripetal effect both vertically, by giving citizens a sense of empowerment, and horizontally, by encouraging deliberation and a feeling of common purpose. However, these effects assume that the conditions for democracy exist in the sense of the existence of cross-cutting cleavages. As he notes, electoral democracy operates best when parties are competing for votes with contrasting visions of the common good that will appeal to different coalitions of minorities. Likewise, he sees referendums operating best when it is possible for them to propose new legislation or oppose existing legislation or policies in ways that might attract different majorities on different occasions. In other words, taken together there must be a reasonable chance of most people – at least those not advocating unconstitutional views – to win at least some of the time rather than losing all the time.

Yet, if opinions and interests are segmented, consistent losers can arise. The disagreements will be polarised, with no incentive to adopt a less partial view in order to build coalitions with other groups. Here the application of the democratic difference principle need not in and of itself produce centripetal democracy. Representatives may simply represent segmented groups and refuse to dialogue with each other. Referendums will simply produce a consistent minority and majority across all issues. In this case, so-called majoritarian devices have historically given way to consensus institutions and the devolution of a wide range of public services and state powers, including taxation, to the regional level. While these serve to hold a segmentally divided political community together, they can also serve to consolidate separate political identities in ways that in long term have a centrifugal effect. Both Scotland and Catalonia offer instances of this phenomenon.

If one compares Switzerland and Belgium, then although both involve a linguistic divide it operates in different ways. In Switzerland, the main German vs. French (with Italian speakers a smaller group) division is cross-cut by the religious and wealth divisions. In other words, there are both Catholic and Protestant as well as wealthy and less wealthy cantons in both the French- and German-speaking communities. Therefore, although the public sphere is linguistically divided and to some degree divided by canton as well, there is not a consistent divide between the French and German communities. This has allowed parties to be national, with no asymmetric or growing demand for the devolution of state powers. Meanwhile, the coalition at the Federal level is fairly stable. That is far less the case in Belgium with regard to the main linguistic divide between Flemish and French speakers (the German-speaking group being far smaller). This division is also a division between richer and poorer regions, with a historic background of the dominance of the once richer but now poorer French region, although both communities have been mainly Catholic. It is these more segmented social conditions that have led Belgium to



adopt an institutional design with centrifugal rather than centripetal implications. All of which is to say that the drivers of political cohesion may be as much social as political. Institutional design has a limited autonomous effect that has to be related to pre-existing social conditions.

Richard Bellamy

Emancipation: political cohesion in a new key

Today it is often claimed that society is falling apart. Many democratic countries witness growing estrangement between urban elites and the surrounding countryside, between the haves and the have-nots and between natives and newcomers. The rise of socially dividing tendencies has generated a quest for new ways to create political cohesion. Instead of merely asking what makes democratic institutions just or legitimate, political theorists have started to explore their integrative function. How can parties, publics and elections assist in fostering commitment to a common political project among people living together as strangers?

The endeavour to explore the role of democratic processes as drivers of political cohesion is a welcome addition to the more loyalty-based approaches of political commitment prevalent in contemporary debates on civic integration. The critical attention is less on the virtues and merits of democratic peoples, and more on the virtues and merits of democratic processes: what do they have to be like in order for people to commit to them in a critically sound and sustained way? In this contribution, I would like to add a new perspective to the literature on political cohesion. The claim I will make is that democracy is a political lifeform animated and sustained by a principle of emancipation, and emancipated lives are not merely created through political processes linked to parties, publics and elections. They are created through policies in such fields as education, work, citizenship and housing.

Close to home, day-to-day and material, policies in these areas have often fallen under the radar of political theorists. They have been dismissed as ‘social’ rather than ‘political’. The main point of this contribution is to argue that policies not only are political; they are vital to the regeneration of democracy. If one wishes to put a halt to the divisive tendencies that plague present-day democracies one ought therefore to pay critical attention to the principles that are operative in these more mundane areas of political life: Do they foster or undermine commitment to democratic practices and ideals?

I will proceed in three steps. First, I will clarify what it means to define democracy as a political lifeform. Second, I will briefly elucidate the meaning of emancipation. Finally, I will return to the topic of this symposium, namely political cohesion. The aim is to illustrate how policies in the field of citizenship – and more precisely, in the field of social rights – have the capacity to foster or undermine



commitment to democracy, all depending on the principles that animate and sustain them.

The description of democracy as a political lifeform draws on pillars first laid out by Montesquieu in *The Spirit of Laws* ([1748], 1989). According to Montesquieu, there are three political forms; republics, monarchies and despotisms. Each form has its own nature and principle, which together give direction and coherence to political life: The ‘nature’ of a political form refers to who governs, and how. In a republic, it is the body of the people who governs, and they do so by choosing ministers who conduct tasks for them. In a monarchy, it is the king who governs, and he does so by means of fixed laws and the intermediary powers of the nobility. In a despotic political form, finally, it is the despot who governs, and he does so without laws and intermediaries but through a vizier who executes his discretionary power. Still, these political forms would not be able to endure without someone giving life to them by adhering to and enacting their respective power. The ‘principle’ therefore refers to the public commitment needed to set and keep these political forms in motion. It is what makes them tick: public virtue or love of the country and the law in a republic, honour or striving for distinction and superiority in a monarchy, and finally fear in a despotic form (Montesquieu, 1989, Book III).

By making reference to these principles, Montesquieu adds a dynamic element to the classical study of political forms. Rather than categorising different political forms and their distorted variants with reference to number – the one, the few or the many – he makes the continuity of a political lifeform dependent on its combination of actions and institutions. The supposition is that ‘[j]ust as some motors only “go” on petrol, different governments have different drives that set them into motion’ (Althusser, 2007, p. 46). Unless people act on the principle of virtue, honour and fear, and unless laws, decrees, institutions and policies encourage commitment to these same principles the republican, monarchical and despotic political form will eventually peter out. They will lose their animating force, or spirit.

The principle is vital to the cohesion of a political lifeform, for two reasons. First, it integrates the political with the social (Singer, 2013). In Montesquieu’s view, virtue, honour and fear do not merely foster commitment to the power of the people, the king and the despot; they extend into more ordinary areas of life, including education, luxury, taxation and the condition of women. It is in these areas that a political lifeform becomes a ‘life’ in the more concrete sense of the term. Second, while virtue, honour and fear refer to the principle needed to sustain a political lifeform, they also serve as immanent ‘standards of right and wrong’ (Arendt, 1994, p. 335). In a republic, for example, laws, institutions and policies are evaluated on the basis of how well they protect public virtue against private benefit, and in a monarchical form they are evaluated on the basis of how well they guard honour and distinction against baseness and equality.



What then is the nature and principle of a democratic political lifeform? Who governs and by what commitment? These are the questions that I seek to answer in my forthcoming book, *The Spirit of Democracy: Sources of Corruption and Renewal*. Since the space for elaboration is severely limited, let me present the main argument in the form of two bullet points, before I move on to discuss its implications for the debate on political cohesion.

First, starting with who governs, a democratic political lifeform does not have a natural source of authority. It is not anchored in a body of people, a king or a despot. In a democratic form, we debate who governs. That is precisely why we have parties, publics and regular elections; to be able to judge and decide who ought to be entrusted with governing. In the words of Brian Singer, we could say that democracy ‘is not so much a struggle between classes *within* society as a struggle *over* society, over the definitions of what society is and should be’ (Singer, 1986, p. 68; italics in original). Second, the principle needed to set and keep this political dynamic in motion is emancipation. What is characteristic of a democratic political lifeform is that while it removes all external limitations on political affairs (God, nature and history), it does not shy away from the abyss of freedom and responsibility that this removal generates in the exercise of politics. Instead of escaping the uncertainty it generates by projecting freedom and responsibility onto a natural source of authority, it encourages human beings to equitably divide up the burden of judgment and decision-making. The result is existential relief, and a unique sense of emancipation: equal time and space to judge and decide the purpose and direction of society. It is the commitment to this principle of emancipation that gives direction and coherence to a democratic political lifeform, including parties, publics and elections. It makes sure that while everyone has an equal say on the purpose and direction of society, no one has the *final* say. There is always room for yet another debate on who ‘we, the people’ are.

Political processes are vital to the regeneration of democracy, but so are policies related to education, citizenship, work and housing. Policies in these fields are not merely social. They are political insofar as they embody principles that have the capacity to undermine or reinforce the democratic political form in which they operate. The plural sense of the term ‘principles’ in the above sentence is not coincidental. No political lifeform is guided by a single principle. On the contrary, each form is guided by a combination of principles that coexist and compete for our attention. What allows us to say that a political form is ‘democratic’, rather than ‘monarchical’ or ‘republican’, is that emancipation trumps honour and virtue in a sustained way, both in the enactment and judgment of politics. Let me end by briefly clarifying this point in relation to recent developments in the field of citizenship: the privatisation of social services.

Since the 1980s, a myriad of policy steps has been taken towards the privatisation of social services, including schools, healthcare, childcare and infrastructure. The ambition has been to empower individuals by increasing their



freedom of choice, and so making them personally responsible for the actions and choices they make, or indeed fail to undertake. In political theory, the privatisation of social services has typically been seen as a matter of social justice and welfare politics. It has been reduced to a conflict between left and right, or between collective and individual ways of organising ‘the social question’. The result is that in political theory little attention has been paid to the democratic significance of the privatisation of social services (but see Brown, 2015; Honig, 2017), let alone to its bearing on the commitment needed to foster democratic practices and ideals.

As a closer inspection reveals, however, the principle that guides the privatisation of social services has more in common with the commitment needed to sustain a monarchy than a democracy (Näsström and Kalm, 2015). The principle of monarchy is honour, and by honour is meant the aspiration for ‘preferences and distinctions’ (Montesquieu, 1989, Book III, p. 27). The problem is that when market-based solutions are allowed to dominate social areas, and the benefits and risks of life are privatised, the striving for distinction may take precedence over emancipation in the enactment and judgment of politics. In order to survive ‘the rat race’, we are encouraged to cultivate certain manners and attitudes that might give us an advantage over others in the competition for security and status, such as ambition, politeness and resourcefulness (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002, p. 23). Moreover, we are taught to evaluate the actions of ourselves and others on this basis, which means that once we have received a particular rank it becomes important to ‘do or suffer nothing that might show that we consider ourselves inferior to the rank itself’ (Montesquieu, 1989, Book III, p. 34).

This priority of distinction over emancipation does not enhance freedom in society. Instead of giving everyone equal time and space to reflect upon the world that they share, including what the rat race does to human relations, it pits individuals against individuals in a constant fight for security and status. The trouble is that if this development continues it may in the long run undermine the support needed to sustain democracy. It may nurture ‘a market for monarchy’, i.e. commitment to a strong leader backed up by (quasi-) religious, natural and historical guarantees (Näsström and Kalm, 2015, p. 566). By fostering competition for status and positions, and at the same time offering human consolation in the case of misfortune, such a monarchical combination could prove custom-designed for a society divided into ‘winners’ and ‘losers’.

Needless to say, this example is neither complete nor exhaustive; examples could be taken from other policy-fields, including education, work and housing. The main point is that in times of democratic discontent, critical attentiveness to the difference between political lifeforms and the complex ways in which they interrelate and compete for our attention, is more important than ever. To come to terms with socially dividing tendencies it is not enough to focus on the political cohesion created by parties, publics and elections. We need to pay attention to the



principles that are active in the field of social policies: do they foster virtue, honour and distinction, fear and/or emancipation?

Sofia Näsström

Emancipation, equality and democratic cohesion: a comment on Näsström

Sofia Näsström's contribution (and book in preparation) offers a fascinating renewal and extension of Montesquieu's approach to reflecting on political lifeworlds. In identifying the spirit of democracy with emancipation, she aims to provide a perspective from which both to integrate the social with the political (in a way that, for example, Arendt fails to do) and to provide an immanent standard of judgment, of right and wrong, appropriate to that form of political life. Political cohesion is rethought from this perspective not as a matter of shared national identity, constitutional patriotism or common values but as the shared practice of sustaining of a reflexive relationship between democratic citizens in and through which they experience the freedom of, and in, participating in governing the terms and conditions of democratic citizenship. This is, I think, a valuable and genuinely intellectually exciting approach, however, I will endeavour to raise some critical concerns with respect to the principle of emancipation that is at the heart of her account.

Let me begin though by pointing to some of the merits of this approach. In her article, Näsström points to the privatisation of social services as giving rise to the domination of society by market-based solutions such that 'the striving for distinction may take precedence over emancipation in the enactment and judgment of politics' since we are thereby incentivised, even constrained, 'to cultivate certain manners and attitudes that might give us an advantage over others in the competition for security and status, such as ambition, politeness and resourcefulness' and 'taught to evaluate the actions of ourselves and others on this basis, which means that once we have received a particular rank it becomes important to "do or suffer nothing that might show that we consider ourselves inferior to the rank itself"'. This acute point can be extended to encompass the multiple forms of everyday inegalitarianism shaping our social relationships and interactions that Michael Sandel documents in *What Money Can't Buy* (2012), and Näsström's framework is well placed to accommodate and give political extension to the arguments of relational egalitarians such as Debra Satz that 'lurking behind many if not all, noxious markets are problems relating to the standing of the parties before, during, and after the process of exchange' (2010, p. 93). We might further note that this marketisation process is linked to a shift to 'flexible labour' and the 'ambition ... to empower individuals by increasing their freedom of choice' seen in the privatisation of social services is part of a wider – and pernicious (Mounk, 2017) –



policy turn to a picture of ‘personal responsibility’ that situates individuals as the entrepreneurs of their own lives and labour, and which, in a context of increased precarity, leads naturally to a state of ongoing anxiety, fear and self-blame that aligns with the despotic form as well as the monarchic. Moreover, Näsström’s argument also seems well placed – to take an example she mentions but does not have space to address – to integrate consideration of the economic workplace as a significant site of social relationships and interactions, and one that, as Anderson’s recent work in *Private Government* (2017) shows, does not align with – and may play a role in undermining – the principle of democracy that Näsström articulates. (This may have particular salience in the contemporary economic order as the division between work time and leisure or home time is, for increasing numbers of workers, blurred and frayed.)

However, while I appreciate the potentially capacious critical power of her framework to integrate the relationship between politics and society in order to articulate what we may think of as ‘infrastructures of democratic life’, I am less sure about the sense in which the principle of emancipation provides immanent standards of judgment, because I am less sure about the status and meaning of this principle. Central to Näsström’s argument about democracy as a political lifeform is the idea that there ‘is always room for yet another debate on who “we, the people” are’ – but what exactly does she intend by this?

There are two different ways in which we can understand the question of ‘*who* “we, the people” are’. The first, which we may call ‘the scope reading’, is in terms of who is included within, or excluded from, democratic citizenship – and relates to the demos (or democratic boundary) problem. The second, which we may call ‘the character reading’, concerns how we understand what makes us a democratic people and what this requires from us. These questions are practically interdependent in that how we answer one is likely to shape our answer to the other. A polity in which women, or those who do not own property, are excluded from political membership is likely to conceive of what being free and equal means, and what conditions are necessary to sustain this standing, in different ways to a polity that includes such groups. But the questions are not the same. So how are we to understand the central – indeed, dynamic – role that this question plays in Näsström’s argument concerning the principle of emancipation as the spirit of democracy?

One way of construing her argument would run thus. If we consider her stress on democracy as the political lifeform that ‘encourages human beings to face up to the task of emancipation by creating institutions that equitably divide up the burden of judgment and decision-making’ and issues in ‘existential relief, and a unique sense of freedom: equal time and space to experiment with new ways of living, thinking and doing democratic politics’, it seems that it is the second character sense that is in play. Thus, suppose that formally we understand our character as free and equal members of a collectively self-ruling polity, and hence our concern as those are the



conditions that enable us to stand to each other as free and equal members of a collectively self-ruling polity. Democracy, then, is the reflexive relationship of members determining their status as democratic citizens: firstly, in terms of what they take to be an equitable division of the burdens of judgment and of decision-making and; secondly, regarding the conditions that enable or support their practical experience of this status as allowing ‘equal time and space to experiment with new ways of living, thinking and doing democratic politics’. However, as the example of women and the propertyless given above illustrates, how these formal notions are filled in will be practically related to how the *who* question in its first scope sense is answered – and perhaps this is why Näsström takes the question of who ‘we the people’ are to be central: practical reflection on who is to be included affects what we take our democratic peoplehood to be and how we should stand to one another; practical reflection on what we are and how we should stand to one another affects who we think should be included – and hence the scope and character senses of *who* ‘we the people’ are construct an ongoing dynamic that drives the principle of emancipation. That at least is one way of understanding Näsström’s stress on the centrality of this question.

One further issue arises fairly naturally from the discussion thus far: what difference, if any, does the fact that the democratic form that Näsström addresses is that of a democratic state make to her argument? Given the form of her argument, I take it that the principle of emancipation is the spirit of democracy and not solely the democratic state, so what difference if any does the fact that the spirit of democracy is encased in a state form make – and what difference does it make to reflection on political cohesion? To see why this question matters, we can consider the issue raised by Näsström’s approach, both from the standpoint of a concern with democratisation and the standpoint of a concern with the specifics of a democratic state, as opposed to other forms or sites of democratic governance.

In relation to the standpoint of democratisation, consider two cases:

Case A: an authoritarian state introduces limited democratic government at municipal level.

Case B: within an only nominally democratic state, a wide variety of private clubs are organised democratically.

We know on Näsström’s view that states can (will?) contain varied principles – hence her concern about the privatisation of social services. It would seem to follow that she holds that, in *Case A*, the authoritarian state that is, let us suppose, attempting to reduce or contain popular discontent by offering restricted opportunities for democratic life at the municipal level, may, inadvertently, be supporting not only the development of civic–political skills among its subjects but also the development of the principle of emancipation (the spirit of democracy). Similarly, in *Case B*, Näsström’s argument would seem to suggest that such democratic clubs are likely to provide some (even if weak) support for the move to a more substantive level of democracy in the state. This raises the interesting possibility of testing Näsström’s



view by investigating whether municipal democratisation or participation in democratic clubs has any salient effects on the political attitudes of the ‘citizens’. One could also look within existing established democracies at the effects on civic attitudes and engagement of participation in democratic innovations such as citizen’s juries, mini-publics or participatory budgeting structures. The question of whether democracy in sub-state polities or even private clubs can act as a force against political cohesion in non-democratic contexts or as a driver of further democratisation in weakly (or well established) democratic contexts is opened up by the structuring of her argument in terms of Montesquieu’s approach.

In relation to the issue of the state form of the democratic state, we should note the contrast between the state as both an impersonal public authority that structures and sets the rules for sub-state polities and the conditions of legitimate private associations, and the state as a political form that is not subject (except voluntarily) to any higher public authority. The salience of the former is that it raises the question of how the organisation of the levels of public governance within the state matters to sustaining the spirit of democracy (consider the issue of secession raised in Catalonia, Quebec, Scotland) and the question of how much freedom of association in civil society is compatible with sustaining the spirit of democracy (consider sports club that choose to exclude black or female citizens). The salience of the latter is that it raises acutely the *demos* problem, both in terms of the position of non-citizen residents and in terms of non-resident citizens (not to go into more contested territory). The case of non-citizen residents raises the question of whether and, if so, how the spirit of democracy can survive in a state in which significant parts of the population are excluded from citizenship or political membership. The case of non-resident citizens raises the question of whether and, if so, how the spirit of democracy can be sustained if a significant part of the citizenry does not reside in the state and share the burdens of the choices to which residents are subject. There are good reasons in a world of independent states for states as intergenerational communities to allow relatively easy naturalisation and to allow citizens who live abroad to maintain their citizenship and, hence, to allow dual nationality (Bauböck, 2017). But then our discussion of both the spirit of democracy and the issue of political cohesion becomes inseparable from international, transnational and global politics. The principle of emancipation cannot only be an inward-facing principle organising the relations of those within the territory of the state, it must also be an outward-facing principle that addresses relations of citizenship between and across states. The question of political cohesion cannot coherently be addressed as a question about the political society within the territorial borders of the state because the relevant political society is transnational in scope. It is one of the merits of Näsström’s view that it not only reconceives the character of political cohesion but also moves our view of it beyond the bounds of methodological statism within which it has been trapped.

David Owen



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