

Parties and Public Reason

Comments on Matteo Bonotti's *Partisanship and Political Liberalism in Diverse Societies*

Reasonable Partisanship as the Cement of a Pluralistic Democracy

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Abstract: Matteo Bonotti's *Partisanship and Political Liberalism in Diverse Societies* develops a Rawlsian framework that defines the constraints political parties need to meet in order to promote their justificatory function and ensure the stability of a pluralistic democracy. Though this perspective represents a significant contribution to the debate both on the normative analysis of partisanship and on the scope and content of public reason, I will suggest that some clarifications are in order regarding its ability to contain populist parties and right-wing hateful speeches.

Keywords: Partisanship, Public Reason, Pluralism, Populism.

Matteo Bonotti's *Partisanship and Political Liberalism in Diverse Societies* addresses one of the most important and debated topics of current normative theory of democracy: the role and justification of political parties. Though empirical accounts of democracy have always considered parties fundamental for the proper functioning of any democratic system, the normative theory of democracy has, instead, traditionally been wary of parties because of their tendency to polarize political debates and create ideological divisions. The deliberative framework has reinforced this antipartisan perspective by requiring citizens to ground their claims in publicly and universally justifiable arguments, assess political proposals on their merits, and critically discuss proposals with one another so as to identify what is best for the polity. In the past few years, the main tenets of this antipartisan doctrine have been challenged by the seminal work of Nancy Rosenblum (2008) and the recent books by Russell Muirhead (2014) and Jonathan White and Lea Ypi (2016). According to these authors, parties, if properly constrained, can promote the essential functions of a democracy (Biale and Ottonelli, 2019). This is especially true within a deliberative framework because parties

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are “shapers and articulators of public reason” (Muirhead and Rosenblum, 2006, p. 104). Yet, as Bonotti rightly points out, these scholars do not explain how public reason, which excludes many comprehensive doctrines from the political debate, can be compatible with partisan proposals and the “comprehensive” ideological values on which they are grounded.

Partisanship and Political Liberalism in Diverse Societies overcomes these ambiguities by systematically evaluating the literature on public reason and claiming that parties and partisanship are compatible with a Rawlsian framework because their proposals and actions facilitate stability for the right reasons in pluralistic societies. To defend this perspective, Bonotti grounds his argument on the idea of fair play and the special political obligation this generates for partisans. Members of parties voluntarily choose to join an association that, provided the democratic process is fair and does not systematically disadvantage their parties, grants them more political influence than ordinary citizens. As a consequence, partisans, qua members of parties, have a political obligation to support and be loyal to those liberal democratic institutions that ensure them this political advantage. Bonotti claims that to achieve this aim, parties and partisans need to ground their claims on accessible reasons (accessibility requirement) and explain how their proposals are connected to shared liberal values (weak shareability requirement). If they exclusively appeal to comprehensive doctrines, they act as factions that address their claims to part of the polity, not the whole political community. While partisans, Bonotti contends, need to meet public-reason requirements, ordinary citizens can be committed to their comprehensive doctrines. Public accountability will be in fact granted by the competition among parties that will have to provide public reasons to justify their claims; otherwise they will be challenged by their adversaries. To conclude, the Rawlsian framework developed by Bonotti ensures significant room for pluralism and diversities while granting at the same time that these features do not undermine the stability of a liberal democracy. *Partisanship and Political Liberalism in Diverse Societies* represents, then, a great contribution to the debate both on the normative analysis of partisanship and on the scope and content of public reason.

Rawls and the populist momentum. Though the achievements and importance of this book are undeniable, Bonotti seems to assume that every member of a democratic polity, or at least every member of a party, is necessarily committed to liberal democratic values and, as a consequence, needs to exercise her political agency reasonably. The spread of populist parties raises some concerns regarding these assumptions, and it would be interesting to clarify the way Bonotti’s Rawlsian perspective can address this phenomenon. Bonotti could reply that since populist parties do not promote liberal values (violation of shareability requirement), they are factions that can be legitimately “contained”. Though at first glance this proposal might be appealing, it is, I contend, problematic and ambiguous. In particular I would like to challenge the effectiveness of the Rawlsian framework developed by Bonotti in identifying and addressing the problems that the spread of populist parties raises for a liberal democracy. Let me clarify these points.

If political parties need to meet public-reason requirements when they develop proposals that affect constitutional essentials or matters of fundamental justice, then only explicitly illiberal or fascist parties will be contained because they will craft a constitution that does not ensure the rights of minorities or a fair democratic process. Though these actions are extremely dangerous and are unfortunately occurring in some countries, they do not represent the specific and most problematic challenges populist parties raise to a liberal democratic system. Populist parties, unlike illiberal or fascist parties, can legitimately claim to embody democratic values, but their proposals and actions erode the essential features of a democracy (Urbinati, 2019). If we look at the Italian context, it is undeniable that Northern League and 5 Star Movement are developing their programs within the limits of a democratic system and are seeking electoral competitions because their legitimacy derives from them. Yet they are misrecognizing their adversaries who, since they do not represent the people, are not worthy of any consideration, and they are conveying an idea of unreflexive democracy in which citizens cannot critically form their preferences but must blindly support their leaders. To conclude, public reason, by focusing on constitutional essentials and matters of fundamental justice, is not fit to identify and contain the populist momentum, because it only excludes those parties that explicitly reject liberal democratic values (Viktor Orban's illiberal democracy).

Bonotti might challenge this critique by claiming that his account constrains any proposal developed by parties, and not only those affecting constitutional essentials. According to this perspective, populist parties are factions to be contained because their programs and actions exclusively speak to, and for, part of the political community and systematically challenge the liberal democratic order. Even though this view seems to confront the challenges of the populist momentum, it: 1) conveys an idea of democratic agency as reasonableness that is not hospitable to partisanship and its partiality (Biale, 2018); every political party, not only populist movements, idealizes the people to which its proposals are addressed as if the whole political community shared its ideological background. Bonotti develops a very demanding account of partisanship that might contain populist parties but significantly curtails other parties as well; 2) does not clarify what this containment implies (excluding populist parties from the political process or disincentivizing them) and when it should be applied. Since, as Bonotti acknowledges, some challenges to the democratic order have a positive transformative function and it is not easy to distinguish, at least *ex ante*, between this case and a critique that undermines a democratic system, leaving some room for contestation and allowing any party to participate seems to be the best way to embody democratic principles. It is not yet clear whether this solution is fully compatible with Bonotti's proposal. To conclude, Bonotti seems to properly define the standards that parties of a well-ordered society need to meet, but his proposal should be clarified to deal with less-than-ideal contexts so as to empower its guidance and ability to face the most pressing challenges to our democratic societies.

Partisan hate speech. Another interesting and problematic aspect of the constraints that can legitimately be imposed on political parties within a liberal democratic

perspective concerns hate speech. This is particularly relevant in our current societies, in which many political parties and politicians are building their careers and platforms on attacks against minorities or marginalized individuals. Bonotti analyzes and rightly rejects two perspectives: Dworkin's liberal view and Waldron's democratic account. While the former claims that hate speech does not have to be applied to political parties because this would entail silencing the people these parties are representing and curtailing the legitimacy of a democratic process, the latter holds that hate speech should limit partisan claims because they can deeply wound minorities and marginalized individuals since parties are more powerful than citizens. Bonotti rightly points out that an intermediate approach is needed. While, in principle, partisans should be free to publicly present any claim – otherwise democratic legitimacy is significantly curtailed – their roles as agenda setters and loudspeakers entail that they exercise significant power over the political community and that if certain thresholds are passed, then hate-speech legislation can be applied. The harm that parties can inflict on minorities and marginalized communities, Bonotti contends, is a matter of degree and beyond a certain level needs to be contained. Though I agree with Bonotti, some clarifications are in order. While it is, at least in principle, possible to identify and contain those proposals that explicitly attack minorities and marginalized groups, politicians and members of the parties usually develop allusive proposals or claims that are not apparently hateful but that can clearly be decoded by those people to whom they are addressed. It would be interesting to know whether Bonotti thinks these speeches should be contained, provided they significantly harm minorities and marginalized individuals, or whether only explicit attacks should receive this treatment. If the former is true, then this proposal is very effective but can significantly limit the freedom of expression of parties; if the latter is the path Bonotti wants to pursue, then his perspective is more liberal but significantly less effective.

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