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Political realism meets civic republicanism

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Abstract

AQ2 The paper offers five desiderata on a realist normative theory of politics: that it should avoid moralism, deontologism, transcendentalism, utopianism, and vanguardism. These desiderata argue for a theory that begins from values rooted in a people's experience; that avoids prescribing a collective deontological constraint; that makes the comparison of imperfect regimes possible; that takes feasibility and sustainability into account; and that makes room for the claims of democracy. The paper argues, in the course of exploring the desiderata, that a neo-republican philosophy of government does pretty well in satisfying them.

The aim of this paper is to construct a set of desiderata for a political philosophy – a normative theory for assessing political regimes – that deserves intuitively to be called realistic; and then to explore the case for thinking that civic republicanism is particularly well-suited to meeting those desiderata and of counting as a realist theory.

I equate civic republicanism with the Italian-Atlantic tradition that begins in the Roman Republic, is resuscitated in medieval and Renaissance Italy, fuels the English revolution of the seventeenth century and later the American war of independence. This tradition is marked by a belief, first, that the freedom of a person requires the absence of subjection to another's will, even the will of someone indulgent and well-disposed; and, second, that a polity that is required to support the freedom of all citizens – historically, a non-inclusive category – should be organized around a mixed constitution that gives citizens a contestatory as well as an electoral role. I am one of those who think that, suitably reworked, the tradition points us to a promising, neo-republican research program in politics. The main reworking needed derives from the requirement to take the citizenry to be inclusive: roughly, to include all adult, able-minded, more or less permanent residents. [1]

AQ5 Political realism, as I understand it here, does not despair of normative theory and so is not a form of political skepticism or quietism or an error theory about political value. The core commitment is the claim that political philosophy should be shaped by the experience of people in the polity it addresses; should be tailored to the issues they face; should be cognizant of their potential for corruption and conflict; and should be able to guide them in their political aspirations and actions. In short, political philosophy should be essentially practical. That commitment supports a range of desiderata on a normative theory and I shall be looking at how far republicanism or neo-republicanism can satisfy them.

These accounts of civic republicanism and political realism are not uncontentious. Thus my characterization of political realism is silent on the question of whether the realm of the political is normatively autonomous, or indeed ontologically autonomous, despite the fact that this question is treated as central by some commentators (Rossi & Sleat, 2014). [2] And my account of the republican tradition is contentious in registering little or nothing about the contribution of Jean Jacques Rousseau.

Why treat political realism, in abstraction from autonomy issues, as a view about the practical form that normative theory should take? Because this construal reflects the main concerns of self-described political realists – this will become apparent later – as well as the intuitively related concerns of those who worry about confining political philosophy to the role

of ideal theory.[3] And why restrict republicanism to the Italian-Atlantic tradition? Because this tradition focuses on the concerns of political realists, as we shall see, whereas the Rousseauvian does not. Rousseau retained the republican conception of freedom as non-subjection or non-domination but relied for advancing that ideal on the civic virtue of the citizens in a unified, sovereign assembly rather than on their ability to be able to contest and enforce a reconsideration of whatever is imposed on them, or proposed for imposition, by those in power (Pettit, 2013).

The paper is in five sections, corresponding to the five desiderata I identify. In each case I give an account of the desideratum and then look at how far neo-republicanism can meet it. I hope that the exercise will be of general interest, and not just of interest to those concerned with civic republicanism. It should help to elucidate some of the implications of political realism.

The desiderata that I associate with political realism fall into four categories since two of them, albeit worthy of concern in their own right, are logically connected: the satisfaction of 2b requires the satisfaction of 2a. Otherwise the desiderata are logically independent: it is possible for a theory to satisfy any one of them without satisfying the others.

(1)

Anti-moralism. Political philosophy should begin from the concerns of people in the society for which it prescribes, not from an imported set of ethical principles.

(2a)

Anti-deontologism. In extracting a normative ideal from those concerns, it should identify a collective target for the citizenry to track, not a collective constraint that they should satisfy.

(2b)

Anti-transcendentalism. The ideal or set of ideals it adopts should be capable of guiding people's judgments of their actual society and their actions within it.

(3)

Anti-utopianism. In putting forward those ideals for the guidance of members, it should focus on feasible initiatives and sustainable institutions, not just on ideal measures.

(4)

Anti-vanguardism. And in putting forward those ideals, it should not pronounce on what is right and wrong without acknowledging the claims of democracy.[4]

First desideratum: anti-moralism

Political realism is cast by its contemporary defenders as the antithesis of moralism. A moralistic approach would begin from the assumption that certain ethical or moral values are the relevant criteria for assessing possible, political arrangements – possible basic structures, in Rawls's (1971) terminology – regardless of whether or not those values are endorsed within the society. In Geuss's (2008, p. 8) words, it would make two assumptions: 'one can complete the work of ethics first, attaining an ideal theory of how we should act, and then in a second step, one can apply that ideal theory to the action of political agents'.[5] The approach would adopt an ethics-first policy, as he says, prescribing for the political world from a detached, presumptively universal standpoint.

Republicans are certainly opposed, as I see it, to this sort of moralism. They start from what I have described as the domination complaint, arguing that this complaint is ubiquitous in the world that most of us inhabit (Pettit, 2005). You will experience domination insofar as you find yourself subject to the will of another, however well-disposed towards you the other may be. In order to understand that complaint, it is necessary only to reflect on experiences that most of us will have had.

Think of what it is to be in a position where you may or may not suffer ill-treatment, depending on the whim of another, be it a teacher or boss or bank manager, an insurance agent or a counter-clerk, a police officer or immigration official or prison warden. Think of what it is to have no physical or legal recourse against such an uncontrolled or arbitrary presence in your life; to be under the power of that other, depending on the goodwill of the person to avoid suffering some loss or harm. (Pettit, 2014a, p. xvi)

Think of your position in any such relationship, so the idea goes, and you will understand what it is to be dominated by another and, by contrast, what it is to escape such domination: to enjoy the freedom that goes with being your own master in the relevant sphere of choice.

The value of freedom as non-domination is not a philosopher's invention, then; it is an articulation of a concern that all of us have in our dealings with others. And it is a concern that naturally surfaces, not just in thinking about how we individually relate to other individuals or private organizations in social life, but also in thinking about how we relate individually and collectively to the government that rules over us, whether democratically or not; and about how we as a society relate to international entities: to other states, to international agencies, to multi-national corporations, and so on.

Or at least it is a concern that all of us are likely to have across these three fronts, social, democratic, and international, when we are not faced with famine or pestilence or total chaos. There is no denying that the concerns that drive us to politics are something of a luxury and that we cannot always expect people to enjoy the emotional and cognitive space to worry about how the local or international society is structured. Rawls (1971) describes the conditions required as the circumstances of justice, stipulating that in the society at issue people of limited altruism confront a society of only moderate scarcity.

But don't republicans suppose that freedom as non-domination is a universal and supreme value, thereby displaying a standard sort of moralism? Don't they hold that it retains its character and claims across an open-ended range of societies, past and present, and that it enjoys a pre-eminent place in relation to other values? They need not, and do not, view freedom in such a manner.

It is reasonable to hold that people are everywhere concerned with avoiding domination, as it is reasonable to hold that they are everywhere concerned with avoiding deprivation. This observation ought to be particularly congenial to political realists, since they inevitably emphasize the ubiquity of power imbalances and abuses. There is no society where involuntary subjection to the power of others can be welcome, as there is none where involuntary deprivation of material resources can be appealing.

But to hold by such claims, it may be complained, falls short of maintaining that non-domination, or indeed non-deprivation, is an unchanging, universal ideal of non-domination or non-deprivation on offer. So what can be said against this complaint?

The concern with avoiding deprivation may assume a different content in each social context, since it is a concern with having enough to make it possible to function in the local society, as Sen (1983) puts it: to have sufficient necessaries, in Smith's (1976, pp. 351–352) formula, to be able to live without shame before others and enjoy the status of a 'creditable person.' And similarly the republican concern with avoiding domination, in my construal of it, may assume a different content in each social context (Pettit, 2014b). In relations with your fellow citizens – in the domain of social justice – an un-dominated status is associated with being able to look them in the eye without reason for fear or deference (Pettit, 2014a, pp. 69–73). And the protection and resourcing that this requires is bound to be sensitive to differences in local culture, technology and expectations, and to impose quite different requirements across different periods and places (Pettit, 2014a, pp. 98–101).

But even if it is understood in this way, don't republicans have to take freedom as non-domination to be a supreme ethical good, thereby privileging an abstract ethical doctrine? Again, no. The tradition, as I read it, treats the value as a gateway good: a good such that, as a matter of empirics, if the institutions of a domestic society are designed to cope with problems of domination, then they will generally be designed to cope with a range of other problems too. Thus I argue elsewhere as follows.

If we look after freedom as non-domination in the context of domestic legislation and government, guarding against people's dependency on others in areas of properly personal choice, then we will also have to look after goods like social, medical and judicial security, domestic and workplace respect and, more generally, a functioning legal and economic order. (Pettit, 2014a, p. xix)

Does republicanism do better in this first regard than other current philosophies of politics? On the face of it, yes. Take the concern with equality in the form it assumes when it is said that people ought to be enabled by their state to enjoy equality of resources (Dworkin, 2002), or equality of utility, or the sort of equality associated with Rawls's (1971) two principles. Rawlsian equality would impose roughly the following requirements: first, full equality for all in the protection of a basic set of liberties; and, second, the lowest level of socioeconomic inequality necessary to make the worst off better than the worst off would be in any more egalitarian society. However intellectually intriguing these values are, it is doubtful if they mirror concerns displayed in the same everyday and universal manner as the concern with not being under the power of others.

Second desideratum: anti-deontologism

Every political philosophy with normative aspirations is bound to try to organize the ideas it marshals into a coherent, theoretical set of criteria for the assessment of political arrangements: that is what makes it into a philosophy as distinct from a political wish list. The second realist desideratum for a political philosophy is that in constructing values or principles to serve as criteria of assessment, it should not just provide us with a collective deontological constraint – a constraint that all citizens are required to satisfy together – rather than a collective teleological target.

Rawls's (1971, 1993) theory of justice offers the paradigm example of this approach. The issue he raises is how the members of a just society should be required to behave collectively: what principles they should be required by justice to satisfy as a body. This, equivalently, is the issue of what justice requires of the basic structure, assuming universal compliance. The answer he gives, of course, is that the members should be required to comply with his two principles of

justice or, alternatively, that the basic structure should impose those principles on members of the society~~, the assumption that members will universally comply~~.

Why does Rawls take this approach? Primarily, because he thinks that what it is right for people to do or be required to do – how it is right that the basic structure ~~ought to~~should be be organized – has primacy over the question of the good that ~~ought to~~should serve as a criterion for assessing people's behavior or the basic structure under which they live. In more familiar terms, he looks in a purely deontological fashion for a constraint with which the just society should conform rather than looking in a consequentialist manner – or even in a consequence-sensitive manner (Sen, 2009) – for a target that it should promote.

The trouble with this purely deontological approach is that we are told nothing about what should happen if there is less than universal compliance: if, for example, the regime of Rawls's two principles of justice motivates a sizable number of wealthy people to do less than their best for the society. We may wish to condemn the wealthy for doing that (Cohen, 2008). But how should we respond if such condemnation is ineffective? What should we recommend when the constraint by which we define the ideally just society is likely to fall short of being implemented?

Rawls gives us no answer to this question, specifying the requirements of justice only for a society where people all conform to whatever is required of them. It is certainly of interest to know what any ideal would demand under one or another set of counterfactual conditions (Hamlin & Stemplowska, 2012). But it runs against the realist commitment to define the ideal only with reference to the perfect model, leaving it free of implications for how we should choose between societies that are likely in different degrees to satisfy it and, when they do so, to satisfy it in different measures.

This difficulty is not going to arise with any theory that identifies a single scalar value, or a more or less completely ordered set of values, that the citizenry are required to promote. Such a theory invites us to assess different political regimes, including those in which many do not contribute to the goal, on the basis of how far they are likely to realize that target, and to what extent. Such a value-target is likely to be enjoyed with a lower or higher degree of probability under different structures, and enjoyed there by fewer or more people, with greater or lesser intensity, over a smaller or larger extent. An approach based on such a target would let any polity be ranked according to its expected performance on that multi-dimensional metric, with suitable weightings being given to each dimension. Whatever criticisms it may attract as a theory of value, utilitarianism offers the classic example of this way of doing political philosophy.

As I interpret the tradition, republicanism is a target-centered, indeed consequentialist, approach of this kind. The equal enjoyment of freedom as non-domination is a scalar value by which we are invited to assess different regimes, including regimes that vary in the extent to which people in general, or people in special positions of power, are prepared to be compliant. There will certainly be difficulties involved in determining how relatively well those regimes are likely to do in avoiding domination, as there are difficulties involved in determining how relatively well societies are likely to do in reducing poverty. And in some cases it may even prove impossible to establish determinate rankings. But these difficulties reflect the multi-dimensional character of freedom as non-domination as well as the fact, as we have seen, that its interpretation in any society is sensitive to local standards. They are of little significance in comparison with the problems generated by a purely constraint-based philosophy of politics.

Third desideratum: anti-transcendentalism

The fact that an ideal is defined within a model where people are unusually virtuous – say, committed to complying with whatever is required of them – does not strictly entail that it cannot serve as a guiding ideal for a world where people fall short of virtue (Valentini, 2009). It can serve in that role provided that it involves a target and not just a constraint, as we have already seen, and provided in addition that the target makes it possible to determine how far imperfect societies succeed in realizing it. Thus the defenders even of a targeted ideal need to show, first, that the ideal can be imperfectly simulated under non-idealized conditions; and, second, that it provides a metric for estimating how well these simulations do relative to one another and relative to the ideal. The third desideratum requires a political philosophy to be able to meet those conditions: not just to offer a target, as the second requires, but a target of a kind applicable in assessing regimes that approximate its realization only imperfectly.

This desideratum on political philosophy is particularly emphasized by Sen (2009), who castigates what he describes as transcendentalism. He argues that it is essential for any political philosophy to provide an ideal for ranking imperfect regimes, in particular the imperfect regime represented by the status quo. Unless a political philosophy can do this, it cannot serve to guide people in deciding about the political interventions they ought to pursue in their own society. This transcendental desideratum, as I understand it here, presupposes that the ideal hailed is targeted rather than constraining in character and imposes a more demanding condition than the anti-deontologism criterion.

Sen criticizes Rawls in particular for focusing on the perfect society – for taking a transcendental perspective – and for neglecting this requirement. Sen points out that having a transcendental ideal like Rawls's is not necessary for ranking imperfect arrangements against each other. Thus a Paretian criterion might enable us to say that one regime does better

than another – it does better for some people and worse for none – without directing us towards any single ideal society. But the point he mainly emphasizes is that not only is a transcendental ideal like that embraced by Rawls unnecessary for comparing imperfect regimes; it is also insufficient. It does not enable us to rank actual regimes, since we are given no means of measuring how far actual, imperfect dispensations approximate the ideal.

But might we not rely on intuition to tell us how far different regimes fall from the Rawlsian ideal and how well they compare with one another? No, because of the general problem associated with the second best fallacy, as it is known. The fallacy is that of assuming that the closer an imperfect simulation is to a first-best ideal, in intuitive terms, the more likely it is to approximate that ideal (Goodin, 1995; Vermeule, 2011). Consider an ideal like that under which each citizen is treated as an equal, having access to equal influence within a system of control over government, and assume that a perfect democracy would satisfy this. And now think about two imperfect regimes. In one, everyone has access to the vote but campaign finance laws allow an elite to have a special oligarchical influence; in the other, control is vested in a group of people selected on a random basis every two years or so. The first regime simulates the perfect democracy much more closely in intuitive terms but it would be a mistake to think that it therefore approximates that ideal better than the second. On the contrary, the second looks much more likely to serve the guiding ideal – access to equal influence within a system of control – rather better than the first.

Simmons (2009) argues that, starting from Rawls's picture of a perfectly compliant world where justice is realized, we should develop principles for guiding the transition towards that world from the imperfectly compliant world we inhabit; we should identify principles for gaginggauging which of the changes that we can bring about within the imperfect world would take us closer to the perfect. In maintaining this line, he identifies what would be needed for the approach to satisfy the anti-transcendentalism desideratum. But the problem is that the Rawlsian theory does not itself provide resources to enable us to generate the required principles.

Civic republicanism – strictly, civic neo-republicanism – does better. It argues that in order to enjoy equal freedom as non-domination people ought to be resourced and protected within a generous set of compossible choices, thereby enjoying social justice; that they ought to have an equal role in controlling the law that establishes those basic liberties, thereby enjoying democratic justice; and that as a society they ought to enjoy a generous set of compossible sovereign liberties that are established within a multi-lateral framework of international law: this would amount to their enjoying a republican version

of international justice (Pettit, 2014). It may not be possible in the abstract to say which of these dimensions is the most important but I assume that in any political predicament, it will usually be clear where the salient problems lie. There will certainly be trade-off difficulties in some cases, as an advance in one dimension threatens a retreat in another. But those are not inevitable and may even be relatively rare: it is not as if social, democratic, and global justice are in essential competition.

But does the neo-republican ideal offer effective guidance in each area on where to fix our sights in championing one or another intervention? I have argued elsewhere that the model of the republican *liber* or free-man, despite the masculinist connotations of the term, can guide us in elaborating workable heuristics to measure progress on social, democratic, and

international fronts (Pettit, 2012, 2014). Thus, as noted earlier, the system of social justice ought to enable each of us to look others in the eye without reason, by local standards, for fear or deference. The system of democratic justice ought to give each of us a reason for thinking that however far a public decision goes against us – however far it is unwelcome – that is just tough luck: it is not a sign of our living under an alien, potentially hostile will. And the system of international justice ought to give each society reason for straight talking in dealing with other states; it ought not to license the pretention of a master or require the servility of a dependent. That a regime fails one or another of these tests, and how far it fails the test, is likely to be perceptible to people within the society, notwithstanding the power of ideology. And when the failure is perceived, it ought also to be clear what changes, realistically achievable or not, would improve the situation.

Fourth desideratum: anti-utopianism

The fourth desideratum associated with political realism is that not only should a political philosophy provide us with a targeted ideal that serves purposes of comparison between imperfect regimes; it should also direct us to regimes that are within feasible reach of our interventions and that establish sustainable institutions. It ought not to indulge in what we may describe as 'utopianism,' ignoring issues of feasibility and sustainability. There may be good intellectual reasons, of course, to look at what an ideal like Rawls's would require under infeasible or unsustainable conditions. The realist rejection of utopianism does not condemn the exploration of such an issue, only the assumption that that is the sole, or even the main business of political philosophy.

The idea behind the feasibility requirement is that people can only be normatively enjoined to adopt political interventions that they are able to implement, since 'ought' implies 'can.' This thought has to be central to political realism, since there would be no practical point in enjoining attempts to achieve the unachievable.

The lesson drawn from this idea is that political philosophers should give particular attention to reform proposals that

are psychologically and institutionally within reach of the community to which they are addressed. There should be modes of individual and joint action identifiable, whether for those in government or those in the society at large, that would take the community towards the implementation of the proposals made. And those modes of action ought to be deliberatively accessible to the individual or collective agents involved: they ought to represent alternatives that those agents can regard as options – possibilities that are within their power to realize, depending on how their deliberation goes (Southwood, 2017).

There is bound to be great indeterminacy about the issue of what is feasible, and what not. It would be crazy to think that any proposal is infeasible if as a matter of psychology or sociology agents are unlikely to go along with it (Estlund, 2007). And equally it would be crazy to hold that any proposal is feasible so long as it is logically possible for people to implement it. Thus the floor constraint on feasible proposals should be higher than psychological or sociological likelihood and the ceiling constraint should be lower than logical possibility. But it is very hard to go beyond that and lay down an abstract criterion of feasibility. This is particularly so in virtue of the fact that normatively challenging a person or a group to do something may encourage and capacitate them, making what was previously infeasible into something that they now can do (McGeer & Pettit, 2015).

Our fourth desideratum not only requires a focus on feasible initiatives, it also prescribes a search for institutions that are capable, once established, of being reliably sustained. The idea here is that there would be little practical point – and nothing to attract political realists – in seeking to establish regimes that were unsustainable.

Whether an institution is sustainable in the relevant sense depends on the strains that it imposes on those who run the institution and those who are subject to it. But what exactly does sustainability require? That it be logically possible for people to sustain it, or that it be psychologically and sociologically likely that they will sustain it? In dealing with this question, it is possible to be a little less elusive than in dealing with the issue of feasibility. Assuming that the failure of an institution to prove sustainable is likely to have extremely negative effects – it may be a recipe for disenchantment and disorder – the sensible line is to set a high bar for whether an institution counts as sustainable. The line I suggest is that it should be able to survive across a range of inhospitable scenarios, many of them relatively improbable; in particular, it should be able to survive across scenarios where corruption sets in and those involved in the system depart from the most minimal standards of virtue.

Hume (1875, pp. 117–18) argued for this sort of line when he said that in 'fixing the several checks and controls of the constitution, every man ought to be supposed a knave, and to have no other end in all his actions than private interest.'[6] He may well have gone too far with this principle, since institutions that are fit to survive knaves may equally fail to inspire those who are more public-spirited: they may crowd out virtue (Pettit, 1997, Ch. 7). But the general point, surely supported by political realism, is that we should not design institutions that work reliably only so far as people generally prove to be relatively virtuous. We should economize on virtue, looking for arrangements that are more resilient in withstanding corruption (Brennan & Pettit, 2004); we should not rely on finding and empowering virtuous officials, for example, as in optimistic readings of what meritocratic selection can achieve (Bell, 2015). The arrangements we support should be capable of surviving the slings and arrows of our wayward nature and the obstacles it can put in the way of social progress.

Civic republicanism is wholly on side with the argument that political philosophy should give attention, if not exclusive attention, to feasible initiatives and sustainable institutions (Marti & Pettit, 2010). The tradition is marked, as we mentioned, by a commitment to the mixed constitution and a contestatory citizenry, where these are cast as requirements for avoiding the corruption of the state. The mixed constitution is defended on these grounds by Polybius, by Machiavelli, by Harrington, and of course by the authors of the *Federalist Papers*. In the traditional tropes, our human nature inevitably causes monarchy to degenerate into tyranny; aristocracy into oligarchy; and democracy into mob rule – ochlocracy, as Polybius calls it. Only the mixed constitution can guard against the corruption of individuals and institutions, according to the tradition. It provides the internal checks and balances, and the vigilance of a contestatory people, that can establish a powerful state without letting that power corrupt those in office.

The mixed constitution is not a blueprint for designing public institutions, of course, and taking it in that role has led to regimes with very salient problems, as with the problems of gridlock and oligarchy in the United States. But the idea signals a commitment within the republican tradition of thinking to guarding against a utopian disregard for the problems of feasibility and, in particular, sustainability. Here as on other counts I think that the approach has good realist credentials.

But do other contemporary philosophies fail to satisfy the requirements of the anti-utopianism desideratum? In practice, many do fail, since they routinely ignore issues of feasibility and sustainability in putting forward policies. And some make a principle of this practice. Cohen (2008) focuses on abstract questions of justice, for example – the pure theory of justice, so called – in conscious and assertive neglect of how justice is to be institutionally realized; he thinks that that issue is not one for philosophy proper. Rawls (1971) is a partial exception to this trend, for he devotes considerable attention to at least the sustainability question, asking whether a society that satisfied his two principles would be stable enough to continue in existence, attracting the support of its members.

Fifth desideratum: anti-vanguardism

Vanguardists in the ordinary sense of the term seize power in the name of the people but exercise it without any concern for democratically registered views. Vanguardists in the sense I have in mind here do not seize power in the name of the people but they do pronounce on what it is right for the people to do. And, like their practical counterparts, they dictate what it is right for the people to do without regard for what is democratically supported. They speak to the members of the society, not in the tones of fellow citizens, but rather in the tones of the teacher or master: someone, quite simply, who knows more and knows better (Walzer, 1981). Vanguardism would license philosophers to make political recommendations that are not subject to the proviso that others should be willing to support the proposals democratically. There are some cases where the democratic proviso does not apply, as we shall see, but these are limited in range and number.

Let democracy be characterized at the most abstract level as a system that enables the citizens of a society – say, the adult, able-minded, more or less permanent residents – to share equally in exercising control over the laws and policies imposed on them by government. There are different sets of institutions that might claim to be able to deliver such equally shared control and the business of democratic theory is to explore and assess the rival candidates. Suppose that we endorse democracy within our political philosophy, arguing for the general value of equally shared control and defending one or another proposal for how to realize it. And suppose in particular that we argue that no regime can implement such control without giving equal electoral and contestatory rights to women and men. What should we say, then, about a society that operates under democratic procedures – perhaps even with the full consent of all involved – to deprive women of the vote?

In this sort of case we should condemn the step taken, regardless of the democratic support for the change. Democracy does not define democracy and even if men and women decide democratically on disenfranchising women, that does not make the resulting system democratic. Let democracy be taken as a value, then – a value, as republicans will think, that is rooted in people's concern for not being dominated – and it will put constraints on what a people may do: on how a *demos* may exercise its *kratos.* This argues, in my view, for constitutionally entrenching basic democratic rights, putting them beyond any possibility of being amended. Those rights would establish the claim of all citizens to be able to vote, stand for office, and contest political decisions by established channels, as well as the presupposed forms of claims to free speech and association. But I do not pursue this suggestion further in the present context.

This is to acknowledge that in the most basic aspects of democratic justice, philosophy can speak with a certain authority, basing its arguments on what is required for equally shared control of government. While those arguments will support certain policies in social justice – there can be no democratic justice without at least a basic education for all, for example, and a basic level of access to various material, social, medical, and judicial resources – this authority will not carry over to all the laws and policies that a government must consider. There are going to be any number of matters, whether in the spheres of democratic, social or global justice, on which a people may decide one way or another in such domains, consistently with citizens continuing to have equally shared control over those issues (Waldron, 2013).

If political realism involves the renunciation of an ethics-first philosophy, then it should inhibit theorists from claiming to speak on matters of these kinds with anything more than the authority of citizens among citizens. And this is a constraint that will impact deeply on common philosophical pretentions. Take even morally irresistible claims such as the claim that a government ought to provide for any area of the country that is subject to a natural catastrophe, or ought to ensure the welfare of the mentally disabled, or ought to contribute to alleviating famine abroad, or ought to put in place protections against the inhumane treatment of animals. We philosophers may feel very deeply about such questions, as indeed anyone is liable to feel deeply about them. But still, we ought to accept that in arguing for what our society and government ought to do, we have to recognize the legitimacy of democratic decision – if indeed there is a suitable degree of democracy in place – and contest standing practices only within the system. This may allow us to resort to civil disobedience but it will preclude any more radical rejection of the authority of ordinary people.

Opposition to philosophical vanguardism is part of the civic republican tradition, because the ideal of non-domination that republican theorists support has anti-vanguardist implications for the position they are entitled to assume in their theorizing. They may champion the equally shared control that a republican democracy would seek to institutionalize, brooking no opposition, however democratically supported. But they have to shrink from any pretention to impose their views on other people, however passionately they may hold those views. The guiding republican ideal requires them to assume the role of democratically respectful interlocutors who aim at persuading others, not overwhelming them.

This is in line with the longer tradition, in which the danger of public domination – the danger of domination by a government that is not suitably constrained by the people – bulks as large as the danger of private domination. The tradition has always emphasized, in the words of the eighteenth-century supporter of the American revolution, Richard Price (1991, pp. 77–78), that 'however equitably and kindly' a popularly unconstrained government may treat its people, the domination it enjoys is inconsistent with freedom. This implies that philosophers have no right to expect that their prescriptions should be generally imposed by government, except to the extent that they are democratically endorsed by fellow members of the community (Pettit, 2015). They may speak with a certain authority on the basic requirements of democracy but they can speak only with the authority of citizens when they address other matters.

Does mainline political philosophy violate the desideratum of anti-vanguardism? Habermas (1995) and Forst (2002) satisfy the desideratum insofar as they distinguish between conditions, on the one side, that are required for realizing a structural ideal – equal democratic control or a universal right to justification – and conditions, on the other, that would be up for negotiation between people who lived under such an ideal. But many other philosophers clearly offend against the desideratum. They do so insofar as they follow the Rawlsian lead in looking at what justice requires of a society, without distinguishing between claims that are non-negotiable – that is, non-negotiably necessary for democratic control – and claims that are up for negotiation among the members of any suitably democratic society. Let justice be homogenized in this manner and vanguardism of the kind envisaged becomes inevitable (Pettit, 2015).

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Disclosure statement

Acknowledgments

Notes

AQ3 1.The recent movement, as I think of it, began from the historical work of Skinner (1978) on the medieval foundations of modern political thought, and from his subsequent articles in the 1980's on figures like
AQ4 Machiavelli who wrote within the republican tradition identified by Pocock (1975). An up-to-date list of English works in neo-republican thought should include these books: (Brugger, 1999 ; Halldenius, 2001 ; Honohan, 2002 ; Lovett, 2010 ; MacGilvray, 2011 ; Marti & Pettit, 2010 ; Maynor, 2003 ; Pettit, 1997, 2012, 2014a ; Skinner, 1998 ; Viroli, 2002); these collections of papers: (Besson & Marti, 2008 ; Honohan & Jennings, 2006 ; Kwak & Jenco, 2014 ; Laborde & Maynor, 2007 ; Niederberger & Schink, 2012 ; Van Gelderen & Skinner, 2002 ; Weinstock & Nadeau, 2004); and a number of studies that deploy the conception of freedom as non-domination, broadly understood: (Bellamy, 2007 ; Bohman, 2007 ; Braithwaite, Charlesworth, & Soares, 2012 ; Braithwaite & Pettit, 1990 ; Laborde, 2008 ; Richardson, 2002 ; Slaughter, 2005 ; White & Leighton, 2008). For a recent review of work in the tradition see (Lovett & Pettit, 2009).
2.As it happens I have argued elsewhere for both sorts of autonomy, maintaining that the state is a corporate agent (List & Pettit, 2011 ; Pettit, 2012 , Ch. 5) and that in seeking to promote republican freedom, it targets the achievement of a good that individuals could not bring about non-politically (Pettit, 2012 , Ch. 3).
3.The two most prominent self-described realists are Williams (2005)and Geuss (2001, 2005, 2008, 2010). For a useful overview and critique of their work see (McKean, 2013). But on my characterization, realism also includes figures like Walzer (1981), in view of his opposition to philosophical hubris, and Sen (2009), in view of his critique of transcendentalism, as he calls it.
4.Desiderata 2, 3 and 4 correspond to three debates that Valentini (2012) takes to be involved, and often confused, in discussions of ideal versus non-ideal theory.
5.It is noteworthy that Cohen (2008) rejects the guidance assumption and represents a position that is diametrically opposed to political realism. For a useful discussion see (Valentini, 2009).
6.He may have been following Mandeville (1731 , p. 332) who had earlier written that the best sort of constitution is the one which 'remains unshaken though most men should prove knaves.'

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