

SYMPOSIUM
PARTISANSHIP AND PUBLIC REASON



PARTISANSHIP AND POLITICAL LIBERALISM
IN DIVERSE SOCIETIES

A PRÉCIS

BY
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*Partisanship and Political Liberalism
in Diverse Societies*
A Précis

Matteo Bonotti

I am very grateful to *Philosophy and Public Issues* and to the contributors to this symposium for the privilege and opportunity to discuss my book *Partisanship and Political Liberalism in Diverse Societies*.

The book originated from years of reflection on the place and role of political parties within John Rawls's (2005) theory of political liberalism. Rawls's work, it is well known, aimed to develop a conception of political legitimacy grounded in the idea of public reason, in order to explain how political power could be rightfully exercised in societies characterized by the fact of reasonable pluralism. As well as having a profound impact on the literature on political legitimacy and public justification, since its publication Rawls's work has also influenced debates on toleration, multiculturalism, and democratic theory, among others. Nevertheless, neither Rawls nor political liberals more generally ever developed a systematic analysis of political parties and partisanship within the context of their theories. This is somewhat surprising, given that parties still occupy a central role in the

political life of liberal democracies, despite their alleged crisis. Rawls does occasionally refer to political parties but those references are sporadic and underdeveloped, and fail to clearly articulate a vision for their role and functions within political liberalism.

Conversely, the growing literature on parties and partisanship in normative political theory (Portis et al. 2000; Rosenblum 2008; Muirhead 2014; Bonotti and Bader 2014; White and Ypi 2016; Wolkenstein 2019) has usually paid little attention to the relationship between political parties and political liberalism. One exception is Russell Muirhead and Nancy Rosenblum's short article "Political Liberalism vs. 'The Great Game of Politics': The Politics of Political Liberalism," which highlights the role of parties as 'shapers and articulators of public reason' (Muirhead and Rosenblum 2006, 104). While having the merit to sketch the first account of the role of parties in political liberalism, however, Muirhead and Rosenblum's analysis is brief and does not engage in a systematic way with the literature on public reason in political theory. Muirhead and Rosenblum especially fail to address two key questions that are central to the relationship between political parties and political liberalism. First, since public reason prevents citizens, and especially legislators, from appealing to comprehensive doctrines when justifying political rules, how can parties find a space within this framework, given that their role is precisely to channel citizens' controversial values and conceptions of the good into the political realm? And, second, how should the standards of public reason be understood in order for political liberalism to make space for a plurality of political parties and avoid flattening political differences via an ideal consensus? More specifically, since public reason liberals distinguish between three main conceptions of the structure of public reason – 'shareability', 'accessibility' and 'intelligibility' – which of these conceptions

provides the best normative framework for parties and partisanship within the boundaries of political liberalism?

Like Muirhead and Rosenblum, Jonathan White and Lea Ypi, who have examined extensively the issue of public justification in connection with parties and partisanship (White and Ypi 2011; 2016), also fail to offer an answer to these questions. White and Ypi (2016, 61) defend the idea that parties and partisans should provide ‘accessible’ reasons to justify their proposed laws and policies. Yet, they do not engage with the literature on accessibility, do not explain whether accessibility is sufficiently inclusive of party pluralism, and do not consider alternative conceptions of public justification, i.e. shareability and intelligibility.

The fact that the aforementioned authors fail to engage systematically with the literature on public reason does not detract from the quality of their works, which are valuable in many other ways. However, it helps to carve a distinctive space for my book within the broader normative literature on partisanship, halfway between the sketchy account of parties and public reason provided by Muirhead and Rosenblum and the wide-ranging theory of parties and partisanship offered by White and Ypi. As well as providing a more detailed analysis of the relationship between parties, political liberalism and public reason, however, *Partisanship and Political Liberalism in Diverse Societies* also aims to make a contribution to other debates in contemporary political theory, including those on political obligation and freedom of speech.

The book’s central argument is that political liberalism and political parties are not hostile to each other. Instead, political liberalism needs and nurtures parties and partisanship, for a number of reasons. For a start, partisanship engenders distinctive political obligations, which supplement any political obligations citizens might have more generally in a liberal democracy. Moreover, despite what many of their detractors argue, political

liberalism and public reason offer a capacious political space for party pluralism and partisan advocacy, not least because their normative goals overlap with those of parties and partisanship at their best. And, relatedly, parties can help to connect citizens' comprehensive doctrines with a political conception of justice, thus sustaining the overlapping consensus that is central to Rawlsian political liberalism. Finally, political liberalism allows significant space for disagreement and democratic contestation on socio-economic, religious and ethical issues, thus providing a fertile terrain for party politics. The analysis in the book proceeds in the following way.

In Chapter 1 I defend the view that partisans have special political obligations. First, I endeavour to ground these obligations in the idea of consent, and particularly in the view that partisans voluntarily decide to take on the distinctive positional duties associated with partisanship. However, after acknowledging the limits of this consent-based approach, I articulate a different account of partisan political obligations grounded in the idea of fair play (or fairness). Fair play partisan political obligations, I contend, arise because partisans benefit from their participation in party politics. This generates a duty for them to comply with the positional duties of partisanship – which include obeying the laws of their state – as this helps to produce and sustain the very benefits they enjoy.

In Chapter 2 I expand my analysis of partisan political obligations by arguing that in the presence of certain conditions parties and partisanship can help reduce the tension between citizens' conflicting obligations. More precisely, when citizens who experience conflicting obligations participate in party politics, and assuming that the latter constitutes a fair scheme of cooperation, two desirable outcomes may ensue. First, by participating in party politics, these citizens may be able to influence the laws and

policies which they must obey, thus rendering them more consistent (and, therefore, less in tension) with their own values, beliefs and interests. Second, and as a result, these citizens may become more motivated to obey those laws, and this can help reinforce social stability.

In Chapter 3 I illustrate how political liberalism allows significant scope for democratic contestation on many contentious issues, thus nurturing parties and party competition. I focus especially on religious matters and argue that political liberalism rules out both moderate separation and moderate establishment regimes of religious governance, since both types of regimes insulate principles of social and economic justice from democratic debate in a way that is in tension with the spirit of political liberalism. I therefore introduce and defend an alternative model called ‘democratic accommodationism’, which leaves religious issues more open to democratic contestation. In the final part of the chapter, I also argue that political liberalism rules out the entrenchment of either classical liberal rights or social rights in the constitution, thus providing further scope for democratic contestation among political parties.

In Chapter 4 I outline what I refer to as the ‘extrinsic’ view of public reason, i.e. the idea that the constraints of public reason are external to political parties and significantly hinder their agency. I explain, first, that the sites in which partisans operate are generally subject to those constraints. I subsequently claim that the standard distinction, within political liberalism, between constitutional essentials and ordinary legislative issues – only the former of which, according to many political liberals, should be subject to the constraints of public reason – collapses when it comes to political parties, since the latter normally include and combine both kinds of issues in their manifestos and programmes, and need to justify them as policy packages. I also contend that Rawls’s (2005, 453)

‘wide’ view of public reason, while more inclusive than the original view towards ordinary citizens’ demands, still imposes significant constraints upon partisans, especially those who run and/or are elected for office. I conclude by showing that the legal enforcement of the duty of civility (i.e. the duty to comply with the constraints of public reason), normally rejected by Rawls and political liberals, cannot be ruled out on the basis of merely practical reasons.

In Chapter 5 I briefly set aside the analysis of parties and partisanship in order to zoom in further on the legal enforcement of the duty of civility. More specifically, I critically assess the relationship between public reason and free speech, in order to establish whether there are any arguments grounded in the latter for opposing the legal enforcement of that duty. After considering arguments for free speech based on the values of truth and autonomy, and showing that neither of them provides a persuasive rationale for rejecting the legal implementation of the duty of civility, I argue that a democratic argument grounded in a procedural account of political legitimacy offers such a rationale. However, since this view of political legitimacy differs from the one central to Rawlsian political liberalism, I conclude that the latter is in principle compatible with some degree of free speech regulation, including the legal implementation of the duty of civility.

In Chapter 6 I reject the ‘extrinsic’ conception of public reason analysed in Chapter 4 and contend that parties and partisanship at their best are compatible with – in fact, vital for – political liberalism, since they can help citizens to connect their comprehensive doctrines with the values and institutions of political liberalism. The normative ideal of partisanship, I argue, is in sympathy with the Rawlsian ideal of public reason and with the demands of the overlapping consensus. More precisely, the

normative ideal of partisanship involves a commitment to advancing the common good of the entire political community rather than the factional and sectarian interests of specific individuals and groups within society. And this, I contend, implies a commitment to the ideal of public reason. In the final part of the chapter, I show how three empirical features of political parties – linkage function, broad multi-issue agendas, and creative agency – particularly help them to foster and support an overlapping consensus in diverse societies.

In Chapter 7 I endorse an indirect conception of public justification, according to which only public officials, and particularly elected partisans – but not ordinary citizens – should comply with the constraints of public reason. I defend a division of labour within political parties and argue that while elected partisans should monitor each other's compliance with the constraints of public reason via a process of horizontal accountability, other partisans should be responsive to constituents' non-public reasons via a process of vertical accountability, and help to find a link between those non-public reasons and public reasons that elected partisans can then employ to justify their political decisions. I conclude my analysis by critically examining the implications of two types of electoral systems, first-past-the-post (FPTP) and proportional representation (PR), for this two-dimensional process of public justification.

In Chapter 8 I address the question of whether partisans should have greater freedom of speech than other citizens, focusing especially on partisan hate speech. I argue that partisans' speech provides three distinctive contributions to political legitimacy, by amplifying citizens' views, contributing to the agenda-setting process, and helping to promote multi-issue programmes. These three contributions, I contend, provide a pro tanto rationale for

exempting partisans from hate speech laws. Nevertheless, I further contend that since a conception of political legitimacy grounded in the ideals of public justification and public reason – rather than a merely procedural conception – would often justify hate speech laws, and since partisans have a duty to comply with the constraints of public reason, partisans’ speech should ultimately not be exempted from hate speech laws.

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PARTISANSHIP AS LOYAL ANTAGONISM NOT
REASONABLENESS

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Partisanship as Loyal Antagonism not Reasonableness

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Complex representative democracies are unthinkable without political parties, but current polarised polities have fostered an antipartisan sentiment according to which parties and partisanship undermine the respect citizens need for one another and make them unresponsive not only to citizens' claims but to reality as well (Chapman 2020; Mason 2016; McWilliams 2021). While normative theories of democracy traditionally share this antipartisan framework, many authors recently claimed that parties and partisanship, if properly constrained, are fundamental to promote essential functions of democracy (Rosenblum 2008; Muirhead 2014; White and Ypi 2016; Wolkenstein 2020). This normative reevaluation of political parties is, at least partially, grounded in

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their justificatory potential according to which they empower citizens and facilitate their exercise of political agency by structuring the political debate among perspectives that are committed to the common good and comprehensible to every member of the polity. As rightly pointed out by Bonotti, this partisanship revival considers parties the “shapers and articulators of public reason” (Muirhead and Rosenblum 2006, 104), but it does not clarify which justificatory standards political parties should meet and how these standards can be compatible with the comprehensive doctrines that seem to characterise partisanship. *Partisanship and Political Liberalism in Diverse Societies* is a fundamental contribution to the partisanship revival because it holds that parties and partisanship need to fulfil Rawlsian public reason requirements to strive for the common good and not defend particularistic interests as factions do. This perspective might be challenged by claiming that Rawlsian public reason does not allow for the level of contestation and disagreement that should characterise a partisan debate. Bonotti rebuts this objection by showing that public reason is more hospitable to disagreement and contestation than it is usually credited for. While it is correct that proposals cannot deny the basic values of liberal democracy, these constraints are compatible with a multiplicity of perspectives, especially in the socioeconomic sphere. Social democratic, libertarian, and conservative parties might legitimately have different ideas on how to address the unemployment crisis due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and they will propose different policies to realise these ideas. Provided that these parties ground their claims in expert opinion and are not incompatible with the shared values of a liberal democracy, this kind of disagreement is fully compatible with the Rawlsian framework adopted by Bonotti. It is thus possible to conclude that this view does not curtail interparty disagreements and conflicts but only ensures that they strive for the common good rather than the interests of part of the polity.

Even if I share the belief that it is important to normatively reevaluate parties and partisanship and I strongly believe that *Partisanship and Political Liberalism in Diverse Societies* is the most systematic and interesting attempt to clarify the justificatory potential of political parties, I challenge the above perspective and claim that it contains a problematic account of partisanship. This view, I contend, undermines the pluralism that should characterise a lively political debate, and it is biased against radical perspectives. It moreover underestimates the agonistic dimension of partisanship and develops a proposal that cannot properly guide political parties. To overcome these ambiguities, I develop a strictly political account of partisanship that is more open to disagreement and conflicts without collapsing into factionalism.

I

The partisan revival and Rawlsian public reason revisited

Democracy acknowledges its members as free and equal by recognising them as full political agents rather than mere beneficiaries of policies chosen by others and by granting them the opportunity to exercise this role without incurring excessive burdens (Biale 2018; Dahl 1989). If this were not the case and a demanding account of political agency was adopted, inclusiveness and responsiveness would be undermined. Only a limited number of people will be motivated to participate and it is very likely that the participation will be greater among the most advantaged or those who have special interests to defend (Verba et al. 1978; Schlotzman et al. 2012). To avoid these shortcomings citizens should not be actively involved in all political decisions, but they should recognise themselves in the decisions made, have the opportunity to shape the political process by influencing it and having their interests and ideas represented, grasp the rationales

for the choices made and have the opportunity to challenge them if the choices do not respond to their interests or ideas (Lafont 2019).

Since this exercise of political agency might be demanding as well (it entails collecting information, interacting with others to cultivate proper political preferences, and properly understanding and critically reflecting on political decisions and their rationale), many authors have contended that political intermediaries are needed to ensure that citizens are truly included and have claimed that political parties are the ideal actors to empower citizens (Goodin 2008). To challenge the antipartisan framework that once characterised normative accounts of democracy, these authors point out that it is critical to distinguish parties from factions and clarify the normative requirements that parties need to meet. While factions aim at defending particular interests and addressing their claims to those who share them, parties politicise these interests and transform them into proposals that promote some conceptions of the common good and are grounded in reasons that everyone can comprehend and accept. This justificatory function of political parties empowers citizens by ensuring that they are committed to an idea of common good that they can perceive as theirs, by fostering their epistemic qualities, and by ensuring they have a critical grasp of the rationales for the different claims (Biale and Ottonelli 2019). Let clarify these points.

First, the bilingualism of intraparty relationships (Muirhead and Rosenblum 2006) allows citizens to politicise their demands, values, and interests by connecting them to general principles and providing interpretations of these principles that are shaped by those particular values and interests. As a consequence, citizens can ground their proposals in values that they acknowledge as theirs but are also publicly acceptable.

Second, to properly exercise their political agency citizens need to understand and use the information that circulates in the public sphere, but this might be too demanding if this information is too technical. Parties can epistemically empower citizens by reducing informational complexity and making the information accessible to them. Political parties develop programmes that define sufficiently coherent orderings of normative commitments and integrate expert knowledge into a policy agenda (Ebeling 2016). And they translate specialised information into accessible language and make such information appealing and relevant to citizens (Bistagnino and Biale 2021; White and Ypi 2010).

Finally, since parties aim at convincing citizens that their proposals are better than the alternatives, they challenge one another's claims, programmes, and values. This adversarial process (Manin 1987; Leydet 2015) ensures that political proposals are criticised, compared, and critically assessed, making citizens aware of the values, foreseeable consequences, and claims at stake in a decision and calling for a constant assessment and redefinition of the arguments on which political proposals are grounded.

To conclude, parties and partisanship are fundamental for a normative account of democracy because they ensure that citizens can exercise their reflexive agency without incurring excessive burdens. This conclusion can be challenged by pointing out that parties could undermine the control exercised by citizens by manipulating the public, demanding blind loyalty, and being unreceptive to any challenge that citizens might raise against their proposals. This critique might be further strengthened by the fact that the partisan revival seems to assume that political parties serve these justificatory functions but does not clarify the normative requirements that they need to meet to empower citizens. Given this shortcoming the partisan revival cannot ensure that parties do not act as factions by eroding rather than reinforcing the control

exercised by citizens. Once properly evaluated against the way in which actual political parties act, the distinction between factions and parties does not hold and it seems to be the outcome of a process of idealisation of the role and content of parties and partisanship. This idealisation is confirmed by the demanding conception of political agency that the partisan revival conveys. According to this perspective, the critics claim, citizens need to satisfy justificatory requirements and critically assess every political claim. While this form of reflexive engagement might be persuasive at first glance, it is particularly burdensome because it denies that members of the polity can be committed to comprehensive doctrines and requires that they act as impartial deliberators. If political parties facilitate the exercise of political agency but make overly demanding claims on political agency, then the exercise of this agency is burdensome and the inclusiveness of democracy is undermined.

Partisanship and Political Liberalism tackles these critiques by holding that since parties ensure stability for the right reasons in diverse societies, they should meet public reason requirements. Party members choose to join an association that grants them more political influence, provided that the democratic process is fair and does not systematically disadvantage their parties. As a consequence, partisans, qua party members, have a political obligation to support and be loyal to the institutions that grant them this political advantage. Within the liberal framework adopted by Bonotti, to achieve this aim parties and partisans need to ground their proposals in accessible reasons (the accessibility requirement) and explain how their proposals are connected to shared liberal values (the weak shareability requirement). As Bonotti (115) writes, “On the one hand, parties and partisans ought to refrain from advancing illiberal arguments which, even if accessible, contravene those basic liberal values that are shared in liberal democracies (e.g. equality, freedom, etc.). On the other

hand, they ought to take those political values and rank them in more specific ways.” This is particularly important in a pluralistic society because it ensures that people who are committed to comprehensive values and perspectives do not undermine but support liberal democratic institutions and the values on which these institutions are grounded. This approach does not only ensure that political parties promote their justificatory empowerment; it conveys an account of political agency that is not particularly burdensome for citizens. While party members need to meet the public reason requirements, these standards do not constrain lay citizens who may be committed to comprehensive doctrines. Public accountability is thus granted by partisan antagonism and not citizens’ critical engagement.

To conclude, Rawlsian public reason grants that political parties can promote their justificatory functions and empower citizens to ensure that they can exercise democratic control without incurring excessive burdens.

II

The challenge of democratic pluralism

In the previous section, I pointed out that Bonotti’s proposal overcomes one of the main shortcomings of the partisanship revival and, without conveying an overly demanding account of political agency, clearly defines the justificatory standards political parties need to meet to empower citizens. Despite these undebatable merits, his perspective entails a problematic understanding of parties and partisanship that limits political pluralism and curtails democratic conflict. Let me clarify this point.

The justificatory requirements defined by Bonotti ensures that the proposals developed by political parties are addressed to the

whole political community, promote an idea of the common good and are committed to the values in which a liberal democracy is grounded. These strictures clearly rule out antidemocratic or illiberal parties but, Bonotti contends, are compatible with a significant level of disagreement regarding the social and economic policies that realise the ideals of freedom and equality to which every member of the polity should be committed. It is undebatable that citizens need to be committed to these ideals, but the Rawlsian framework represents only one possible interpretation of the ideals and not necessarily the most inclusive one.

A democratic polity in which different political parties ground their proposals in partisan interpretations of the common good entails that these parties must develop worldviews that make their claims coherent. If these worldviews need to be compatible with a Rawlsian framework, this curtails all perspectives that are committed to democratic values but critical of the Rawlsian (or liberal) interpretation of these values. Let me clarify this point by focusing on some concrete examples: progressivism and libertarianism.

Imagine a progressive party according to which the Rawlsian framework cannot properly address injustices within our society because it does not acknowledge the impact that asymmetry of power has on the control citizens exercise over their lives, it excessively prioritises freedom over equality, and it problematically takes as given the economic structure of liberal societies. To ensure justice and develop a proper transformative project, this party contends, a more egalitarian perspective needs to be adopted (Biale et al. 2021) and citizens need to be empowered by broadening the set of issues subject to democratic control (Azmanova 2020; Dryzek 2002, Fung & Wright 2001; Raekstad and Gradin 2020). On the opposite side of the political spectrum, libertarian parties challenge the Rawlsian interpretation of the liberal framework by

claiming that all distributive policies are incompatible with the ideals of freedom and equality in which a liberal democratic society needs to be grounded. According to this perspective, self-ownership and economic freedoms should be considered among the fundamental rights to be granted to citizens and the free market should not be constrained at all.

We can disagree with these views, but it would be problematic to claim that they do not convey an acceptable idea of the common good or that they undermine citizens' commitment to democratic values. Since these views explicitly challenge the Rawlsian framework adopted by Bonotti, if public reason defines the standards that political parties need to meet, then it is likely that the expressions of these views will be curtailed. As rightly suggested by Jonathan White and Lea Ypi, political justifications do not occur in a vacuum; rather, they require "some degree of common ground, or 'frame resonance,' ... (1) to be recognized and understood as such, and (2) to be received as convincing" (White & Ypi 2011, 389). This implies that a political justification is not accepted only for the force of its reasons but for its fit with what citizens consider as common ground. If the Rawlsian framework defines this common ground, progressivism and libertarianism might be considered legitimate and admitted to the public arena, but the background against which they will be included will clearly disadvantage them by limiting their appeal to the public and curtailing their message (Freedman 1996). This creates unfairness and problematically limits the level of disagreement that is allowed within a democratic society and ensures that citizens are not exposed to a plurality of perspectives.

It might be claimed that my critique overestimates the demandingness of Rawlsian public reason and pointed out that, according to Bonotti, it only requires that proposals be committed to ideals of freedom and equality and not to their Rawlsian

interpretation. If this were the case, pluralism would be ensured but the normative work of Rawlsian public reason would be very limited and, contrary to what Bonotti suggests, would not imply a commitment to a liberal but strictly democratic order. This way out would however entail a lax reading of the Rawlsian framework that void its content and nature. To conclude, either we ensure democratic pluralism but adopt a lax reading of the Rawlsian framework or we adopt a stricter reading of the Rawlsian framework but limit democratic pluralism.

III

Reasonable partisanship is not partisanship

In the previous section I pointed out that Bonotti's interpretation of Rawlsian public reason clarifies the justificatory constraints that parties need to meet but curtails democratic pluralism and the political conflicts that this pluralism inevitably triggers. These limits are confirmed by the idealised idea of partisanship that this perspective conveys, an account that transforms partisanship into a form of reasonable reflexivity that is problematic and burdensome. If partisans need to meet public reason requirements, they do not only have to justify their proposals but have to assess them on their merit and adopt a certain detachment and impartiality. Within this context, partisans are not adversaries who aim at winning but individuals who are ready to change their mind if a better alternative for the polity is suggested. This process of idealisation is confirmed by the fact that Bonotti's work analyses in detail the standards that partisans need to meet in order to develop proposals that are addressed to the whole political community, but it does not specify how interparty competition should be constrained. This kind of antagonism disappears because of a tension between the Rawlsian framework,

and its idea of reasonableness, and a proper account of partisanship.

Partisanship entails an adversarial relationship that does not require to assign the same value to every proposal. Within a partisan context proposals and values are continuously challenged but partisans are epistemically partial and attribute different burdens of judgement to their claims and those of their counterparts. Even if partisans address their opponents' challenges, they revise their proposals while maintaining, or minimally updating, their values and ideological background. The adversarial process that characterises interpartisan relationships aims not at analysing and revising political proposals in order to identify the best alternative according to some standard of correctness that is external to the preferences of citizens but at winning the argumentative struggle and defending the partisan viewpoint to which someone is committed. This form of partisan antagonism does not simply require that partisans support a certain perspective but that they limit the alternative perspective that is incompatible with theirs. Within this context, partisans aim at defining a language or values that constitute the common ground on which citizens develop the arguments that are most favourable to the values to which the partisans are committed. This is confirmed by the fact that partisans are ready to adopt strategic behaviours, such as supporting their second-best option if this reduces the chances that worse alternatives will be realised, that are not compatible with the idea of identifying the best solution for the polity.

It might be claimed that Rawlsian public reason does not necessarily entail detachment and is thus compatible with a form of partisan antagonism. If this were the case, it would still be necessary to clearly define the constraints that partisans need to meet in order to ensure that citizens have access to reasoned

exchange and can exercise their reflexive agency. Since, in fact, parties aim at winning if their partiality and antagonism are not constrained, they will transform citizens into passive recipients of their claims rather than facilitating their exercise of political agency. To conclude, though Rawlsian public reason ensures that political parties develop proposals addressed to the whole political community, it idealises partisanship either by excluding its antagonistic dimension and then ruling out one of its essential features or by conveying an unconstrained account of partisanship that undermines its justificatory empowerment. To overcome this problem and ensure that the antagonism and partiality characterising partisanship do not transform citizens into passive objects of decisions made by others, the following requirements should be met:

1) Justifiable antagonism. Those who are committed to a partisan worldview aim at realising it by interpreting reality according to this worldview. Since to achieve this aim the support of a significant number of citizens is needed, it is necessary to show them that a set of coherent proposals that are grounded in this partisan horizon respond to their interests and are better than the alternatives. To win the contest against the alternatives, it is legitimate to engage in strategic behaviours provided that every claim or strategy adopted to support the claim is compatible with the partisan horizon (political justifiability) and responds to the citizens who believe that their interests are not being taken into consideration (responsiveness).

2) Democratic loyalty. Even if partisans can challenge one another and try to defeat their adversaries, they need to support those institutions that make possible this conflict and need to be loyal to democratic ideals. If they do not, they will not act as political actors but will simply impose their views. Democratic loyalty requires developing perspectives that are compatible with

the democratic ideal and addressing the challenges raised against these proposals. It is moreover important to recognise that the democratic process needs to ensure equal consideration to every interest at stake and support this goal by avoiding partisan behaviour when the rules of the game (for example, electoral districts or voting systems) or fundamental decisions (for example, the selection of Supreme Court members) are at stake.

3) Intellectual honesty. Given the complexity of political issues and given that they involve elements that can be differently interpreted, there is room for partisanship but partisans cannot distort reality to defend their claims. Intellectual honesty requires that citizens accept that their perspective is not the only one available, but it does not rule out epistemic partiality. This does not mean that someone who is committed to a partisan horizon must deny the possibility of revising their framework or the proposals that are grounded in it. Since it is legitimate to attribute more importance to the partisan worldview to which one is committed than to alternative worldviews, it is possible that partisans will revise their proposals along with partisans who share the same horizon (that is, intraparty interaction).

This form of loyal partisanship does not idealise partisan interactions, because it acknowledges their antagonism and partiality but constrains these features to ensure that they do not collapse into a form of factionalism. If these requirements are met, partisan proposals will be politically justifiable because they will embody democratic values and will be situated against an ideological background that citizens can feel as theirs. This ensures that citizens can exercise their agency and control without incurring excessive burdens, but it does not transform partisans into detached deliberators. According to this model of democracy, citizens need to acknowledge one another as equal political actors, support the values and practices that make it possible to exercise

their political agency, and consider every political proposal even if they can be committed to a partisan interpretation of the common good and can aim at realising this idea and supporting policies that pursue this task. This idea of democracy embodies the spirit of *Partisanship and Political Liberalism* (including partisan interactions within a normative account of democracy) but challenges the idealisation that characterised Bonotti's account. Bonotti clearly showed us that the Rawlsian framework is richer and more hospitable than we usually think. The inclusion of political parties requires, however, a further expansion of this view, and we have to understand whether there is room for this option or whether a more radical change is needed.

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SYMPOSIUM
PARTISANSHIP AND PUBLIC REASON



ACCESSIBILITY, SCIENCE,
AND POLITICAL PARTIES

BY
GIULIA BISTAGNINO

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Accessibility, Science, and Political Parties

Giulia Bistagnino

Introduction

There is little doubt that one of the most long-standing and hotly debated issues in political philosophy concerns how democratic societies should deal with the problem of disagreement and how government actions should be justified in the face of it. There is also little doubt that, since the publication in 1993 of John Rawls's *Political Liberalism*, what is usually called *public reason liberalism*, namely the idea that political authority must in some sense rest on the free consent of those subjected to it and thus be justified with public reasons, has dominated the discussion.

Despite its prominence, in the last two decades the paradigm of public reason liberalism has been under great pressure: theoretical difficulties and conceptual impasses have been uncovered, requiring defenders of public reason liberalism to sharpen their arguments and to deeply reflect upon the limits of their theory. In particular, public reason liberalism, especially in its Rawlsian form, has been criticized for being too ideal and irrelevant to real world politics because of its faith in the possibility of reaching an overlapping consensus (Gray 2000; Horton 2010) and its attempt to sweeten the problem of disagreement into that of *reasonable*

disagreement (Mouffe 2005), thus eluding the realm of “the political” by theorizing away from politics altogether (Honig 1993; Newey 2001).

Such critique is particularly important given the practical character assigned to political philosophy by public reason liberals, and this is also the reason why attempts to rescue public reason liberalism from the accusation of being inhospitable to real-world politics are remarkable. One of the most interesting rescue attempts that have been recently proposed consists in showing how theories of public reason not only can accommodate but also require political parties to achieve their aims. Within this literature, which goes hand in hand with a new general interest and attention to political parties in normative political theory,¹ Matteo Bonotti’s idea that “political liberalism needs and nourishes political parties” (2017, 175) represents the most systematic and comprehensive normative theory of partisanship from the perspective of Rawlsian public reason.²

Of course, Bonotti’s intention is not only that of defending and expanding on the idea of political liberalism, but also offering an account apt to redeem political parties and restore trust in them in the face of their current crises.³ For this reason, it is important to understand whether Bonotti’s theory is up to the task of providing solutions to at least some of the problems concerning political parties in current democratic societies. In what follows, I tackle and focus on a particular aspect of Bonotti’s account, namely the accessibility conception of public reason he proposes and his

¹ See Rosenblum 2008; Muirhead 2006, 2014; White and Ypi 2016; Wolkenstein 2015; Biale & Ottonelli 2019.

² Russell Muirhead and Nancy Rosenblum (2006) have proposed a similar move, though in a more limited and sketchy form.

³ Bonotti is explicit about this point in the conclusions of his book (2017, 175-6).

illustration of scientific evaluative standards as specific instantiations of such conception. My aim is not only to signal a possible problem and excessive optimism about the idea of accessibility defended by Bonotti, but also to show how such difficulty may be troublesome for contemporary politics, characterized by polarization not only with respect to political matters, but also scientific ones, and in which political parties adopt anti-scientific claims and stances.⁴

The paper is divided in four sections. Section I recollects Bonotti's general approach to partisanship and public reason. In section II a discussion about accessibility with respect to scientific evaluative standards is offered and the problem of anti-scientific arguments in public discourse is presented. Section III attempts to understand if and how it might be possible to respond to the problem highlighted in section II from Bonotti's perspective. Here, it is argued that all available strategies are problematic. Finally, some concluding remarks are offered.

I

Partisanship and public reason

According to Bonotti, political parties are vital to the project of Rawlsian political liberalism for they essentially contribute to

⁴ To make two very quick examples, consider former US president Donald Trump's suggestion that his "gut instinct" superseded scientific evidence on how to contain the COVID-19 pandemic (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/05/us/politics/trump-hydroxychloroquine-coronavirus.html>), or how, in Italy, the Five Star Movement have spent a long time nodding and winking to anti-vaxxers (https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/02/opinion/vaccination-populism-politics-and-measles.html?partner=rssnyt&emc=rss&_r=0)

reaching an overlapping consensus, thus granting stability for the right reasons within a pluralist and democratic society. By drawing on the literature focusing on the opposition between parties and factions, Bonotti develops on the idea that the former are different from the latter because they propose views of the common good rather than sectorial interests (White and Ypi 2016) by arguing that political parties are “shapers and articulators of public reason” (2017, 108). Parties translate citizens’ comprehensive doctrines into reasons all citizens can accept, and this “bilingual” attitude (Muirhead & Rosenblum 2006, 104) guarantees that they are not factions: they speak not only nonpublic languages drawn from political ideologies, churches, etc., but also that kind of political Esperanto that is public reason.

As is well known, according to Rawls, “public reason is characteristic of a democratic people [and its] subject is the good of the public” (2005, 213). The ideal of public reason is fundamental to honour the “liberal principle of legitimacy”, which states that coercive power should be exercised in accordance with constitutional essentials that all citizens can be expected to endorse (*ibid.*, 217). In this sense, government actions are legitimate insofar as they are grounded in reasons that all can be reasonably expected to accept, despite the nonpublic, sectarian reasons that citizens may have. The liberal principle of legitimacy, grounded in the criterion of reciprocity (*ibid.*, xliv), imposes a “duty of civility”, according to which not only public officials, political representatives, candidates, judges, but also ordinary citizens are to “be ready to explain to one another [...] how the principles and policies they advocate and vote for can be supported by the political values of public reason” (*ibid.*, 217).

According to Bonotti, the demands of public reasons are the demands of partisanship precisely because parties are, by definition, those political agents that present partial values in a way

that takes into account the common good, and the ideal of public reason requires to justify norms and policies on the basis of reasons that all can accept, for they represent their common interest. To present a normative theory of partisanship grounded in Rawlsian political liberalism, Bonotti makes two moves: first, he shows how political parties, if properly conceptualized, can actually contribute to achieving the aims of political liberalism; second, he provides an interpretation of public reason that is hospitable to the kind of democratic contestation that nourishes political parties. I will briefly recollect the first move and then concentrate on the second.

Partisanship can improve political liberalism by not only making the requirements of public reason less demanding, but also connecting citizens' comprehensive doctrines and public reasons. Indeed, on the one hand, by claiming that only partisans are to be subjected to the constraints of public reason while ordinary citizens should be relieved of the duty of civility (Bonotti 2017, 64-66), the normative ideal of partisanship Bonotti proposes aims to diminish the demandingness of Rawls's view,⁵ which on the contrary

⁵ One may wonder whether such move can be considered successful, given Bonotti's position that a person should be subjected to the constraints of public reason in virtue of the *intentions* with which she presents her political views. Bonotti contends that, when partisans discuss qua partisans, namely with the intention of convincing their interlocutors (even friends or relatives in informal conversations) to support and endorse the views of her party, the ideal of public reason should apply (2017, 66). In this sense, since not only members, but also supporters and sympathizers may have the intention of convincing others to vote for a party and thus be subjected to the constraints of public reason, a form of partisanship grounded in such conception may still appear excessively demanding. To solve this problem, Bonotti introduces the idea of a justificatory division of labour, which should relieve ordinary citizens of the duty of civility (2017, 128-138). However, to be alleviated from the burdens of public reason, citizens are to engage in politics not via political parties. The voluntary character of partisanship (even only intentional partisanship) requires abiding by the

concerns political relations between citizens in general (Rawls 2005, 217-218). On the other, on Bonotti's account, citizens are not left alone to work out how their comprehensive doctrines relate to the political conception of justice. Thanks to their intermediate position between the background culture of the society and public fora, political parties play a fundamental role in helping citizens to relate their nonpublic values to public ones (Bonotti 2017, 120-122).

For political parties to contribute to the aforementioned aims of political liberalism, Bonotti specifies a certain interpretation of public reason. First, he rejects the Rawlsian idea that public reason should concern solely matters involving constitutional essentials and questions of basic justice (Rawls 2005, 214).⁶ Indeed, political parties are not single issue, but present broad political platforms, involving both fundamental and non-fundamental political issues connected with public policies, that should be justified in terms that all can be expected to endorse (Bonotti 2017, 68). This move broadens the scope of Rawlsian public reason, and it is necessary to allow for a wide range of different and conflicting proposals and of political parties to flourish. Indeed, Bonotti rejects both a *shareability* and an *intelligibility* conception of justificatory reasons (Vallier 2014, 104-111) and defends an account of public reason that comprises both an *accessibility* and a *weak shareability* condition. According to Bonotti, a shareability conception of public reason would be too demanding and hostile to party politics because of its requirement to use, in public justification, only reasons that all members of the public share, at a certain level of idealization.

norms of public reason, thus asking citizens to greatly limit their political participation if they do not want to respect such norms.

⁶ As Bonotti also observes (2017, 68), this move is not in contradiction with Rawls's theory, which states that "it is usually highly desirable to settle political questions by invoking the values of public reason" (2005, 215).

Indeed, it considers public only those reasons that all citizens may regard as their own, both in terms of the evaluative standards grounding them and their content. As Bonotti rightly recognizes, such an account of public reason is so restrictive that it might be possible “that only one party is required in order to fulfil the justificatory demands of partisanship” (2017, 112). Accordingly, he embraces an accessibility conception, which requires that public reasons are not shared, but accessible to all citizens, at a certain level of idealization.⁷

Accessible public reasons are reasons that are grounded in common evaluative standards, which are recognized by all citizens as sound, though their content may not be shared: “reasons are accessible not if they are shared among all citizens [...] but if, while differing, they are grounded in evaluative standards that all citizens share” (Bonotti 2019, 499). Since accessibility might in principle allow accessible reasons that support illiberal policies into public justification, Bonotti couples it with a requirement of weak shareability, according to which public reason cannot contravene general basic political values that are widely shared in liberal democracies, as for example freedom and equality (Bonotti 2017, 115-116).

In this sense, according to Bonotti, his ideal of public reason can be considered very inclusive in allowing many different laws and policies to be publicly justified, thus ensuring a wide space for partisan pluralism. On the one hand, although the weak shareability requirement constraints the proposals of parties, political values are general, indeterminate, and abstract so to allow

⁷ Bonotti’s rejection of intelligibility regards the excessive importance that it confers to those reasons citizens can invoke to oppose legislation. Since it requires that a policy or a law is justifiable to all citizens with reasons that they recognize as valid, intelligibility allows private reasons to challenge the common good, denying a properly normative conception of partisanship (2017, 117).

for political parties to interpret and rank them in many different and conflicting manners. On the other hand, the accessibility condition ensures some common ground for justifying proposals without commanding a commitment to any specific political position.

II

The accessibility condition in practice: science’s evaluative standards

I now concentrate on accessibility and in particular on the idea of shared evaluative standards concerning epistemic rules of inquiry⁸ to signal a problem in Bonotti’s theory.⁹ Such focus is motivated by the fact that, in presenting his argument, Bonotti refers to scientific reasons, considering them a paradigmatic example of accessible reasons and thus a perfect candidate to explain how accessibility works.¹⁰

Consider an economic matter that is publicly relevant and requires some government action. Since partisans need to defend their proposals in terms of accessible reasons, partisans ought to appeal to shared evaluative standards, for example widely endorsed economic data and methods of analysis. However, sharing evaluative standards concerning economics does not turn into sharing the same conclusions: partisans can still advocate for different economic policies, given the possibility of expert

⁸ Evaluative standards are both normative and descriptive in character: they include both moral principles and “epistemic rules for the collection of factual evidence and for drawing inferences” (Badano & Bonotti 2020, 39).

⁹ For criticisms focused more on Bonotti’s resort to shared political values and normative evaluative standards, see Ypi 2019 and Destri 2021 in this volume.

¹⁰ This is argued also in Badano & Bonotti 2020.

disagreement on economic matters.¹¹ Scientific reasons, intended as reasons that are grounded in science and the scientific method, pass the test of accessibility for they conform to a shared evaluative standard (e.g. acceptance of the scientific method in general), though they can be controversial in their content. In this sense, accessibility seems particularly well-suited to shape an ideal of partisanship in line with the demands of political liberalism for it grants a certain common – in this case epistemic – grounding, while at the same time allowing for disagreement and pluralism with respect to policies and proposals. This is particularly evident in Bonotti's example concerning climate change: "most people may find certain scientific arguments [...] accessible, and even scientifically uncontroversial, and yet deeply disagree on what course of action should be taken on the basis of them, because they endorse different ethical theories" (2017, 114).¹²

This characterization of accessibility is very attractive and resonates with Rawls's idea that in public justification it is legitimate to "appeal only to presently accepted general beliefs and forms of reasoning found in common sense, and the methods and conclusions of science when these are not controversial" (2005, 224). However, it also risks being misleading for it portrays accessibility in a simplified manner, overlooking some possible problems that may arise if such condition is not better specified.

¹¹ This example is presented by Bonotti 2017, 113-114.

¹² It is important to point out that Bonotti's discussion of the case of climate change is limited, and possibly ambiguous. Although it is true that most people find scientific arguments in favour of the occurrence of climate change valid and common now, this was not true in the past. Despite an undebatable and long-standing consensus among scientists on the matter, laypersons have considered such scientific consensus and the issue in general controversial for many years. In this sense, it is not clear, within Bonotti's account, if scientific arguments should be regarded as common when they are agreed upon by experts only or also by ordinary citizens. I come back to this point in the next section.

Consider how scientific evaluative standards can be employed and appealed to in public discourse not in virtue of their epistemic credentials or validity, but because of their level of acceptance in a society. As Vallier explains, “evaluative standards are ‘common’ when they enjoy intersubjective recognition” (2014, 108), and thus can be considered suitable candidates for public reason as long as they are accepted. Although it is clearly possible for scientific evaluative standards to be shared and, in turn, to count as accessible, it might well not be the case. The problem is that Bonotti does not provide a framework for understanding what it means for a certain evaluative standard to enjoy intersubjective recognition and thus to be common.¹³

It seems plausible to think that any account of accessibility should not require some sort of unanimity on evaluative standards. The fact that few citizens do not accept the scientific method or reject some data despite their epistemic credentials within the scientific community should not impair the accessibility of a certain scientific reason. At the same time, it is not clear what level of disagreement should be tolerated and allowed within a society for an evaluative standard to be considered common. It seems that a criterion based on a simple majority rule, requiring for example that 51% of citizens accepts the evaluative standard, would not only be extremely difficult to assess, but also contrary to the spirit of accessibility. Indeed, it is difficult to understand how such a

¹³ It is important to note that this is not a problem only for Bonotti, but also for Rawls, who writes that “the knowledge and ways of reasoning that ground our affirming the principles of justice and their application to constitutional essentials and basic justice are to rest on the plain truths *now widely accepted, or available, to citizens generally*” (2005, 225, italics mine). Within this framework, it is difficult to pinpoint the amount of agreement needed on a certain standard to count as public. The ideas of “wide acceptance” and “general availability” are indeed extremely vague.

criterion should be shaped and framed, and Bonotti does not elaborate on this point.

It is important to note that this gap in explanation is problematic not only in terms of the theoretical soundness and plausibility of Bonotti's account. Lacking an argument to assess when evaluative standards can actually be recognized as accessible is particularly troublesome if we consider current public debates concerning scientific matters that inform political decisions. Consider the case of the anti-vaccination movement, namely the reluctance or refusal to be vaccinated or to have one's children vaccinated against contagious diseases despite overwhelming scientific consensus on the safety of vaccines, which has resulted in disease outbreaks and deaths from preventable diseases (McKee & Diethelm 2010; Thomas 2010).¹⁴ Although anti-vaccination supporters are a minority of the population in many countries, the number of individuals who hesitate and reject vaccination does not seem so small to not at least pose a threat to the accessibility of scientific evaluative standards that are at the heart of vaccination policies. Indeed, in addition to disagreement on what course of action should be taken with respect to compulsory vaccination because of different ethical perspectives,¹⁵ laypeople do find scientific arguments grounding the safety of vaccines not

¹⁴ The most notable and well-known case of vaccine hesitance concerns measles. Notwithstanding being considered eradicated in the US in 2000, today the spread of the disease is worrisome and alarming, with a higher number of cases than those occurring in 1992. On this matter, see the data offered by the Centres for disease control and prevention: <https://www.cdc.gov/measles/cases-outbreaks.html>.

¹⁵ To make a quick example, compulsory vaccination can be opposed by arguing that governments should not infringe on individual freedom to make medical decisions for oneself or one's children. On the contrary, vaccination can be defended by invoking the harm principle and the public health benefits that derive from it.

accessible and controversial. In this sense, it is important to understand not only whether partisans can employ scientific reasons concerning vaccines in public justification, but also, more generally, what reasons are available to them when evaluative standards are contested despite their epistemic credentials.

III

Four problematic replies

To solve the problem signalled in the previous section, four moves seem available to Bonotti. First, he can argue that, despite certain specific cases, ordinary citizens generally believe in science and in the scientific method, that trust in experts is not that uncommon and, therefore, that we can safely consider scientific reasons accessible.

This strategy seems questionable given not only the current trust crisis in traditional epistemic authorities (Nichols 2017), but also the success and spreading of what Muirhead and Rosenblum call *new conspiracy* or *conspiracy without a theory* (2019, 19-41). According to their analysis, in the last years, classic conspiracy theories, which attempt to make sense of the political world on the basis of prejudice and insufficient evidence, have given way to new forms of conspiracy that dispenses with the burdens of explanation. Conspiracies without theories get their validation not from proof or evidence, but from repetition, producing polarization and attacking reality and the common grounds to ascertain factual truth.¹⁶ The point is not that political parties that

¹⁶ Consider, as an example of new conspiracy, the famous “pizzagate”, according to which high-ranked Democratic party officials use a number of U.S. restaurants for human trafficking and child abuse without any evidence or proof of it.

employ new conspiracy theories and post-truth strategies¹⁷ in public discourse should not be condemned. On the contrary, they should be considered blameworthy for attempting to destabilize and disorient citizens about factual truths and eroding common grounds of understanding. The worry is that, given the level of acceptance of such theories within the population, the accessibility conception of public reason proposed by Bonotti lacks the theoretical resources to do so, making it impossible to simply assume that citizens generally accept the scientific method and scientific rules of inquiry and analysis.

A second strategy available to Bonotti is to bite the bullet and say that, since evaluative standards can change and public reason can be transformed thanks to the wide view of public reason, which allows for nonpublic reasons to be used among partisans (2017, 135), scientific evaluative standards cannot be secured as permanently legitimate. Rather, they are to be considered legitimate insofar as they are actually accepted within a society. Such acceptance cannot be granted by scientific consensus among experts only. Indeed, employing the criterion of intra-scientific consensus would require excluding from public reason beliefs and reasons supported by large parts of the general public¹⁸ and this would be in contradiction with the very idea of public justification. In this sense, if citizens are to shape public reason through partisanship in such a way that certain scientific reasons are not accessible anymore, for they lack intersubjective recognition, this

¹⁷ With “post truth strategies” I refer to the deliberate creation of “an environment where objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion, where theoretical frameworks are undermined in order to make it impossible for someone to make sense of a certain event, phenomenon, or experience, and where scientific truth is delegitimized” (Bufacchi 2021, 350).

¹⁸ See also Jønch-Clausen and Kappel (2016) for a discussion on a similar problem with Rawls’s theory.

should be just considered a possible and legitimate transformation and change.¹⁹

The problem with this strategy is not only that it is somehow contrary to a certain Rawlsian appreciation of science,²⁰ but also that it might justify a society in which partisans that advocate for scientifically grounded policy proposals could be considered factions. Indeed, it seems that, on the accessibility account defended by Bonotti, it could be possible for a political party to be considered an unreasonable faction given its support to a policy that is scientifically valid but does not enjoy intersubjective recognition. Such a move would be not only puzzling and undesirable, but possibly dangerous, given the consequences that may derive from enacting policies that are grounded in anti-scientific reasons.

The third possible way out for Bonotti is that of arguing in favour of a conception of “in principle accessibility” (Badano & Bonotti 2020, 54-56). Assuming that it is rational to accept the scientific method and scientific conclusions, despite the difficulties that laypersons may encounter in assessing them, it is possible to idealize citizens with respect to their epistemic capacities and knowledge to make scientific reasons accessible to them. Indeed, it can be argued that, although scientific evaluative standards are not actually accessible in practice to many citizens, they can be

¹⁹ Note that changing public reason in this way cannot be considered on a par with transforming it in an illiberal manner, given that Bonotti limits public reason by invoking general liberal values, such as freedom and equality (2017, 115).

²⁰ As previously noted, Rawls considers uncontroversial methods and conclusions of science part of public reason. Moreover, in Rawls’s original position, as presented in *A Theory of Justice*, the parties are modeled to make their decisions on the basis of general information provided by natural science and social theory (Rawls 1999, 236).

accessible to all in principle.²¹ Such a move may be considered not particularly problematic because the idealization required is not radical: it ameliorates citizens' abilities to follow standards of reasoning and evaluation that are "within normal human capacities to learn about" (Badano & Bonotti 2020, 56).

There are two problems with this strategy. First, it risks appearing contrary to the ideal of public reason by grounding accessibility with respect to scientific reasons in the idea that there is some sort of continuity between people's common sense and complex scientific inquiry (*ibid.*, 54). Considering science an extension of common sense seems an endorsement of some comprehensive, philosophical conception of what science is. Such a move is in contrast with political liberalism's aim of staying "on the surface, philosophically speaking" (Rawls 1985, 230). Second, in principle accessibility runs into difficulties also at the practical level, by allowing partisans – and, in turn, the state – to coerce citizens with reasons they do not actually recognize as valid and public. Given the numerous and heated protests that have sprung from the anti-vaccination movement, it seems reasonable to think that accepting a conception of in principle accessibility would exacerbate political conflicts over public matters in which scientific arguments play a role and are contested. To use a revised Rawlsian expression, in principle accessibility may end up securing some sort of "instability for the right reasons".

The last response that Bonotti can advance is directly linked with partisanship and requires to specify the epistemic function that political parties can and should perform. As White and Ypi argue (2016, 90-93), partisanship can epistemically benefit partisans and supporters by performing an educational role. Through partisanship, citizens can gain new information and skills

²¹ A similar move is proposed also by Ferretti (2018) and Bellolio Badiola (2019).

to make their political views more coherent, appealing, and clearer. Accordingly, political parties can be considered platforms for systemizing and spreading not only political, but also scientific knowledge. Indeed, political parties connect citizens and experts and thus make complex views informed by technical knowledge available to all citizens.

The problem with this strategy is similar to the one I have raised about the conception of in principle accessibility. Arguing that political parties should perform an epistemic function to teach citizens scientific reasoning and to cultivate a scientific mindset seems in contradiction with political liberalism's aims. Defending such an epistemic function of partisanship appears as a form of "epistemic perfectionism" (Talisso 2008), according to which a specific view of citizenship ought to be promoted and, consequently, certain epistemic practices and methods of inquiry should be encouraged.

Conclusions

By focusing on scientific evaluative standards and scientific reasons, I have attempted to signal a problem with the accessibility conception of public reason that lies at the heart of Bonotti's theory of partisanship. Considering the level of polarization about scientific claims that is present in current public debates, accessibility appears unsuited to secure policies that are both acceptable and scientifically valid. I have also shown how four possible strategies available to Bonotti to solve this problem are dubious and would require changing some fundamental aspects of his account of political parties. Despite my doubts about the possibility of saving both accessibility and science, one of the merits of Bonotti's position is that of taking seriously how science is important for contemporary democratic societies. Thanks to

him, the need to address the increasing hostility towards science and scientific authorities and to respond to political parties that assume anti-scientific stances from the point of view of public reason is more and more pressing.

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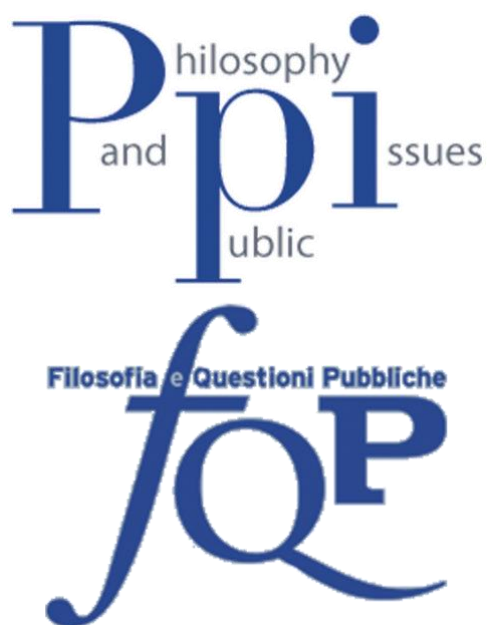
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SYMPOSIUM
PARTISANSHIP AND PUBLIC REASON



OF PARTIES AND FACTIONS

BY
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Of Parties and Factions

Chiara Destri*

Introduction

After decades of neglect, normative approaches to political parties have recently flourished (Rosenblum 2008; Muirhead 2014; White and Ypi 2016; Bonotti 2017; Biale 2018; Wolkenstein 2020). Since these theories aim to explain and justify the value of parties within democratic institutions, they do not take parties as they are, but as they should be. With some notable exceptions (Muirhead 2010; Efthymiou 2018), most offer a normative picture of political parties as inherently valuable for democratic politics. We know from political science that there are various types of party, but that the common denominator is the following: parties are organisations that contest elections (Epstein 2019; Aldrich 1995;

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Sartori and Mair 2005). When a political association attempts to put its candidates into public offices through an electoral process, that association counts as a party. Let us call this the descriptive requirement. Small or sectorial as it is, if it runs for office like a party, if it contests elections like a party, it's a party. What normative theory tells us is that this descriptive criterion is insufficient (White and Ypi 2010). In order to assess parties normatively, we need to add a normative criterion to our picture and this criterion serves to separate parties from their evil alter ego: factions.

Although their etymological origin differs, parties and factions have been traditionally associated and distrusted. As Jonathan White and Lea Ypi observe, “Taking sides, maintaining a position, adopting a stance – all attitudes we tend to link to the spirit of partisanship – seem to have been immediately associated with the threat of division, the disruption of political community, a conflict for power and the worst excesses of sedition” (White & Ypi 2016, 35). If we take partisanship simply as a “political orientation of citizens who *stand with a party*” (Muirhead 2006, 714), we cannot discriminate between cases in which parties fulfil a beneficial role in democratic institutions and cases in which parties are threatening those institutions. A positive, or at least more nuanced, evaluation of partisanship and parties requires first the possibility of distinguishing them from factions, because otherwise any contribution to the democratic ethos that they can give is distorted by the latter's seditious dangers – these political theorists seem to tell us.

This article aims at shedding some light on the distinction between parties and factions by analysing two important accounts that have been given of it. Firstly, I will introduce White and Ypi's view, which is characterised by two normative requirements that are meant to complement the descriptive one I just mentioned: the

common good and the contestability requirement. As I will try to show, the combination of these requirements, though innovative and compelling, is ultimately unsuccessful at drawing the line between parties and factions. Secondly, I will extensively analyse Matteo Bonotti's proposal, which provides a Rawlsian understanding of the common good requirement. While Bonotti's account is certainly more demanding than White and Ypi's, I will argue that it is also unconvincing, for different reasons. I think that Bonotti's attempt at showing the intrinsic connection between partisanship and public reason fails, but points to a possibly fruitful way to draw the distinction between parties and factions. I will sketch this third option in the conclusion.

I

Are parties different from factions?

Jonathan White and Lea Ypi read Western philosophers' traditional suspicion of and even blunt hostility towards parties as a mistaken conflation between parties and factions. Factions, they argue, are rightly seen as dangerous and disruptive of the political system because they "represent a corrupt display of passions, triggered by arrogance, envy, and the desire to accumulate wealth, and lead to the explosion of destructive conflicts between opposing parts of society" (White and Ypi 2016, 38). Parties, on the other hand, offer "principled visions of what society should look like for the benefit of all" (*ibid.*, 51). Rather than mere aggregations of certain sectoral interests in society, parties provide partisan but not partial conceptions of the common good and aspire at harnessing political power to govern in the name and for the benefit of the people. Let us call this normative criterion the common good requirement. While factions pursue partial interests, parties advance principled views of the common good.

Furthermore, White and Ypi consider also partisans' acceptance of the contestability of their claims as "intrinsic to the partisan attitude" (2016, 22): parties must always recognise the contestability of their claims vis-à-vis other partisans.

Together, these two normative requirements are necessary to qualify a political grouping as a *proper* party and contribute to explaining what positive role partisanship can play for democratic institutions. Interestingly, White and Ypi's normative requirements are clearly internal: they do not impose external constraints on partisanship but show what partisanship at its best means. Because proper parties are not factions, they can give expression to partisanship in a valuable way.

However, citizens in contemporary democracies widely disagree over the common good, and any recognition of the value of political parties stems from the idea that disagreement is part and parcel of a democratic society. Given the fact of pluralism, one party's conception of the common good may appear partial and factional in its adversaries' eyes. While White and Ypi explicitly appeal to "principles and aims that are plausibly generalizable" (2016, 21) and to goals that are "proposed in the name of the whole people and with reference to principles and aims that could in principle be endorsed by everyone" (2016, 60), they do not provide more flesh to the bones of the common good requirement.

In fact, they *cannot* provide it. For these two requirements pull in different directions. On the one hand, the common good is not independently specified and hence political groupings qualify as parties as long as they appeal to *their* own view of the common good, which may widely differ, and do not explicitly offer *only* considerations based on sectorial interests (White and Ypi 2016, 60). This is even clearer if we consider that, contrary to what White and Ypi claim (White and Ypi 2011), there are important structural differences between public justification and partisan justification

(Muirhead 2010). As Enrico Biale points out, when partisans offer reasons in favour of their programmes, they are neither impartially assessing all available proposals, nor aiming at finding out what the best proposal really is (Biale 2018, 137-138). Rather, they aim at winning elections by convincing other citizens of the soundness of their programme, towards which they are inevitably partial (Biale 2018, 141-143). But this entails that each party that does not explicitly advocate only for sectorial interests will reasonably claim to be a party in the normative sense.

On the other, the requirement of contestability entails that parties must always be open to criticism from adversaries¹. White and Ypi mean this second criterion to express partisans' democratic orientation: because parties accept a "public process of debate, persuasion, and contestation", they are at home only under institutions that "express the legitimacy of political contestation – where offices are elected, where disagreements are debated" (White and Ypi 2017, 22-23). Acceptance of contestability, however, does not *require* democracy: a party may allow for debate and contestation by other parties while firmly holding on to power and denying elections. Democracy needs more than contestation: it needs the acceptance of popular sovereignty and political equality, at least (Dahl 1989). Furthermore, thanks to contestability, each party can deny its adversaries' sincere commitment to generalizable principles while asserting its own, and they can do it based on their own evaluative standards. Even though a left-wing party may defend teachers' interests because of

¹ Being open to criticism entails neither moral scepticism, nor relativism, as White and Ypi observe (2016, 74). It does, however, entail that if each party must recognise the contestability of its claims, it must be open not only to adversaries' rejection of its political justification but also to their denial that such a justification is rooted on a conception of the common good instead of on factional interests. At the same time, being open to such criticism cannot entail *accepting* it; hence parties are free to reject other partisans' contestation.

a principled view of the importance of state-provided education, its adversaries can always object that this defence is factional as it looks at a specific group's interests. As White and Ypi note, "at stake is not whether, in the eyes of the observer, a political grouping reliably does make claims in the name of generalizable principles (this will be a matter for political debate), but whether it *seeks* to do so given the kinds of argumentation it pursues" (2016, 59).

According to the common good requirement, therefore, all groupings that offer more than an aggregation of sectorial interests may count as parties, on their terms. According to the contestability requirement, all parties can legitimately accuse their adversaries to be no more than factions, on their terms. On the one hand, the common good requirement is overinclusive, because it allows almost all political groupings to qualify as parties even if these parties may advance conceptions of the common good that are inconsistent with democratic institutions. On the other, the contestability requirement is underinclusive, because it allows each party to deny the legitimacy of other partisans' claims, irrespective of whether these claims are compatible with the democratic game.

This is a problem for White and Ypi, because the combination of these two normative requirements does not seem sufficient to draw a clear and publicly recognisable line between factions and parties. Furthermore, the mere presence of just institutions, intended as the set of procedures regulating conflict to prevent domination, such as "separation of powers, due process, respect for fundamental rights and the rule of law" (2016, 52), is certainly required, but far from sufficient to separate parties from factions. As they observe, institutional remedies that correct the effects of inequalities without neutralising the system of production of such inequalities are not enough and, as a result, factionalism "understood in the classical sense as the unequal influence that

those with more power and wealth exercise over the rest of the political community, continues to haunt principled partisan politics” (2016, 53).

II

Parties as agents of public reason

To solve this problem, Matteo Bonotti in his *Partisanship and Political Liberalism in Diverse Societies* has recourse to political liberalism. Since reasonable disagreement is a core feature of well-ordered societies, partisans may find a common ground in a political conception of justice. Indeed, parties play the role of bridges, or connections not only between citizens and government (White and Ypi 2010; Muirhead and Rosenblum 2012) but also between citizens’ comprehensive doctrines and a freestanding political conception of justice (Muirhead and Rosenblum 2006; Bonotti 2017). According to Bonotti, partisans are thus agents of public reason, because they translate citizens’ particular demands and private reasons into public reasons. Political liberalism provides normative standards, rooted in the liberal values that citizens of a well-ordered society share, and these standards allow us to draw a clear distinction between factions and parties. While factions offer private reasons, parties trade in public reasons².

As is widely known, Rawls calls public reason "the reason of equal citizens who, as a collective body, exercise final political and coercive power over one another in enacting laws and in amending

² Partisans are allowed to offer nonpublic reasons to their constituency when they engage in what Bonotti calls vertical justification, but they cannot call on comprehensive doctrines when they justify policies or laws to adversaries or other citizens (Bonotti 2017, 134). See note 3.

their constitution” (Rawls 2005, 214). Because coercive power must be exercised in accordance with constitutional essentials that all citizens as free and equal may reasonably be expected to endorse (2005, 137), political justification of laws must be grounded on liberal values that all citizens of a well-ordered society share. Consequently, political agents in institutional roles, such as judges, elected officials or candidates, must be willing to provide reasons that are public, i.e., reasonably acceptable to all citizens as free and equals. Rawls calls this the duty of civility, which is a moral duty “to explain to one another on those fundamental questions how the principles and policies they advocate and vote for can be supported by the political values of public reason” (Rawls 2005, 217). Ideally, lay citizens are also under the same duty when they vote, because by their vote they hold officials accountable. Hence, they should “think of themselves *as if they were legislators* and ask themselves what statutes, supported by what reasons satisfying the criterion of reciprocity, they would think it most reasonable to enact” (Rawls 2005, 444-445). It goes without saying that this view is particularly demanding. However, Rawls adds two important limitations. Firstly, he endorses a wide view of public reason, according to which nonpublic reasons can be offered as justifications for political decisions at any time, *provided* that public reasons are also given in due course (Rawls 2005, 462-466). Secondly, he seems to limit public reason to “constitutional essentials and questions of basic justice” (*ibid.*, 214), thereby leaving other political issues, such as tax or environment legislation, out of the constraints of public reason (but see Quong 2004; 2011).

Bonotti proposes another way to make public reason less demanding without resorting to these limitations. He exonerates regular citizens from the duty of civility and applies it only to partisans (Bonotti 2017, 133). While lay citizens are hence free to propose their nonpublic reasons, partisans must always comply with the duty of civility and justify their proposals on the basis of

reasons that are acceptable to all citizens as free and equals. Bonotti's view is then less demanding on ordinary citizens, but still quite demanding on partisans, since they don't seem to benefit from Rawls's limitations on public reason.

Firstly, the limitation on constitutional essentials and matters of basic justice does not work for partisans because they are meant to elaborate complex manifestoes, which include both nonfundamental and fundamental matters, and which partisans must justify in their entirety (Bonotti 2017, 69). Secondly, partisans are tasked with the elaboration of these complex platforms and their justification based on reasons acceptable to all their fellow citizens. Even though they are permitted to offer nonpublic reasons to their constituents (Bonotti 2017, 134), they must confine themselves to public reasons when they attempt to convince citizens of different political positions to vote for their party. What engenders a surprisingly demanding implication is Bonotti's quite wide view of partisan identity, including candidates, party members, activists, supporters and sympathizers (Bonotti 2017, 15). Since he seems to think that a sympathiser acts *qua* partisan as soon as she has the intention of convincing her friends or relatives to vote for her party, this leads to the odd implication that even as a simple party supporter she will need to comply with the constraints of public reason *in her private conversations*, while her interlocutors will not have the same duty, unless of course they are also party supporters (Bonotti 2017, 67). Here Bonotti proves to be even more demanding than Rawls, if partisans cannot appeal to the wide view of public reason to justify their use of comprehensive doctrines to fellow citizens.

To be fair, in chapter 7 Bonotti does spell out a division of justificatory labour which allows certain partisans to benefit from a wide view of public reason. He distinguishes between horizontal and vertical accountability. While the former is conducted among

partisans of competing parties, who are supposed to keep each other accountable thanks to public reasoning (*ibid.*, 130), the latter takes place between partisans and their constituents (*ibid.*, 134). Since its function is to keep elected officials accountable to their constituents, so that they are responsive to constituents' comprehensive doctrines and voice their demands, vertical accountability allows for nonpublic reasons and makes the wide view of public reason available also for partisans³. This calls for a division of justificatory labour: elected officials should focus on public reasons and nonelected partisans can focus on “ensuring that their elected fellow partisans are responsive to citizens' non-public reasons” (Bonotti 2017, 143). Unfortunately, while such a division of labour helps us draw a line between elected and nonelected partisans, it does not help clarify what Bonotti means by “constituents.” If by constituents he means any person who could possibly vote for the party, this explicitly contradicts the requirements he mentions in chapter 4 and opens the possibility for partisan, widely intended, to speak their mind without following public reason constraints (at least in conversations with friends and relatives).⁴ If, on the other hand, by constituents he means people who usually vote for a certain party, then the line between constituent and partisan *as party sympathizer* (Bonotti 2017, 67, 73) becomes much more blurred. Accordingly, partisans would be justified in exchanging reasons based on their comprehensive

³ This is particularly important for Bonotti because it is the only way in which social and political change in public reason is possible. See Bonotti 2017, 135.

⁴ It would also contradict what Bonotti states again in chapter 7: “all partisans, I would like to stress again, have an intrinsic duty to comply with public reason” (Bonotti 2017, 142).

doctrines only between themselves, but never with citizens who are not already known to be party supporters⁵.

The ideal of public reason is therefore quite constraining on partisanship. However, Bonotti does not simply offer public reason as an external constraint on parties and partisanship. In chapter 6, he openly rejects this view, introduced in chapter 4, and defends an intrinsic account, according to which public reason is intrinsic to partisanship, well understood. As Bonotti claims, “partisanship, intended as a distinctive normative category, already involves something like a commitment to the Rawlsian idea of public reason” (2017, 104). In order to argue in favour of such a claim, Bonotti resumes White and Ypi’s analysis of parties as different from factions and agrees that “presenting partial values and demands in a way that takes into account general ends and the common good, therefore, is the distinctive normative attribute of partisanship” (Bonotti 2017, 106). As we have seen, though, White and Ypi leave the common good requirement too indeterminate and, most importantly, too entirely dependent on each parties’ own view of it to have it available as a discriminating criterion between parties and factions. If the common good is anything a party claims it is and if a political grouping only needs to appeal to its view of the common good to count as a party, then all political groupings that contest elections are parties, as long as they do not explicitly defend only partial interests. Furthermore, the contestability of partisan claims means that in each partisan’s eyes adversaries may

⁵ This would in turn make the possibility of social and political change in public reason much more difficult. If partisans must employ only public reasons with all citizens who are not fellow partisans, it is difficult to see how they can introduce new values into the set of shared ones (Bonotti 2017, 135). How could have Green parties planted ideas of sustainability and carbon footprint in the public discourse if they had to restrain themselves to reasons that were *then* public with ordinary citizens?

easily and legitimately appear as factional, because each party must be open to having its claims contested.

The novelty of Bonotti's approach lies in dropping the contestability requirement and calling on public reason to specify the common good requirement. Following Muirhead and Rosenblum, parties can be considered bilingual entities that ensure the achievement of overlapping consensus, by integrating the political conception of justice into citizens' comprehensive doctrines (Muirhead and Rosenblum 2006). But why should parties construe their view of the common good in Rawlsian terms? Not all principled views of what society should look like conform to a reasonable conception of justice. Bonotti replies to this objection by resorting to the idea of well-ordered societies: "In liberal democratic societies [...] a sincere commitment to the common good cannot amount to the promotion of a comprehensive conception of the good as the basis for state legislation, as this would fail to respect many citizens as free and equal persons" (Bonotti 2017, 108). Since these societies are characterised by reasonable pluralism and by a public political culture centred on the idea of society as a fair system of cooperation among free and equal citizens (Rawls 2005, 13-14), imposing rules based on reasons that other citizens cannot accept would amount to failing to respect them as free and equal.

As has been extensively pointed out, actual democratic societies are far less consensual than Rawls's well-ordered societies. Actual democratic citizens tend to disagree more on issues that according to Rawls should only allow for reasonable solutions and the number of unreasonable citizens is steadily surging, contrary to his hope that it would decline over time. This entails that many citizens will support parties that are themselves unreasonable, i.e., that are not willing to provide fair terms of cooperation that other citizens

are reasonably expected to endorse and to acknowledge the burdens of judgment.

Bonotti's answer to this first strain of criticism is that his proposal only applies to well-ordered societies characterised by a shared liberal political culture (Bonotti 2017, 111). A shared political culture provides the necessary evaluative standards based on which parties can formulate their reasons. As a result, parties do not share the same reasons, but they share the standards of what counts as a reason. These standards include firstly what Rawls defines the "guidelines of inquiry: principles of reasoning and rules of evidence in the light of which citizens are to decide whether substantive principles properly apply and to identify laws and policies that best satisfy them" (Rawls 2005a, p. 224). This is what makes reasons accessible: they can be recognised as reasons by all citizens because all citizens share the same evaluative standards⁶. But secondly, and importantly, these standards also include a "weak form of shareability", Bonotti 2017, 116): it is not enough that citizens in a well-ordered society share guidelines of inquiry, they also need to share liberal political values of freedom and equality. As Bonotti states, "accessibility is a *necessary* but not *sufficient* condition for public justification" (*ibid.*), because mere accessibility would allow public support for illiberal policies.

Bonotti's account has two problematic implications. Firstly, since his view only applies to well-ordered societies, it leaves out those decent societies characterised by a shared political culture that is not liberal. As Bonotti tactfully puts it, "It is not unreasonable to claim that in such non-liberal societies, due to the specific character of their political culture, the commitment to the common good that characterizes partisanship as a normative ideal may be consistent with the advancement by political parties of

⁶ For an analysis of the acceptability condition with respect to scientific standards see Bistagnino 2021 in this volume.

political platforms which would be considered unreasonable in liberal democracies” (Bonotti 2017, 107). But if these societies share illiberal evaluative standards, this entails the somehow odd consequence that a liberal party campaigning for freedom and equality in a less than well-ordered society would count as a faction exactly because this party would not provide reasons based on the illiberal political culture of its society.

Secondly, even in a well-ordered society there may be unreasonable citizens, though admittedly few. If these citizens do not share the same liberal values that by definition all their fellow citizens share, why should they follow their same evaluative standards? Bonotti would reply that if a party in a well-ordered society does not abide by the requirements of public reason, it must be considered a faction rather than a proper party. But this so-called faction may well advance a general view of society and not simply sectorial interests. A right-wing populist party does not explicitly promote the interests of a part of society; quite the contrary, it claims to represent the entire people versus powerful elites and often harmless minorities (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017). By their own lights, populist partisans are advancing a conception of the common good, and they may even provide reasons that are accessible to other citizens, even though these are not based on shared liberal values. Think of another case: in a well-ordered society, there may be (few) perfectionist citizens who conscientiously adhere to liberalism but reject its justificatory form (Raz 1986; Enoch 2011; Bistagnino 2018). A perfectionist party would provide good reasons based on values such as autonomy, but they would not provide public reasons, intended as reasons rooted in a *political* conception of justice which is itself freestanding with respect to comprehensive doctrines. If we were to follow Bonotti’s Rawlsian interpretation of the common good requirement, a perfectionist party in a well-ordered society would also count as a faction. Importantly, it would thus count even if it

addressed all citizens with its proposals, in order to convince them of the desirability of its claims, and even if these proposals were more than a mere collection of sectorial interests.

Both consequences seem puzzling. If what matters for a partisan conception of the common good is that it conforms to standards shared in a given society, the transformative potential of partisan agency is seriously threatened, as the case of a liberal party in an illiberal society shows. Accordingly, while parties of a well-ordered society would manage to respect the intrinsic connection between partisanship and public reason, all partisans who find themselves in less than well-ordered societies would either lack a shared set of evaluative standards that define which conception of the common good is acceptable or they would be required to abide by an illiberal set of evaluative standards, thereby being prevented from offering reasons based on liberal values. In these cases, they either are necessarily indistinguishable from factions or they act like factions when they are advocating for freedom and equality. If, on the other hand, what matters is that such a partisan conception conforms to public reason standards, regardless of whether these are shared or not, then Bonotti's interpretation of the common good requirement is certainly normative but hardly seen as intrinsic to partisanship itself. In other words, contrary to what Bonotti claims, public reason ought to be viewed as an extrinsic constraint on partisanship, which should be recognised as valuable only insofar as it conforms to political liberalism.

Conclusion

We have seen that partisanship scholars in political theory insist on providing normative accounts of what parties should be. Accordingly, the descriptive requirement that a political grouping must contest elections to count as a party is not sufficient to

distinguish between a proper party, which is supposedly valuable for democratic institutions, and a faction, which is instead dangerous. While White and Ypi offer a combination of common good and contestability requirements, Bonotti argues in favour of a requirement of common good intrinsically connected to public reason.

Though a political scientist, Giovanni Sartori is not unfamiliar with such a normative understanding of partisanship: he acknowledges not only that parties are different from factions, but that parties acquire a positive connotation because of that difference (Sartori [1976] 2005, 21). Parties are indeed parts of a pluralistic whole: “If a party is not a part capable of governing for the sake of the whole, that is, in view of a general interest, then it does not differ from a faction. Although a party only represents a part, this part must take a non-partial approach to the whole” (*ibid.*, 23). Despite this recognition, Sartori offers a minimal definition of parties in line with political scientists’ traditional view: “A party is any political group that presents at elections, and is capable of placing through elections, candidates for public office” (*ibid.*, 57). While, as he admits, this definition might not “hit on what matters most” (*ibid.*), it is necessary to identify those cases where parties fail to respect their normative vocation by pursuing the sectoral interests of a part instead of the public interest.

In other words, a minimal definition is *descriptively accurate*, insofar as it manages to track those political associations that contest elections without pursuing the common good, and *normatively adequate*, insofar as it manages to draw a line between bad parties and good parties, which pursue the common good. Parties are shown to be valuable only insofar as they meet this further normative desideratum. A minimal definition of parties, therefore, maintains that these are political groupings that contest elections, and a normative assessment of parties allows us to see if and when

parties, intended as groupings that contest elections, are indeed valuable for democratic ends.

This is not simply a terminological dispute concerning the conditions under which it is appropriate to call something a “party”. As we have seen, a normatively loaded definition of parties may be convincing in showing that parties, properly understood, advance conceptions of the common good in a contestable way but fails to offer a full-fledged account of when parties are indeed valuable, or, differently put, when they can be separated by dangerous factions. White and Ypi provide a compelling normative definition of parties. And yet, when we employ this definition to identify proper or valuable parties in the real world, we see that virtually all political groupings can qualify as parties as long as they offer more than an explicit aggregation of sectorial interests. Even if there are good reasons to doubt that “catch-all parties” (Kirchheimer 1966) really aim to elaborate a consistent view of the common good, rather than simply mixing various demands in order to appeal to as many citizens as possible, their programmes often present principled views of society, though admittedly with tenuous ideological consistency. Similarly, a regional party explicitly advances the interests and values of *its* people, but often does so based on a conception of justice and democracy⁷. Additionally, each self-proclaimed party can deny the same status to its adversaries in virtue of the contestability of partisan claims. While this is to a certain extent the inevitable consequence of political debate, I think that adopting such a normative definition of parties entails to problematic drawbacks. Firstly, it does not provide a clear and public distinction between proper parties and

⁷ Think of the Scottish National Party, which defines itself as “centre left and social democratic” (<https://www.snp.org/about/>) and pledges to defend the democratic process (“Stronger for Scotland – The SNP General Election Manifesto”, n.d., 13), while being clearly regional in its constituency.

factions. Second, it loses sight of the possibility that so-called proper parties can put forward a conception of the common good in a contestable way while at the same time also posing a threat for democratic institutions.

A normative assessment of parties calls for the specification of external criteria that allow us to distinguish valuable from dangerous parties. Bonotti's account is a valuable contribution in this respect, because he offers a criterion of discrimination between good and bad parties (or between parties and factions, as he would say): public reason. However, this is also too demanding. Firstly, his view of an intrinsic connection between partisanship and public reason leads to unpalatable conclusions concerning less than well-ordered societies. Secondly, even in a well-ordered society, it is not clear why those few unreasonable partisans who address their programmes to their fellow citizens, accept the contestability of their claims and sincerely offer reasons grounded on *their* conception of justice and the common good should be treated as dangerously factional. The only reason seems to be that partisanship and public reason in well-ordered societies are compatible "as a matter of definition" (Ypi 2019, 466).

A proper distinction between parties and factions requires something less than Bonotti's proposal and something more than White and Ypi's. I think that parties can be viewed as valuable only insofar as they publicly accept the legitimacy of the democratic process. Naturally, this normative requirement is more or less demanding depending on the conception of democratic legitimacy that is endorsed. However, even if we give a quite minimal view of the democratic process, as for instance characterised by the ideals of popular sovereignty, political equality and open and fair discussion (Christiano 1996, 3), such an account has two interesting strengths, I think. Firstly, it is much more inclusive than public reason and may safely be applied even in less than well-

ordered societies. Secondly, this proposal explicitly recognises that political parties, whether they are internally distinguishable from factions or not, have a conditional value with respect to democracy. In fact, this view helps single out those parties that fail to respect democratic ideals even while proposing principled views of the common good and accepting the contestability of their claims. When, for instance, a political party baselessly rejects democratic outcomes as illegitimate or pass laws that facilitate voter suppression, what makes this party a dangerous faction is neither the partial set of interests it advances, nor its inability to live up to public reason constraints. It is, more simply, its rejection of democracy as a legitimate decision-making procedure.

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SYMPOSIUM
PARTISANSHIP AND PUBLIC REASON



PARTISANSHIP AND THE BOUNDARIES
OF THE POLITICAL LIBERAL PROJECT

BY
STEVEN WALL

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Partisanship and the Boundaries of the Political Liberal Project

Steven Wall

In his forceful commentary on Rawls's conception of liberalism, Jürgen Habermas expressed a concern many have had about it. On this conception of liberalism, Habermas charged, too many political questions are settled in advance, leaving insufficient space for real world citizens to determine the character of their political life.

For the higher the veil of ignorance is raised and the more Rawls's citizens themselves take on real flesh and blood, the more deeply they find themselves subject to principles and norms that have been anticipated in theory and have already become institutionalized beyond their control. (Habermas 1995, 128).

On this critique, democratic citizens in a Rawlsian polity debate the policy details of Rawlsian justice. The scope of democratic contestation is severely confined. Does this economic policy or does that one offer the best prospect for realizing the Difference

Principle, for example? In light of Rawls's later work, this critique is less compelling. Since the publication of *Political Liberalism*, Rawls allowed that his favored conception of justice is not the only conception of justice that could legitimate the basic structures of the kinds of societies with which he was concerned. Democratic debate in a Rawlsian society, accordingly, can center on competing conceptions of justice as well as policy proposals for implementing justice.

In his insightful study of political liberalism and partisanship, Matteo Bonotti calls attention to some further and less often noted features of Rawlsian political liberalism that also should not be overlooked in assessing the Habermasian critique. Not only does this form of liberalism not “try to fix public reason once and for all in the form of one favored political conception of justice,” but also it does not try fix the content of public justification, or the forms it can take, once and for all.¹ For to do so would threaten to suppress voices that are entitled to be heard and could lead to improvements in a society's understanding of what justice requires of it.

Given the unpersuasiveness of many of the arguments that Rawls offered in support of his own views about justice and legitimacy, this broadening of the political liberal project is a welcome development. It also makes Bonotti's study of political partisanship a valuable addition to the political liberal project, one that enables the political liberal to offer a fuller reply to the kind of critique that Habermas voiced. In what follows I propose some modifications to the political liberal project that further expand the domain for political partisanship in a politically liberal society. These modifications press up against the boundaries of the project that Rawls himself articulated but are motivated by the underlying

¹ Bonotti 2017, 51-52 (quoting Rawls from “The Idea of Public Reason Revisited”). See also Bonotti's discussion of these ideas *ibid.*, 133-136.

Rawlsian concern to come to terms with the pluralism of modern democratic societies.

I

Partisanship as a normative idea

Before proceeding, I wish to clarify the nature of the inquiry I will be pursuing. In the introduction to his study, Bonotti writes that partisanship in politics “involves a commitment to the common good rather than the sole advancement of merely partial interests” (Bonotti 2017, 5). This characterization helpfully distinguishes partisans from members of interest groups or factions.² Bonotti immediately adds that a commitment to the common good “implies a commitment to public reasoning” (*ibid.*). I agree that a commitment to the common good implies a commitment to public reasoning, but only in an attenuated sense of that pregnant term.

Public reason, I am happy to grant, has its own subject matter. It is reasoning about the public good of one’s society, especially regarding matters of “fundamental justice.”³ In this minimal sense of public reason, a concern for the common good does imply a commitment to public reasoning, since anyone who is concerned with the common good of his society will need to be concerned with the fundamental justice of his society. But partisans in a liberal political society can accept this minimal understanding of public reasoning and reject the raft of further ideas that Rawls packs into

² Note, however, that this characterization papers over a potentially significant tension between partisan political engagement and commitment to common good political deliberation. See Mutz 2006.

³ Some writers claim that ‘public reason’ is a pleonasm, since reason is inherently public (See Finnis 2011, 4.) Even so, if public reason is understood to pick out a distinctive subject matter, then the adjective ‘public’ is informative.

the notion.⁴ Such partisans remain committed to the common good of their society, while rejecting the project of political liberalism. Indeed, they, or those who were interested in explaining their role in politics, could articulate a set of further ideas that inform the activity of public reasoning in a liberal political society that contrast with the set of ideas advanced by Rawls. We could then critically investigate which understanding of public reasoning, the Rawlsian understanding or the envisioned contrasting understanding, has a stronger claim to acceptance by those who were committed to the common good of the liberal societies under consideration.

This investigation is not one that Bonotti pursues, however.⁵ His book is not designed to persuade those who are not already broadly on board with the political liberal project. The soundness of political liberalism is largely assumed in his study. This is fine, as far as it goes. There can be a division of labor between those who seek to defend political liberalism against rival conceptions of politics and those who aim to work out its details on the assumption that it is a sound project. But the reader should be careful not to be misled. The notion of normative partisanship that is articulated by Bonotti does not provide any independent support for political liberalism. When, for example, he claims that “partisanship itself, understood as normative conception, embodies an intrinsic commitment to public reason” and that,

⁴ Rawls articulates five aspects of public reason, only one of which concerns its subject matter. See Rawls 1997.

⁵ Bonotti observes that “there seems to be a discrepancy between the commitment to the common good that defines partisanship and the one that characterizes the ideal of public reason” (Bonotti 2017, 106). Immediately after this observation, he asserts that the common good of a liberal society is “deeply rooted in what Rawls calls the ‘public political culture.’” This assertion either assumes the soundness of the political liberal view or fails to close the noted discrepancy.

accordingly, political parties that reject the constraints of Rawlsian public reason lie “outside the realm of partisanship” and are better viewed as “factions rather than parties,” this may look like an argument for political liberalism. But it is not. For the claim in question can be translated as follows. ‘The specific normative conception of partisanship that is appropriate for political liberalism embodies an intrinsic commitment to public reason in the specific sense understood by political liberals.’ This is a true claim, but it is true by stipulation.

Having noted the nature of Bonotti’s project, I propose to engage with it on its own terms. Setting aside the soundness of political liberalism, I want to consider the role political partisans might play in a recognizably politically liberal model of politics. I will argue that the role for partisanship here is substantially more robust than Bonotti envisions. My discussion is less a critique of his account of political liberal partisanship and more of an invitation for him to extend his ideas further.

II

Pluralism’s dynamic

‘Political liberalism’ can refer to the specific conception of politics that Rawls proposed, or it can refer more broadly to a research program that builds on the key ideas and concerns that animated his post-*A Theory of Justice*-political theory. To some degree, the latter research program is forced upon any friend of political liberalism. Since the Rawlsian texts contain conflicting claims and unresolved tensions, efforts at interpretation invariably shade into efforts at rational reconstruction. The political liberal must decide to be more Rawlsian (or less Rawlsian) than Rawls.⁶

⁶ A point not lost on Bonotti. See 2017, 97.

One of the driving forces, if not the driving force, behind the instability in Rawls's articulation of political liberalism is his embrace of reasonable pluralism. Essential to reasonable pluralism are the "burdens of judgment." These are factors that purport to explain reasonable disagreement as opposed to disagreement simpliciter.⁷ The latter can be explained sociologically, but the former requires a normative account of the limits of reason. The burdens of judgment purport to provide that account, thereby explaining how it is that "conscientious persons with full powers of reason, even after free discussion," can hold opposing views on important matters (Rawls 1996, 58). For Rawls, these factors explain reasonable disagreement over the good. But once the "burdens of judgment" have been introduced to explain the possibility of reasonable disagreement among conscientious people over the good, they exert their own momentum. If the burdens of judgment apply to ideals of the good, why would they not also apply with equal force to conceptions of the right, including conceptions of justice? We know that Rawls felt the force of this question. It led him to propose that the content of political liberalism, including both its conception of public reason and its conception of political legitimacy, is informed not by a uniquely correct conception of justice, but rather by a family of reasonable conceptions of justice (*ibid.*, xlix).

The extension of reasonable pluralism from ideals of the good to conceptions of justice was a major development in Rawls's thought, and it had ripple effects on his larger argument for political liberalism that he did not fully come to terms with. I will mention one example here, which will be relevant to the discussion in later sections of this paper. Rawls's treatment of the

⁷ In Rawls's parlance they refer to "the many hazards involved in the correct (and conscientious) exercise of our powers of reason and judgment in the ordinary course of political life" (Rawls 1996, 56).

inadequacies of a mere constitutional consensus, when contrasted with an overlapping consensus on a political conception of justice, emphasized, among other things, the fact that constitutions require interpretation for their application to new circumstances. In a constitutional system with judicial review, judges will need “to develop a political conception of justice in the light of which the constitution, in their view, is to be interpreted” (*ibid.*, 165). Yet given reasonable pluralism over political conceptions of justice, no consensus on a political conception of justice to guide interpretation of the constitution can be expected. The most that can be expected is an overlapping consensus on a family of such conceptions.

This fact poses a problem for achieving the deeper social unity that an overlapping consensus on political justice supposedly enjoys over a mere constitutional consensus. Rawls was not completely unaware of the problem here, but his response to it was curious. He observed, first, that “different social and economic interests may be assumed to support different liberal conceptions,” and, second, that the less opposition there is among these different interests the more likely it will be that the family of reasonable political conceptions of justice will be narrow (*ibid.*, 167-168). This response is curious because it is entirely sociological. The fact that citizens endorse different reasonable political conceptions of justice in Rawls’s model of politics, however, is explained fundamentally by the burdens of judgment and not merely by the fact that conflicting social and economic interests can lead citizens to favor different conceptions of justice. Thus, while Rawls dimly recognized that reasonable pluralism regarding conceptions of political justice makes trouble for his defense of an overlapping consensus on political justice, he failed to take the full measure of the problem. Internal to Rawlsian political liberalism is a fault-line that threatens to crack its foundations.

I will apply some pressure to that fault-line myself in section IV below, but first I need to bring into view a further key respect in which Rawls, and political liberals who follow him, have failed to appreciate the dynamic of reasonable pluralism. If the burdens of judgment explain why no societal consensus on a single conception of political justice, such as justice as fairness, is to be expected, even under favorable conditions, then, it is fair to ask why we should expect there to be a consensus on a *family* of reasonable political conceptions in such a society. Reasonable citizens can disagree over how wide the family is, or whether there is, as Rawls sometimes intimates, a privileged (i.e. most reasonable) member of the family. This added dimension to reasonable pluralism over political justice is hard to deny, once the burdens of judgment have been allowed to apply to conceptions of justice; and this added dimension introduces further and more radical ripple effects into the Rawlsian model of politics.

III

Contesting civility

Recall that Rawlsian public reason must be open to revision, if it is to avoid the charge that it ossifies current understandings of public reason. This acknowledgment, I now want to argue, discloses how the duty of civility itself can become subject to reasonable controversy. To see how, suppose that two groups of partisans in a society are committed to political liberalism, but disagree over the family of reasonable political liberal conceptions of justice. The first group maintains that the family includes only three conceptions, while the second maintains that the family includes these three conceptions, but also a fourth, PL4. Suppose next that the members of this second group believe that PL4 is the best conception. When they debate matters of basic justice in the

public political forum, they frame their arguments in terms of PL4. From their reasonable standpoint, they honor the duty of civility, for they frame their arguments in terms of one of the reasonable conceptions of justice in the family of such conceptions. By contrast, from the first group of partisan's reasonable standpoint, these partisans violate the duty of civility, insofar as they defend political proposals in terms of a conception of justice that falls outside the family of reasonable political conceptions.

Before discussing the consequences of this kind of situation for political liberal partisanship, it will be useful to say more about how it might arise. Let us stipulate that both groups of partisans in our example are committed to the freedom and equality of persons and they both work up conceptions of justice drawn from the fundamental ideas implicit in the public political culture of their society. In working up these shared ideas into more determinate conceptions of justice they perforce draw on their moral views. Suppose, for example, that the second group of partisans appeal to a moral claim, such as that expressed by the sanctity of human life doctrine, to articulate the content of PL4. This claim is not itself a comprehensive doctrine. It is, these partisans claim, detachable from any specific comprehensive doctrine and fully accessible to common human reason.⁸ The first group of partisans, however, are not persuaded. The moral claim in question, they think, is too closely associated with a specific comprehensive doctrine for it to qualify as a public political reason.

The disagreement envisioned here is a good faith disagreement among partisans committed to debating political questions within the terms of a reasonable political conception of justice. This kind of disagreement is to be expected, given the burdens of judgment. The disagreement has the potential to engender distrust among the

⁸ It is noteworthy that Rawls allowed that a moral doctrine can be comprehensive and accessible to our common human reason (Rawls 1997, 775).

two groups of partisans, thus leading to a breakdown of civil relations among them. But I want to suggest that it need not have this consequence. There is a difference between thinking that one's opponents are mistaken, and thinking that they are not fighting fair, or acting in bad faith. Since the first group of partisans in our example accept the burdens of judgment, they should be open to the possibility that the second group is making a reasonable mistake, and not furtively rejecting the political liberal project. Correspondingly, the second group should be open to the possibility that the first group of partisans are making a reasonable mistake in excluding PL4 from the family of reasonable conceptions of political justice.

The scenario presented thus discloses how trust among reasonable partisans, while likely strained by the type of disagreement depicted, can endure. It also brings into view an additional role for political liberal partisans. On Bonotti's view, partisans, and especially members of political parties, occupy a unique position. They are "the only organizations that operate both in the public political realm and in civil society" (Bonotti 2017, 117). As such, they have "horizontal" responsibilities to rival partisan groups and "vertical" responsibilities to their constituents. The horizontal responsibilities include both honoring the duty of civility in their own political advocacy and "monitoring" the advocacy of other partisans to ensure that they too comply with this duty. The vertical responsibilities include responding appropriately to their constituents' non-public reasons and helping them "to find an internal connection" between those reasons and public reasons. By discharging both sets of duties, political partisans help to bring about the dual justification essential to the stability of political liberalism. Rival partisans both ensure that public reasoning is honored in the public political forum and that their diverse constituents can integrate these public reasons, and

the proposals that they support, into their wider comprehensive doctrines.

It is an attractive picture. But how does it hold up in our example? Since, in our example, the content of the duty of civility is itself the object of reasonable disagreement, the rival parties cannot fully monitor each other, as there is no agreed upon understanding of the boundaries of political liberal justice. The second group of partisans can comply in good faith with the duty of civility, as they understand it, while the first group of partisans can in good faith charge them with factionalism. Relatedly, reasonable disagreement over the boundaries of political liberal justice significantly complicates the vertical task of responding adequately to constituents' non-public reasons. In our example, each group of partisans, working with a different understanding of the set of admissible public reasons, will be driven to forge internal connections between non-public and public reasons among their constituents that cannot be accepted as reasonable integrations by the other side.

To address the problem the example illustrates, the terms of public reason may need to be revised. It is a virtue of Bonotti's account of partisanship that it carves out a legitimate role for political parties to change the content of public reason. This can be done either in a "top-down" fashion, whereby political parties seek to nudge the public political culture in a direction more inclusive of their comprehensive commitments, or in "bottom-up" fashion whereby social movements, to which political parties are accountable, seek to transform the public understanding of shared institutions and practices.⁹ Indeed, on Bonotti's account, political parties are well positioned to perform both of these functions. Applied to our example, the rival partisan groups each could work

⁹ Bonotti's discussion here draws on Flanders 2012.

to overcome the rift in public reason in their society by working to change the public political culture. But notice that, like Rawls's response to the problem generated by reasonable pluralism over justice for constitutional interpretation, this response is too sociological. The rival parties, on this account, believe that if they can just change the public political culture then they can vindicate in public reason what are now considered controversial commitments. But the reasonable controversy over the commitments among those seeking to transform the terms of public reason in their society is a product of the burdens of judgment as well as social facts and history. To adopt a Dworkinian idiom, Bonotti's account of how public reason can change and evolve pays too much attention to 'fit' and not enough to 'justification.'¹⁰ And when due attention is paid to justification, the dynamic of pluralism once again generates trouble.

IV

Two-tier legitimacy

So far, I have argued that the dynamic of pluralism in Rawls's thought puts into doubt both his focus on conceptions of justice as the basis of social unity in a political liberal order and his articulation of a shared commitment to a shared understanding of a duty of civility among the reasonable members of that order. Not surprisingly, these developments point to further modifications in the political liberal project, modifications that impose additional demands on political liberal partisans.

¹⁰ Dworkin 1986, describing the method of constructive interpretation – a method that, when applied to constitutional interpretation, Rawls appeared to endorse (see Rawls 1996, 236-237n33).

Consider the liberal principle of legitimacy. If there is reasonable disagreement among reasonable citizens in a political liberal model of politics over the family of reasonable conceptions of political justice and the content of the duty of civility, then this principle cannot be fully satisfied. In our example imagine that the second group of partisans succeed in establishing PL4 as the conception of justice that informs legislation and constitutional interpretation by the judiciary in their society. These partisans will then be able to accept that the exercise of political power in their society is legitimate. But the same will not be true for the first group of partisans and those they represent. Rejecting PL4 as outside the family of reasonable conceptions of political justice, they must reject the exercises of political power that it justifies as illegitimately sectarian.

At this point some might conclude that the game is up. Either the political liberal project must become dogmatic and insist that reasonable pluralism cannot be extended in the ways we have outlined, or it must allow the nondogmatic extension of reasonable pluralism and countenance the resultant breakdown of the social unity the project aspired to achieve. But I believe a third alternative is available. Recall that reasonable citizens in a political liberal model of politics can judge that their opponents have made a reasonable mistake in ascertaining the boundaries of political liberalism. They can judge them as committed to the project, despite this mistake, as opposed to ruling them out of court as sectarians opposed to the project. This requires trust and good will, but, as I intimated earlier, reasonable citizens, in light of their own recognition of the consequences of the burdens of judgment, ought to be disposed to extend this trust and good will, at least when there is no compelling evidence that their opponents are being insincere. Yet even when the requisite trust obtains, liberal legitimacy will remain elusive. Not all reasonable citizens will be able to accept that the exercise of political power in their society is

“fully proper.” Rawls says very little about the consequences of a judgment that the basic structure of a society is illegitimate, but Bonotti is helpfully more forthcoming. Legitimate political institutions, he claims, impose political obligations on partisans, but “non-publicly-justified political institutions imply no partisan political obligations at all.” (Bonotti 2017, 36). However, when applied to our example, this claim is too strong. To explain why, I need to introduce a supplement to the liberal principle of legitimacy, what I will refer to as Tier-2 legitimacy.

Tier-1 legitimacy is realized when the liberal principle of legitimacy is realized. But Tier-1 legitimacy is not fully realizable in our example. At most, it can serve as an aspiration, much as the full realization of justice is an aspiration.¹¹ True, in our example, the proponents of PL4 can view the exercise of political power in the society as fully proper, but they know that their rivals cannot. How then should we understand the situation of these rivals? My proposal is that they can view the constitution and the democratic process that has been established in their society as legitimate in a different, and weaker, sense. While not viewing it as legitimate according to the liberal principle of legitimacy, they can view it as imposing obligations on them. Specifically, they can view it as imposing obligations on them to work within the system that it establishes, seeking to reform it from within. To adopt a useful term from Philip Pettit, they can view the exercise of political power, and the constitutional decision-making process for authorizing the exercise of that power, in their society as

¹¹ The political liberal might be tempted to say that liberal legitimacy comes in degrees. But what would that mean if not that some, but not all, matters of basic justice/constitutional essentials were legitimate?

“legitimizable,”¹² even if not legitimate. This would suffice for Tier-2 legitimacy.

Tier-2 legitimacy does not require partisans to agree on the criteria of liberal legitimacy for matters of basic justice in a political liberal order. But it does require agreement on the presumptive authority of the order itself. It requires something akin to what Rawls had in mind when discussing a constitutional consensus.

The example I have used to illustrate my points posits only two groups of rival partisans, and it depicts a situation in which one group succeeds in establishing its favored conception of justice. A more realistic example would include a wider plurality of partisan groups and would depict a situation in which the established structure was more of a compromise between their competing views than one in which one side prevails. Rather than viewing the exercise of political power in their society as publicly justified or not, the different partisan groups would need to make piecemeal assessments about the (Tier-1) legitimacy of particular laws and institutions. These assessments plausibly bear on the political obligations that they would have reason to recognize. This contrasts with the account of political obligation presented by Bonotti. On his account, partisan groups have political obligations that are grounded in consent and fair play. In a well-ordered political liberal order, there is no differentiation of obligations among them. But once the terms of the political liberal project itself become the object of contestation, then the account of partisan political obligations needs to be revised. Political measures that were recognized to be Tier-1 legitimate would be viewed as publicly justified and thereby generative of obligations under the principle of fair play. But not so for measures that were not recognized to be Tier-1 legitimate, even though they were

¹² That is, capable of being made legitimate by being treated as if it were worthy of support. Pettit 2012, 139-140.

authorized by procedures that were recognized to be Tier-2 legitimate. To be sure, some of these measures, if not complied with, could threaten to disrupt the functioning of the system as whole. As such, Tier-2 legitimacy would suffice for grounding an obligation of obedience. But plainly not all political measures that were judged to be Tier-1 illegitimate would have this consequence. Accordingly, a political liberal account of politics needs a bifurcated account of political obligation to go with its bifurcated account of political legitimacy.

In closing, I mention one final consequence of attending to the dynamic of pluralism in political liberalism. Recognizing the futility of efforts to secure public agreement on a family of acceptable conceptions of political justice, and the consequent futility of efforts to publicly justify all matters relevant to public justification in their society, partisans might aspire to achieve broad-based, rather than full, public justification for their proposals. This would complicate the horizontal responsibilities of partisans. They would now need to distinguish those partisans who were potential partners, as it were, and with whom they would aspire to reach mutual justification on their proposals, from other partisans, who while remaining political liberal citizens in good standing in their eyes, would not be potential partners. The responsibilities owed to the former group would mirror the horizontal responsibilities Bonotti highlights, but the responsibilities toward the latter would differ. With these latter groups, the partisan responsibilities would encompass fostering and maintaining trust among them, and efforts to reassure them that they are not viewed as unreasonable members of the society despite their reasonable disagreement over the boundaries of political liberalism.

I said at the beginning of this paper that the role of partisanship on my proposal is substantially more robust than that provided by Bonotti. Once the dynamic of pluralism is given its due, partisan

contestation extends to the very terms of the political liberal project. This pushes political liberalism back toward a constitutional consensus, and perhaps even back toward a moralized *modus vivendi*¹³, but the model of politics remains genuinely politically liberal insofar as the reasonable members in it are committed to regulating their political life by a public, political conception of justice and to working respectfully with those who share this commitment, but reasonably disagree over how it can be achieved.

Bonotti's valuable discussion of partisanship in political liberalism goes a long way toward putting to rest the Habermasian critique. I have tried to show that it also provides resources for making the content of political liberalism even more open to democratic contestation than his discussion envisions. Doing so requires a fundamental rethinking of the boundaries of the political liberal project, but one that aims to be more faithful to the deeper motivations that launched it.

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¹³ For discussion of the general idea of a moralized *modus vivendi* see Wall 2013.

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SYMPOSIUM
PARTISANSHIP AND PUBLIC REASON



PARTISANSHIP AND POLITICAL OBLIGATIONS

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Partisanship and Political Obligations

Fabian Wendt

In the first chapter of his wide-ranging book on political parties and political liberalism, Matteo Bonotti defends the claim that partisans have political obligations grounded in their partisanship. Political obligations are moral obligations with a ‘political’ content; prime example is the duty to obey the law.¹ Bonotti argues, first, that some partisans incur political obligations by giving their consent to them when becoming partisans. Secondly, he argues that – at least given certain background conditions – it would be unfair of partisans not to accept the restrictions of their liberty that have to be widely accepted among partisans if the benefits of party politics are to materialize. This is a second source of political obligations. Bonotti doesn’t discuss a third alternative, namely that partisans have political obligations understood as associative obligations owed to their co-partisans.² While I think that there might be something to be said in favor of this third alternative, I am skeptical about

¹ I will use “duty” and “obligation” interchangeably.

² He leaves open whether they do (Bonotti 2017, 12). On associative obligations and partisanship see White and Ypi 2016, Ch. 5.

Bonotti's consent – and fairness – based arguments in favor of partisan political obligations. In the following I will explain why.

I

Partisans' consent

The argument from consent starts with the observation that there are certain “positional duties” associated with partisanship. The positional duties of partisans can be legal duties (either specified by a formal political parties' act or something similar [Bonotti 2017, 9] or as part of the broader legal system, in particular the criminal law, *ibid.*, 11), but they can also be associated with a more informal “ethos” of partisanship. While the content of these positional duties may vary from country to country, Bonotti suggests that their core will typically be the “duty to promote partial demands while complying with the basic values, institutions and procedures for gaining power of the polity in which they operate” (*ibid.*, 9). This duty, among other things, will also imply a general duty to obey the law (*ibid.*, 6, 12). The argument from consent suggests that the positional duties associated with partisanship get *moral force* if and because partisans give their consent to accept them when becoming partisans. The positional duties thereby become proper moral duties.

Bonotti himself acknowledges some limits of this argument. He points out how “partisanship” is a somewhat vague and fuzzy concept, and how formal party members, activists and supporters are partisans to different degrees and in different ways (*ibid.*, 13-14). In the end he seems to suggest that only partisans who formally joined a party have given the consent that is necessary to generate the respective moral duties.

But even that moderate claim is hard to defend. Of course, by formally joining a party one incurs *some* duties, e.g. the duty to pay one's membership fee (when there is such a thing), or the duty not to join another political party – everything one literally signs by joining the party. And it is *possible* that some party somewhere makes new members sign that they will promote partial demands while complying with the basic values, institutions and procedures for gaining power of the polity in which they operate. But most parties do not do that, and so arguably partisans do not give *express* consent to incur the political obligations Bonotti has in mind.

Maybe they *tacitly* consent to promote partial demands while complying with the basic values, institutions and procedures for gaining power of the polity in which they operate (or similar other alleged positional duties)? Tacit consent is tricky, of course. John Simmons has argued that “all consent [...] should be understood to be consent to all and only that which is necessary to the *purpose* for which the consent is given, unless other terms are *explicitly* stated.” (Simmons 1998, 167). What the purpose of an act of consent is can of course not just be decided unilaterally, neither by the person giving consent nor by others. It requires established conventions to determine what the purpose of consent should be taken to be in a certain type of situation. When ordering a meal in a restaurant, for example, one tacitly consents to pay the bill after eating, but one doesn't tacitly consent to be extra-friendly to the waitress, to leave a nice review for the restaurant, to help cleaning the dishes, or to return to the restaurant in the following week. This is the common understanding of what is tacitly implied in ordering a meal; it's part of a convention that is probably accepted more or less worldwide.

Are there conventions about what joining a political party involves, what one tacitly consents to when joining a political party? Maybe there is some vague sense that one commits to some

loyalty toward the party one joins, but my personal impression is that there is not much beyond that. Most people joining a political party do not feel that they violate a moral duty when they do nothing much after joining the party, and neither do parties act as if there's anything wrong with party members who just do nothing.

Why are there no conventions that associate joining a party with the duty to promote partial demands while complying with the basic values, institutions and procedures for gaining power of the polity in which they operate (or similar other alleged positional duties)? The problem, I think, is that the notion of partisanship is fuzzy and vague not just because formal party members, activists and supporters are partisans to different degrees and in different ways, but also because different formal party members are partisans to different degrees and in different ways. Someone who is a Member of Parliament somewhere is a partisan in a different way than a mere nominal party member who never went to any party meeting and never participated in an election campaign. Accordingly, the positional duties associated with partisanship are also much fuzzier than Bonotti suggests. Only specific party offices – for example the position of a party chairman or general secretary – come with reasonably well-specified positional duties. This, in turn, arguably explains why there are no conventions that regard joining a political party as tacit consent to the (alleged) positional duties of partisanship. Consent thus doesn't ground partisan political obligations.

II

Is party politics a cooperative venture?

The second argument for partisanship-based political obligations is a bit more complex. Roughly speaking, the fairness

principle³ says that participants in a cooperative venture have a fairness obligation to accept the restraints that have to be widely accepted if the venture is to produce its benefits, at least when the burdens and benefits of cooperation are fairly distributed, and more generally if it is a *reasonably just* cooperative venture.

Bonotti argues that party politics is a “cooperative venture” in the required sense. He explains that “parties as we understand them (at least in liberal democracies) are normally engaged in the joint task of organizing societal demands into broad and coherent political platforms, and in ensuring that the latter are subject to democratic decision-making (e.g. through elections) and, when successful, translated into government policies” (Bonotti 2017, 16).

There are two claims involved here. One is that political parties have a certain function to play in liberal democracies: They organize societal demands into political platforms, and they have an important role to play in organizing democratic decision-making: They build the resource of political personnel and shape the form of elections, they allow to structure daily parliamentary processes (e.g. the assignment of time for speakers in parliament), they assign responsibility for political decisions, and they allow governments to make politics with stable majorities in parliamentary democracies. The second is that, in fulfilling their function, parties produce certain benefits. This is a separate claim, since something can have a function in producing bad things, too. Think of the function of the trigger of a gun in some destructive shooting. But I guess it is plausible that a well-functioning democratic political system is overall a good thing, and that

³ See Hart 1955, Rawls 1964, Rawls 1971, 111-112.

therefore parties indeed contribute to something beneficial because they help to organize democratic decision-making.

But these two claims taken together are not yet enough to establish that party politics is a “cooperative venture”. It is true that for political parties to fulfill their function some partisan activity is needed, and so there may be some initial plausibility in talking about “cooperation” between partisans. But compare the football example Bonotti mentions himself.⁴ It seems quite implausible to say that football players are engaged in a “cooperative venture” (and that they incur fairness obligations because of that). Bonotti’s response is that party politics and a football match are different, because party politics is not only competitive, but also producing the aforementioned benefits of channeling societal demands into platforms and helping organize democratic decision-making. This response is unconvincing, though. Football matches produce benefits, too. They tend to be good for the health of the players (well, sometimes they aren’t), and they are at the center of public events that bring experiences of joy and community to the fans (well, to many of them). So that can’t be the difference. Note also how it makes sense to ascribe different functions to the different roles that are constitutive of a football match, like the goalkeeper, the defenders, or the referee. They all have a function in the game, and thereby contribute to the production of the benefits of the game. And yet it doesn’t seem like a football match is a “cooperative venture”.

The same, it seems to me, holds for party politics. A real cooperative venture is one where the parties do what they do *in order to* produce the benefits. Cooks in a kitchen preparing a meal are part of a cooperative venture in that sense: they do what they do *in order to* produce the benefits of having a nice meal. The players

⁴ See Bonotti 2017, 15-16. The example is from Horton 2010, 90.

in the football match as well as partisans in a party system at best produce some benefits *as a side effect* of what they're doing. They do not do what they do *in order to* produce the benefits.

This doesn't mean that the function of political parties in liberal democracies is irrelevant to partisans' moral duties, of course. For example, as I argued elsewhere, political parties in multi-party parliamentary democracies (and party leaders in responsible party positions) sometimes have a duty to take responsibility in a coalition government, namely when this is the only feasible reasonable option (Wendt 2020). But this has nothing to do with fairness or party politics as a cooperative venture. It is rather a duty that is grounded in the positional duties of parties as collective agents and of specific offices (like the party chairman) within political parties.

II

Irrelevant obligations

I argued that party politics is not a cooperative venture in the sense needed for fairness obligations to arise. But let us assume, for the sake of argument, that party politics *can* be understood as a cooperative venture in the required sense. This all by itself is not yet enough to establish that partisans have political obligations based in their partisanship. One also has to make plausible that accepting certain restraints on most partisans' liberty is necessary to produce the benefits of the cooperative venture. According to Bonotti, the restraints that are necessary to produce the benefits of the cooperative venture of party politics are the aforementioned moral duties, in particular the duty to promote partial demands while complying with the basic values, institutions and procedures for gaining power of the polity in which they operate: "It is by complying with such positional duties, and thus restraining their

liberty, that partisans make it possible for the abovementioned benefits of party politics to be produced and sustained” (Bonotti 2017, 16).

It is probably true that for political parties to fulfill their function in liberal democracies, most partisans will have to (more or less) comply with the basic values, institutions and procedures for gaining power of the polity in which they operate. But a lot depends on what that means exactly. If it means abstaining from violence and respecting useful laws and regulations, then one could make a case for partisan political obligations (assuming, counterfactually, that party politics can be understood as a cooperative venture). On the other hand, these things are morally required anyway. Everybody ought to comply with useful laws and regulations and to abstain from violence. These seem like perfectly “natural” duties, i.e. duties that are not voluntarily incurred, unlike obligations based on consent or the acceptance of benefits from a cooperative venture. If one thinks of softer “ethos”-based positional duties, on the other hand, it seems less clear that wide compliance is really necessary to produce the benefits of party politics. Parties could fulfill their function to channel societal demands into platforms and help organize democratic decision-making if many partisans did not comply with softer “ethos”-based positional duties, as long as they comply with the stricter duties that are natural duties anyway.

Bonotti may reply that fairness-based partisan obligations are still not irrelevant, even if they are just reproducing what everyone has a natural duty to do anyway. This is because partisans could be said to have a “more *intense and continuous* moral duty to obey the law, that is, a duty that does not allow downtimes or hesitancy” (Bonotti 2017, 21). Again I have doubts. Participants in a cooperative venture have a duty to do their share in what is necessary to produce the benefits, and if they already have a natural

duty to do exactly that, then the fairness-based duty may simply be superfluous, rather than added on top and thus “intensifying” the already existing duty. Compare another example. We all have a moral duty not to kill other people. This is, of course, a natural moral duty, not grounded in a voluntary act like consent or the acceptance of benefits from cooperation. Now when you promise your sister that you will not kill other people, this does not seem to add anything to the original moral duty. A test for the stringency of a duty is to consider how much good would be needed to override or outweigh the duty. Our duty not to kill may very rarely be outweighed, but if *a lot* is at stake (the existence of the planet, for example), it may be. And it doesn’t seem that your duty not to kill is any less easily outweighed if you also promised to your sister not to kill other people. A hypothesis would be that one’s duties in general are not altered (made more stringent or intense or continuous) when natural duties get accompanied by voluntarily incurred duties of the same content.

Things may be different when we look not at a natural duty and a voluntarily incurred duty, but at several voluntarily incurred duties. Take the example of the cooks who are engaged in a cooperative venture. One of them, say, has the fairness-based obligation to prepare the dessert. If that person now promises to his grandma that he’ll prepare the dessert, maybe the stringency of his duty to prepare the dessert *has* been raised, and more good would be needed to outweigh this duty. But, frankly, I am not sure about that either. A counterintuitive implication would be that one could deliberately strengthen one’s duties by giving more and more promises to do the very thing one already has a duty to do, and thereby protect oneself from being recruited to help produce good things that would otherwise be important enough to outweigh one’s original duties. I’ll have to leave this open here.

III

Public or private benefits?

So far I treated the benefits generated by party politics as a public good, i.e. as a good that is non-excludable and non-rival: the good of having a functioning democracy is a benefit to everyone, the “consumption” of it is non-rival, no one can be excluded, and it is the good that party politics contributes to. I also think that this interpretation is in line with Bonotti’s text. At times, though, Bonotti seems to think of the relevant benefits as private goods. He says, for example, that “a party leader who enjoys high political visibility and strong influence upon decision-making (e.g. by being close to elected MPs or being an MP herself) certainly derives greater benefits from her participation in party politics than a party activist” (Bonotti 2017, 17-18). Yet it is hard to see why a party leader should generally benefit more from living in a functioning democracy than anyone else. Of course, he may benefit from his influence as a party leader, but that is not the result of party politics understood as a cooperative venture that is beneficial because parties bundle societal demands into platforms and help to organize democratic decision-making.

At one point, Bonotti considers a well-known objection against fair play arguments with regard to public goods: that one cannot refuse public goods and that one therefore cannot be said to “voluntarily accept” them, which would be necessary for fair play obligations to arise (Simmons 1979, 125-126). Bonotti’s surprising answer is that the benefits associated with party politics *are* excludable, and he explains that “in liberal democracies [...] citizens have the freedom not to formally join or informally support a party” (Bonotti 2017, 18). This suggests, again, that the benefits associated with party politics are those privately enjoyed by partisans, not the public good that the party system supplies in helping to organize democratic decision-making.

So let us assume that it is the private benefits which the partisans enjoy as partisans that are supposed to ground their fair play obligations. The problem with *that* account would be that for an individual partisan's private benefits to be produced one need not everyone else to comply with the ethos of partisanship. One's private benefits rather depend on all kinds of contingencies within one's own party. That a party leader benefits from her influence as a party leader, for example, may depend on her being elected in an inner-party election, which again depends on her being able to give a convincing speech or to spread the right kind of gossip about other candidates, and so on. It is true that one of the background factors that makes it possible for her to enjoy the benefits of being a party leader may also be that at least *some* other partisans in her party are restraining themselves by a partisan ethos. But that need not be so, and it is unclear to what extent such restraint is necessary to produce the private benefits of being a party leader. Moreover, the worries I articulated above about what is to count as a cooperative venture still apply. Of course, hardly anyone restrains himself *in order to* bring about the private benefits the party leader enjoys, and so the activities that together bring about these benefits cannot count as a cooperative venture.

This also means that Bonotti's reply to Simmons's objection does not succeed. In other words, besides my own worries, Bonotti's theory of partisan obligations faces the old objection that the fair play argument does not work with regard to non-excludable benefits, basically because non-excludable benefits cannot be voluntarily accepted. The good of living in a working democracy, to which political parties contribute, *is* non-excludable; no one can willingly accept or refuse the good of living in functioning democracy, and this is why fairness considerations do not arise. Of course, Simmons' objection has not convinced

everyone,⁵ but it indeed seems to be part of the intuition behind the fairness principle that it is unfair to free-ride on the efforts of others, and one can hardly be a free-rider in a blameworthy sense if one is *forced* to free-ride by the circumstances.

Summary

Bonotti has argued that some partisans have political obligations based on consent, and that – at least given certain background conditions – all partisans have political obligations because it would be unfair not to accept the restrictions of their liberty that have to be widely accepted among partisans if the benefits of party politics are to be produced. In this essay I tried to shed doubts on both claims. I argued that there are no conventions that count joining a political party as tacit consent to (alleged) positional duties of partisanship; that party politics is not a cooperative venture in the sense that is required for fairness concerns to arise; that even if it would be a cooperative venture, the resulting fairness obligations would not add anything to the natural duties people already have; and that the benefits of party politics have to be understood as public goods, which is another reason to be skeptical that fairness considerations properly apply (because one cannot refuse public goods).

All this does not mean that partisans have no political obligations, of course. They have the same obligations that all citizens have, and maybe they have some associative obligations owed to their fellow partisans. But within these restraints, partisans should be taken to be at liberty to pursue their partisan goals in whatever way they see fit. It is only partisans in specific party offices (party chairman, for example) who have well-specified

⁵ Some think that voluntary acceptance is not necessary for fairness obligations to arise. See, e.g., Arneson 1982, Klosko 1992, 48-54.

positional duties and gave consent to follow them when accepting the office.

I will end with a few remarks on how my argument affects what Bonotti does in the following chapter (Chapter 2), which still deals with partisan obligations. In that chapter he argues that the political obligations grounded in the principle of fair play help reduce the potential conflict between citizens' political obligations on the one hand and values and norms associated with their comprehensive doctrines on the other hand. This is because *if* the framework of party politics is *just enough* for fairness obligations to arise at all, then partisans will have stronger political obligations than other citizens, but these stronger obligations “will be obligations to obey state laws that are in general more sensitive to their needs, values, and interests” (Bonotti, 2017, 33). If my criticisms in this essay are sound, then partisans will *not* have stronger political obligations, of course, and in that sense Bonotti's argument from Chapter 2 would be undermined. On the other hand, one could probably restate his argument without relying on the claim that partisans have stronger political obligations than others. What is crucial, in the end, is that a just framework for party politics will be more sensitive to everyone's needs, values, and interests, and *this* is what could be said to reduce the tension between citizens' political obligations on the one hand and values and norms of their comprehensive doctrines on the other hand, no matter if partisans' political obligations are stronger than those of other citizens or not.

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SYMPOSIUM
PARTISANSHIP AND PUBLIC REASON



PUBLIC REASON ALONE
WON'T SAVE THE PARTIES

BY
FABIO WOLKENSTEIN

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Public Reason Alone Won't Save the Parties

Fabio Wolkenstein

Matteo Bonotti's *Partisanship and Political Liberalism in Diverse Societies* (henceforth *PPL*) is without doubt one of the major contributions to the new political theory of parties and partisanship. *PPL* is an insightful and engaging book about political parties that is written in the language that the majority of contemporary (anglophone) political theorists finds meaningful and appealing: the language of John Rawls's *Political Liberalism* (henceforth *PL*). The book's primary aim is to show that *PL* is able not just to accommodate parties, but that parties are indispensable for the effective functioning of public reason – which is a core concern of Rawlsian and post-Rawlsian political thought. These issues have been widely neglected up until this point. With the sole exception of Russell Muirhead and Nancy Rosenblum, I am not aware of any other scholar who has unpacked and examined the role of parties in *PL*. Yet, as Muirhead and Rosenblum argue, reflecting on “[t]he place of parties and partisanship” in *PL* is intellectually fruitful, as it “illuminates the intimate connection between Rawls’s ideal theory and the everyday politics that is the focus of political science” (Muirhead and Rosenblum 2006, 101). It helps clarify,

that is, what one of the most influential normative political theories of our time has to say about real political struggles, and what normative resources that theory offers for criticising and re-imagining real-world political practices and institutions.

As I have already indicated, the idea of public reason plays a central role in *PPL* – and quite naturally so, given how prominently that notion figures in *PL*. The book’s theoretical centrepiece is the unconventional argument that the internal logic of partisanship, understood as a normative ideal, and the demands of public reason are not conflicting but *mutually reinforcing*. Sensing perhaps that many readers will find this idealised interpretation of partisanship problematic or even outright unpersuasive, Bonotti also proposes quite drastic institutional fixes to ensure that parties actually comply with the normative demands of public reason. For instance, Bonotti toys with the idea of legally enforcing the “duty of civility” – that is, citizens’ “moral ... duty to explain to one another those fundamental questions how the principles and policies they advocate and vote for can be supported by the values of public reason,” to exhibit a “willingness to listen to others,” etc. (*PL*, 217) – by introducing mechanisms to “monitor party manifestoes and programmes and require parties to expunge from them any references to comprehensive doctrines” (*PPL*, 75). Bonotti here departs from Rawls, who thought that the duty of civility should *not* be legally enforceable – but perhaps the master himself would have reached the same conclusion had he studied parties more closely?

At any rate, quite unsurprisingly, early critics of *PPL* noted some of the limitations of the book’s strongly idealised conception of partisanship as well as the assumed connection between that ideal of partisanship and political liberalism. For example, both Carlo Invernizzi-Accetti and Ulrich Wagrandl have observed that conceptualising parties as those agents who are internally driven to

present their policies in terms of public reason problematically leads *PPL* to engage only very superficially with the innumerable real-world parties that do *not* live up to this ideal.¹ Consequently, the book fails to address one of the most pressing challenges facing liberal democracy: the rise of what is typically called “right-wing populism.”² Lea Ypi, in turn, has suggested that an idealised account of partisanship is attractive only when its link with political liberalism is severed. Accordingly, the problem with Bonotti’s argument for the compatibility of partisanship and public reason is that it presents partisanship as necessarily embedded in, and contributing to the stability of, political liberalism, a particular institutional regime type that partisans in fact might (and, in Ypi’s view, *should*) want to overcome.³ Finally, I have argued that a more elaborate empirical understanding of the incentives that make parties comply with the norms of Rawlsian public reason is essential for successfully delivering on the promise of bringing *PL* closer to real-world politics; precisely because many will be inclined to dismiss as unpersuasive the idealised interpretation of the practice of partisanship, a more phenomenological account of partisanship would better serve Bonotti’s purpose (see Wolkenstein 2018).

My aim in this short essay is to add a further yet related concern to this list of worries about employing an idealised conception of parties. This is that Bonotti’s deliberate refusal to bring his idealised conception of parties into a closer dialogue with

¹ Cf. Invernizzi-Accetti 2020; Wagrandl 2020.

² As Muirhead and Rosenblum (2006, 101) note, *PL* more generally rules out “small parties” that “appeal to particular interests rather than abstract principles” as well as “the sort of great parties whose aim is to advance religious, philosophical, or moral doctrines in public political arenas” – which is to bar quite a few (not necessarily democratically suspect) parties in most representative democracies.

³ Ypi 2019.

analyses of the empirical development of party democracy – Bonotti explicitly argues that we should resist the “empiricization of the idea of the party” (*PPL*, 105) – risks making us insensitive to the possibilities of realising (or coming closer to the realisation of) his ideal of parties. My primary focus will not be the ideal that stipulates an intrinsic connection between the norms of partisanship and those of public reason, however, but the further idealising assumption that parties are rooted in the “background culture” of civil society, where citizens’ comprehensive doctrines and unconsidered preferences are at home. As I want to argue, in reality parties are largely disconnected from the “background culture,” having replaced traditional and participatory forms of political intermediation via membership organisations and intra-party democracy with a form of representation that centres on “visual attendance by an indistinct audience of viewers.”⁴ Reflecting on these empirical trends reveals, first, that parties that are decoupled from civil society can still meet the demands of public reason; and second, that any attempt to reconnect parties with civil society will revolve around practices and institutions that, even in Bonotti’s view, cannot be expected to meet the demands of public reason.

I

Bonotti’s idealised conception of parties and partisanship

In *PPL*, Bonotti makes two central idealising moves as far as parties are concerned. He establishes:

⁴ Urbinati 2015, 481; also see Manin 1997, 218-33. This also involves that they avoid as far as possible any engagement with critical media, a problematic issue that I cannot engage with here due to space constraints.

1. **The “discursive” ideal:** In virtue of their internal functioning logic, partisans present their policies in terms of public reason, appealing to general principles and advancing some conception of the public good: “presenting partial values and demands in a way that takes into account general ends and the common good” is “the distinctive normative attribute of partisanship” (*PPL*, 105).
2. **The “organisational” ideal:** Parties are at home in both what Rawls calls the “background culture” of society, viz. all the institutions and social relations that are outside the “basic structure” *and* the “public forum.” Because of that, parties can connect the two spheres in a unique fashion, providing “the ideal locus in which comprehensive doctrines,” which populate society’s background culture, “can be related to a political conception of justice and to public reason” (*PPL*, 122).

As I have already noted, my main focus in the following is on (2); however, since Bonotti frames (1) and (2) as two foundational aspects of his broader idealised conception of parties, I will also touch on (1). The first task in line is to get a better sense of what it might mean to say that parties are at home both in the background culture and the public forum. This is necessary to understand the degree to which this ideal is out of sync with reality. To see what is involved in (2), then, it is helpful to turn to Muirhead and Rosenblum, on whose argument Bonotti heavily draws. In their view, what is unique about parties is that,

They are both associations with roots in civil society and quasi-official actors in the electoral process and in government. They

are the concrete manifestation of both the existence of two domains and their connection. The purpose of parties is to bridge these spheres. One way in which they bridge spheres is to provide an institutional framework for political engagement by nonpublic associations. Parties have as a principal purpose the creation and organization of partisans, often recruiting from the membership of other groups (Muirhead and Rosenblum 2006, 104).

This description of parties evokes the familiar image of a “golden age of party democracy.”⁵ Most commentators locate this “golden age” in the post-war era, where “cultural and political liberalization, development of associative networks, politicization of cleavages and societal mobilization, all combined” to produce ideologically distinct and socially rooted mass parties (Ignazi 2017, 123). Social democratic and confessional parties embodied this particular type of party, and they remain to be seen by many as the ideal of a party that delivers on the most fundamental promises of representative democracy: giving citizens, “not as activist individuals but as members of collective interest groups,” a voice in politics as well as ensuring that they receive “at least their fair share of the political offices, bureaucratic posts and material benefits that lay within the gift of the state.”⁶ These parties provided strong intermediary structures between society and the

⁵ I have serious reservations against this notion, since it tends to be invoked without any sensitivity to the hierarchies of class, gender and race that gave the post-war democratic order its strength. On this, see e.g. Conway (2020).

⁶ Conway 2004, 83-84. I note in passing that, according to Muirhead and Rosenblum (2006, 101), *PL* actually turns out to be “hostile to ... parties based on permanent cleavages of class or status,” and thus to the traditional mass parties, since these parties “stand in effect for different societies” – but though the post-war mass parties were indeed based primarily on class and religious cleavages, they all accepted constitutional democracy as a shared institutional scheme of cooperation.

state that were sustained by large membership organisations (which habitually had a party newspaper as a shared channel of intra-party communication). In this way, they created a robust institutionalised linkage between the “background culture” and the “public forum” in the way described by Bonotti and Muirhead and Rosenblum.

II

From party democracy to “direct representative democracy”

Now, it has been extensively documented that political parties already in the first two decades after World War Two underwent significant transformations; the “golden age of party democracy” was a relatively short period. These transformations are typically framed in terms of the “mass party” being gradually replaced by the “catch-all party” (cf. Kirchheimer 1966). While the former had, as it were, a “natural” constituency (which usually was a more or less clearly-defined societal group, e.g., the working class, Catholics, etc.), the latter was a “more competitive model that tried to undo the old emphasis on strong representational links, seeking to ... win often short-term and contingent support far beyond the limits of their once pre-defined constituencies” (Mair 2013, 82). A crucial enabling factor were here the new communication technologies that became more and more widespread in the late 1950s, in particular television. Through television, party leaders could all of a sudden “appeal directly to the public at large and address an audience much larger than their own constituency,” which made them “think in more general and all-encompassing terms rather than in partisan terms,” and made them eventually become “indifferent to the members’ identification with the party” (Ignazi 2017, 134). The result was a more personalised politics, in which political leaders enjoyed ample freedom from horizontal (e.g., party bodies like central committees) and vertical (the party

membership) constraints, and increasingly bypassed whatever institutionalised linkage to society’s “background culture” their party previously had.

Bernard Manin has famously suggested that this relatively early development already marks the beginning of the end of party democracy. What has eventually arisen in its place is an “audience democracy,” where successful political leaders tend to be “media experts” who shrewdly use mass media to “communicate directly with their constituents without the mediation of a party network” (Manin 1997, 220). Television, Manin argues, gives the link between representatives and represented a new “face-to-face character,” in that it enables unmediated *one-way communication* between leaders and the public as a whole – at the expense of pre-existing channels of *two-way communication* within the party that used to connect the party to its constituencies (such as the aforementioned party newspapers, which eventually have all but disappeared) (*ibid.*). A party’s capacity to form and sustain a “bridge” between the “background culture” and the “public forum” accordingly depends on its leaders’ capacity to credibly present themselves as being rooted in civil society and responsive of citizens’ demands and concerns.

The rise and near-omnipresence of social media in the early twenty-first century has equipped parties, or, more accurately, their leaders and key officials, with even more effective means to communicate in a direct, unmediated fashion with the wider public, as well as to make their communicative acts carry an aura of authenticity. The most well-known example of this is probably the former President of the United States, who was notorious for his use of Twitter (until his account was suspended in early 2021). Well-aware that it provides a unique tool for unmediated one-way communication with mass publics, Trump said about Twitter: “This is my megaphone. This is the way I speak directly to the

people *without any filter*” (quoted in Woodward 2018, 205). However, there are innumerable other examples of politicians using social media such as Twitter or Facebook as primary or preferred means of diffusing political messages. In search of a language to describe this increasingly pervasive phenomenon, Nadia Urbinati has coined the term “direct representative democracy,”

wherein directedness pertains to the visual and communicative so as to give birth to a live broadcasting representative democracy rather than direct participation, according to the classical claim and meaning of political autonomy. The web makes central ordinary citizens’ influence or visual and interacting conversations, but not their authorizing power in decision-making (Urbinati 2015, 480).

Thus, the central role of the “visual and communicative” that Manin already singled out as one of the defining features of “audience democracy” in the age of television and radio, has been further reinforced in the age of social media. In addition to creating the illusion of horizontal communication between more or less equal citizens (for one can “like” and comment on the president’s or prime minister’s Facebook posts just as one can “like” or comment on, say, one’s aunt’s cat pictures), a significant advantage of social media is that parties have considerable control over the messages they diffuse. There is no need to rely on potentially unreliable journalists to deliver a message to the public; and one can delete exceedingly critical citizen comments (esp. on Facebook) and instantly publish reactions or counter-arguments where necessary. Lastly, one must not forget that social media also allows party elites to cultivate in a unique fashion an image of “normality” and “down-to-earthness,” for example by posting

pictures or videos of their everyday life (e.g. cleaning their homes, picking up the kids from school, walking the dog, etc.). When this is well done, it can generate a much stronger sense of proximity and immediacy than televised images that were curated or edited by journalists. All the while party members who establish face-to-face contacts with possible voters at the local level, and serve as a transmission belt between the party's constituencies and upper organisational echelons, become more and more irrelevant.

Scholars studying these more recent transformations of political parties tend to concentrate on “populist” leaders like Trump or unconventional parties like Podemos or the Movimento 5 Stelle. The latter are known for relying more extensively than traditional parties on unmediated communication via the internet, being animated by the twin impulses of wanting to overcome party democracy in its present form and profoundly mistrusting the mainstream media (Beppe Grillo, one of the founders of the M5S, routinely complained on his blog that professional journalists are part of *la casta*, the ruling class). Yet, it must be borne in mind that the phenomenon of “direct representative democracy” is by no means limited to new parties with anti-establishment appeal and radical political goals. To cite just one example, the Social Democratic Danish prime minister Mette Frederiksen has become known for using Facebook and Instagram as primary means of communication. Whether it is key political speeches on such pressing topics as the management of the Covid-pandemic, or videos of her doing the washing up while singing along to a hit by the 80s Danish pop stars Dodo and the Dodos, Frederiksen's main communication channel are social media. Q&A with journalists tends to be limited to well-orchestrated press briefings, and intra-party debate with the wider membership is all but avoided. This led some critics to draw unflattering parallels with Trump:

[Frederiksen] and her ministers communicate with their voters on Facebook and Instagram in simple form and without being challenged [by critical voices]. And here it is being signalled that those, who are not with the government, in fact are opponents of the broader national project that is good for everyone. This is populism with a Trumpian dimension (Krasnik 2020).

Whatever one thinks of this judgment, it seems clear that this communication strategy makes much of the traditional work of party members superfluous as described above, concentrating even more power in the hands of the leadership.⁷

It might be objected that this is not a necessary implication of parties' intensified use of digital communication channels. A central aim of parties like Podemos and M5S, it might be said, was to connect party leaders to the wider membership and citizenry in an unmediated fashion, thus enhancing the parties' capacity to form a bridge between the "background culture" and the "public forum." However, it would be naïve to think that this promise has ever been fulfilled (or that the respective party leaders ever seriously attempted to fulfil it). As Paolo Gerbaudo demonstrated in his comprehensive study of Podemos and M5S, "the opening at the party's bottom" was in both cases "accompanied by an increasing concentration of power in the hands of the charismatic party leader ... the reality of the online democracy seen in these formations and their 'participatory platforms' corresponds [rather] to ... a 'reactive democracy' manifested in the dominance of forms of 'passive democratic engagement' that are constantly retro-alimented by the leadership's top-down intervention" (Gerbaudo 2019, 17). In sum, even those parties that ostensibly aimed to re-

⁷ As Mariager and Olesen (2020, 329) have recently noted about the Danish social democrats, "membership participation has been eliminated to a matter of paying subscriptions and hanging up posters on lamps."

establish a link between the party and civil society have eventually empowered party elites at the expense of the grassroots.

III

Implications for Bonotti's theory

We can safely conclude from examining these arguments that *PPL* is operating with an ideal of socially rooted parties that is dramatically out of sync with the organisational reality of contemporary party democracy. This does of course not mean that the ideal itself is unappealing: in fact, neither Bonotti's "discursive" ideal (1) nor his "organisational" ideal (2) are unappealing ideals.⁸ But I think it is problematic that Bonotti in *PPL* makes use of a strategy of theorising that scarcely brings his ideals of parties and partisanship into a conversation with the "real world" of party democracy, *as if* the identification and justification of attractive normative ideals would relieve the theorist from the pressure of reflecting on the implications of possible dissonances between ideals and reality, and on the conditions under which ideals could be realised. The refusal to confront these issues in a more systematic fashion is not only detrimental to *PPL*'s promise of bringing Rawls's *PL* into "everyday politics." It also weakens the book's power to guide our actions towards the realisation of the proposed ideals of parties and partisanship. In the remainder of the paper, I want to do some of the work that I would like to have seen done in *PPL* and offer some thoughts on the consequences of the above-discussed transformation of parties for Bonotti's theory and the capacity of contemporary parties to live up to the ideals laid out in *PPL*.

⁸ Though there may be good reasons to object to the broader theoretical architecture in which Bonotti embeds (1), see Ypi 2019.

The first thing to note is that parties that have severed their ties to society's "background culture," and whose leaders largely bypass intermediary bodies like the traditional media and indeed their own party organisation, clearly fail to meet ideal (2), but can in principle meet ideal (1). In other words, though they are no longer providing (in Muirhead and Rosenblum's words) a meaningful "institutional framework for political engagement by nonpublic associations" (Muirhead and Rosenblum 2006, 104) they may well be able to present their aims and policies in a way that is compatible with the requirements of Rawlsian public reason. This has in fact already been intimated by scholars like Kirchheimer and Manin, who observed that the capacity of party leaders to speak to the public as a whole via new electronic media also transformed their mode of communication: instead of appealing to a particular group that is the party's core constituency (the working class, Catholics, etc.), they increasingly began offering arguments that were meant to resonate more widely. And even contemporary critics of "direct representative democracy" seem to acknowledge that one can be a socially disconnected party leader who cultivates a self-image of being the primary representative of the people by way of "direct and permanent communication with the audience" via social media (Urbinati 2019, 120) and *still* live up to norms of public justification. Recall in this connection that the above-cited critical journalist, who accused the Danish prime minister of being a populist, also remarks that the prime minister is framing her policies as contributing to a "broader national project that is good for everyone" (Krasnik 2020). Of course, one might plausibly question whether the proposed policies are *really* good for everyone. Yet, as two of the main architects of the "discursive" ideal of parties remind us, "at stake is not whether, in the eyes of the observer, a political grouping reliably does serve the public good ... but whether it seeks to do so given the kinds of argumentation it pursues" (White and Ypi 2011, 384).

In short, while the “discursive” (1) and “organisational” ideals (2) are in *PPL* conceived as interconnected, in reality they may well come apart. Parties may well live up to (1) without even coming close to living up to (2). If this is correct, it seems we have two options. We might:

- a. Accept that the age of socially rooted parties has passed, and content ourselves with the fact that being disconnected from the “background culture” need not impair parties’ capacity to appeal to general principles and advance some conception of the public good.

- b. Or, resist the temptation of sacrificing the “organisational” ideal as long as the “discursive” ideal is met, and invest our intellectual energies in asking how we can re-establish the link between parties and society’s “background culture.”

On the face of it, option (a) appears attractive because it promises relief from the difficult task of having to reconnect parties with society, whilst allowing us to remain committed to the fundamental Rawlsian concern of compliance with public reason norms. Bonotti’s analysis can however illuminate why renouncing our commitment to the “organisational” ideal of parties (2) may have considerable costs. For as Bonotti rightly argues, parties must be somewhat rooted in the “background culture” of society in order for the “division of justificatory labour” between parties and citizens to function effectively. By this, he means that two-way communication between citizens and partisans that is relatively unconstrained by public reason norms is a precondition for avoiding that the reasons that parties introduce into the public

sphere violate the constraints of public reason (see *PPL*, 135-138). Put differently, without being able to “hear the demands of their constituents” and respond to them, parties might end up justifying their aims and policies with arguments that are out of touch with “widely endorsed political values” (*PPL*, 136). A familiar example are arguments from necessity that rule out that there could be any legitimate alternative to a proposed course of action. Such arguments reduce public justification to its most primitive form, invoking the unavoidability or inevitability of certain decisions while avoiding references to the value choices that lie behind them (White 2015, 307). It is no coincidence that these justificatory strategies are often linked to a form of partisanship that is out of touch with citizens’ actual demands (Katz and Mair 2009, 758).

To repeat, there is no reason to think that parties that lack a firm footing in the “background culture” cannot meet the demands of public reason; if Kirchheimer and Manin are right, then being decoupled from society can even enhance parties’ capacity to conform to public reason norms. The normatively important point that one can glean from Bonotti’s discussion is simply that there remains a *risk* that parties violate public reason if their communication with the citizenry is limited to one-way communication through the channels of social media, where citizens feel like they can communicate directly with leaders but actually only are the passive recipients of political messages. *If* we think, like Bonotti, that we should guard against such possible failures of parties to comply with the norms of public reason, *then* we have good reasons to try to re-establish the link between parties and society’s “background culture” in line with option (b). Choosing option (a) might mean jeopardising parties’ capacity to live up to the “discursive” ideal (1).

But if the way forward is to make parties start “abandoning the *citadelle* in which they are entrenched, recasting societal linkages,

relinquishing all their privileges [and] immersing themselves again in society” (Ignazi 2017, 264), as Piero Ignazi colourfully puts it, what needs to be done? Clearly, any attempt to cultivate parties’ long-abandoned links to the “background culture” must involve creating spaces where party members (of which there are not many left) and ordinary citizens can engage in meaningful two-way communication with party officials, expressing in an open and unconstrained fashion their concerns and policy priorities, and holding party officials to account by demanding reasons for their actions.⁹ To achieve this, parties arguably must be open to experiment with new forms of collective agency, such as the “party-based movements” Momentum and Our Revolution, which have recently sprung up in the UK and US, within the Labour Party and the Democratic Party, respectively (Muldoon and Rye 2020). Looking to these movements for inspiration is instructive, for whatever one thinks of them politically, they have managed to mobilise incredible energies by creating new opportunities for citizens to express their demands in the context of established parties. But note that they have also come to articulate large-scale transformative ambitions that sit uneasily with the measured liberal partisanship Bonotti envisions. Operating in a realm where public reason constraints are (and, as Bonotti allows, *should be*) inactive, and channelling grievances that the parties have hitherto ignored, their avowed goal was to capture the party and radically change society as a whole (*ibid.*, 495-497).

This points to a potential paradox. Trying to re-anchor parties in the background culture of society in order to make sure that they do not violate public reason norms might in practice unleash forces that eventually come to violate public reason norms because they demand an altogether different society; as Muirhead and Rosenblum emphasise, “political liberalism is hostile to ... parties

⁹ I argue this point in more detail in Wolkenstein 2020.

arising from rival fundamental claims about the best regime. They contest to much. Political liberalism presupposes that these questions have been settled.”¹⁰ What we might get, in other words, are parties that live up to the “organisational” ideal (2) but fall short of conforming to the “discursive” ideal (1) that presupposes that they are “essentially committed” to liberal society (*PPL*, 137). One way of resolving this issue would be to follow Ypi and drop the notion, central to *PPL*, that partisans can only comply with the demands of public reason if they are committed to a Rawlsian liberal society.¹¹ But even if we – because of our faithfulness to Rawls or satisfaction with the status quo – are unwilling to go down that route, it seems we have to accept that public reason alone can’t save the parties.

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¹⁰ Muirhead and Rosenblum 2006, 101.

¹¹ Ypi 2019.

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SYMPOSIUM
PARTISANSHIP AND PUBLIC REASON



PARTISANSHIP AND POLITICAL LIBERALISM:
FURTHER THOUGHTS ON PUBLIC REASON,
POLITICAL OBLIGATION, AND DEMOCRATIC
LINKAGE

BY
MATTEO BONOTTI

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Partisanship and Political Liberalism:
Further Thoughts on Public Reason, Political
Obligation and Democratic Linkage

Matteo Bonotti

I am extremely grateful to the contributors to this symposium for their thoughtful commentaries on my book *Partisanship and Political Liberalism in Diverse Societies*. In this paper, I provide a critical reflection on the issues they raise with regard to some of the key aspects of my analysis, focusing especially on political obligation, public reason and democratic linkage.

Response to Enrico Biale

In his attentive commentary, Enrico Biale advances two key criticisms against my account of parties and partisanship. First, my account undermines pluralism and excludes radical perspectives such as progressivism and libertarianism. Second, it neglects the agonistic dimension of politics. I will consider them in turn.

According to Biale, “[my] perspective entails a problematic understanding of parties and partisanship that limits political

pluralism and curtails democratic conflict” since “the Rawlsian framework represents only one possible interpretation of the ideals [of freedom and equality] and not necessarily the most inclusive one” (Biale 2021, 20). For example, Biale argues, political liberalism excludes progressivism – which challenges asymmetries of power and advances egalitarian goals – and libertarianism – which assigns priority to self-ownership and economic freedoms, and challenges distributive policies. I would like to contest this conclusion.

First of all, Biale’s line of argument seems to presuppose that political liberalism entails a specific and narrow understanding of distributive justice, i.e. the one presented and defended by Rawls (1999a) in *A Theory of Justice*. Yet, as I have argued elsewhere (Bonotti 2019), this assumption should be challenged. It is plausible to argue that the fact of reasonable pluralism and the burdens of judgment concern not only the kinds of religious and ethical comprehensive doctrines often central to debates on political liberalism and public reason but also views about socio-economic justice. While Rawls never developed his political liberalism in this direction, he does acknowledge that in diverse liberal democratic societies, principles of social and economic justice should not be entrenched in a constitution and thus insulated from democratic debate, since people tend to disagree about them more than they do about basic rights and liberties such as religious liberty, free speech or freedom of association (Rawls 2005, 230). In my book (Ch. 3), I draw on this point to argue that Rawls’s political liberalism allows much more scope for democratic contestation on these issues that many critics of political liberalism might often assume. This democratic contestation will include, among others, libertarian views that emphasize the importance of classical liberal property rights (e.g. Tomasi 2012) and progressive views that defend the idea of social rights (e.g. Fabre 2000). These views interpret and rank shared political values such as freedom and equality in different ways which, however, can be potentially

consistent with the accessibility view of public reason that I embrace in my book (Bonotti 2019, 499). For this to be possible, however, and contrary to what authors such as Tomasi and Fabre argue, none of these rights should be constitutionalized and insulated from the democratic contestation of which parties are key agents, precisely because, as Rawls himself observes, there is significant disagreement about these issues. Entrenching these rights in constitutional charters would entail neglecting those political values (e.g. other rights and liberties) that are not granted constitutional protection, thus resulting in an unreasonable balance of political values that contravenes the demands of public reason (Quong 2011, 207).

Furthermore, Biale's critique overlooks an important aspect which perhaps I do not sufficiently stress in my book. The political liberal framework in which parties, in my idealized account, operate, is one that corresponds to what Rawls calls "a well-ordered constitutional democratic society" (1999b, 573), i.e. a society in which all citizens endorse and are willing to comply with the same liberal democratic principles of justice, which are reflected in basic social institutions. Yet, most if not all real-world societies are far from matching that ideal. In these societies it is possible, in fact it may often be desirable and necessary, for parties to advance political agendas that will facilitate a transition towards a well-ordered political order. This will allow scope for progressive parties that challenge power asymmetries and socio-economic injustice.

The second main criticism raised by Biale against my account concerns my alleged lack of focus on the antagonistic dimension of partisan politics. According to Biale,

[t]he adversarial process that characterises interpartisan relationships aims not at analysing and revising political proposals in order to identify the best alternative according to some standard of correctness that is external to the preferences of citizens but at winning the argumentative struggle and defending the partisan viewpoint to which someone is committed. This form of partisan antagonism does not simply require that partisans support a certain perspective but that they limit the alternative perspective that is incompatible with theirs. Within this context, partisans aim at defining a language or values that constitute the common ground on which citizens develop the arguments that are most favourable to the values to which the partisans are committed (Biale 2021, 23).

In order to accommodate partisan antagonism, Biale (*ibid.*, 24) suggests expanding and modifying the political liberal framework central to my book based on three criteria: a) “justifiable antagonism” (advancing policy proposals grounded in a distinctive partisan horizon); b) “democratic loyalty” (a commitment to democratic institutions and ideals); and c) “intellectual honesty” (accepting that one’s perspective is not the only one, while remaining epistemically partial). I do not have any objections to b) and c). Democratic loyalty is clearly central to political liberalism and to the idea of respecting other citizens as free and equal. And so is intellectual honesty. Indeed accepting that one’s perspective is not the only one is central to the Rawlsian idea of reasonableness: in order to be reasonable, we need to accept the “burdens of judgment”, i.e. “the many hazards involved in the correct (and conscientious) exercise of our powers of reason and judgment in the ordinary course of political life” (Rawls 2005, 56). Empirical evidence is often complex and can be interpreted in different ways, and people assign different weight to considerations concerning empirical and moral matters. This is particularly clear when it

comes to moral, social and political issues: even when we agree on the importance of certain values, principles and political goals, we may disagree regarding which of them should be prioritized. But the burdens of judgment also affect the way in which people evaluate scientific evidence (Badano & Bonotti 2020; Barnhill & Bonotti 2022). Hence we often witness disagreement on scientific matters not only among citizens in general but also among members of the scientific community. As long as that disagreement is a genuine result of the burdens of judgment rather than of flawed methods or “gross epistemic error” (Vallier 2014, 106), being epistemically partial – e.g. being committed to a certain interpretation of evidence – is not in tension with political liberalism. For these reasons, I also do not have any objections to Biale’s point that “[p]artisanship entails an adversarial relationship that does not require to assign the same value to every proposal” (Biale 2021, 22). It is precisely because partisans committed to political liberalism acknowledge the burdens of judgment that they can assign different weight to different empirical and moral considerations, and compete in the political arena in order to advance their preferred evaluation of those considerations in an adversarial way.

But what about justifiable antagonism? Does this criterion signal a departure from the political liberal framework central to my account of partisanship? According to Biale, partisans should not act as “detached deliberators” (*ibid.*, 25). Instead, they may embrace “a partisan interpretation of the common good” (*ibid.*) which is responsive to certain citizens’ interests and values. This is not in principle incompatible with my account of partisanship, and with political liberalism more generally. In fact, according to Rawls himself, and as I point out in my book (Bonotti 2017, 117), in order to achieve “full” (rather than “pro tanto”) justification, it is necessary that public reasons in support of policies are also related to the diverse comprehensive doctrines that citizens endorse

(Rawls 2005), thus de facto introducing a convergence conception of public reason into Rawls’s consensus approach (Vallier 2014, 131). And this is of course crucial for partisans’ responsiveness to their constituents (what I refer to as “vertical accountability” in my book – Bonotti 2017, 133-138). However, to the extent that Biale considers justifiable antagonism sufficient for public justification, then his account inevitably departs from mine. In the absence of any shared grounds for public justification across the partisan spectrum, it seems that we are left with a convergence account of public reason which risks exacerbating factionalism (*ibid.*, 116-117) and may potentially lead to state inaction if the partial reasons advanced by different parties (especially those in opposition) can defeat the justification for policies (Vallier 2016, 603; Vallier 2019, 114).

Response to Giulia Bistagnino

Giulia Bistagnino’s insightful contribution to this symposium focuses on the accessibility conception of public reason central to my account of partisanship, and particularly on the role of science and scientific claims in party politics. Bistagnino rightly observes that “accessibility seems particularly well-suited to shape an ideal of partisanship in line with the demands of political liberalism for it grants a certain common – in this case epistemic – grounding, while at the same time allowing for disagreement and pluralism with respect to policies and proposals” (Bistagnino 2021, 39). However, she notes, a commitment to accessibility may also have some unwelcome consequences. More specifically, Bistagnino points out, since accessibility is grounded in shared evaluative standards that “enjoy intersubjective recognition” (Vallier 2014, p. 108), scientific evaluative standards can only provide the basis for accessible reasons if they do enjoy that kind of recognition—something that we cannot take for granted. In fact, Bistagnino

adds, it is not even clear from my account (as well as from Rawls's work) what the criterion for considering scientific evaluative standards (or any evaluative standards more generally) the object of intersubjective recognition should be. For example, she argues, a simple majority criterion, by which an evaluative standard is shared if recognized by 51% of citizens, "would not only be extremely difficult to assess, but also contrary to the spirit of accessibility" (Bistagnino 2021, 40-41). The lack of a clear criterion for establishing whether evaluative standards are shared (and, therefore, whether accessible reasons grounded in those shared standards are possible), Bistagnino argues, can pose significant problems with regard to concrete policy issues such as vaccination policy. According to Bistagnino,

[a]lthough anti-vaccination supporters are a minority of the population in many countries, the number of individuals who hesitate and reject vaccination does not seem so small to not at least pose a threat to the accessibility of scientific evaluative standards that are at the heart of vaccination policies. Indeed, in addition to disagreement on what course of action should be taken with respect to compulsory vaccination because of different ethical theories, laypeople do find the scientific arguments grounding the safety of vaccines not accessible and controversial (Bistagnino 2021, 41-42).

I believe that this important statement needs to be unpacked and analysed, especially in order to explain what "not accessible and controversial" means in this context. As Anne Barnhill and I (2022, ch. 6) have argued elsewhere, scientific positions (and, by extent, citizens' views regarding scientific matters) could be categorized in the following ways.

In the first instance, there are majority scientific views, i.e. views that are grounded in shared evaluative standards (the standards of science), are not the result of gross epistemic errors, and are endorsed by the majority in the scientific community. A second category consists of minority scientific views. These views also rely on shared evaluative standards, do not involve any gross epistemic errors, but are only endorsed by a minority within the scientific community. The distinction between majority and minority scientific views can be ultimately traced back to the burdens of judgment: people (including scientists) start from the same premises but reach different conclusions due to the different weight they assign to evidence. A third type of scientific positions, Barnhill and I argue, involves “bad science.” Bad science is grounded in shared scientific evaluative standards but, due to gross epistemic errors, it results in incorrect conclusions.

None of these three kinds of scientific positions challenges accessibility since they all recognize the presence of shared evaluative standards (the standards of science). Therefore, even if anti-vaccination positions, as many would argue, are an instance of bad science resulting from gross epistemic error (and cannot therefore be legitimately used to ground public policy), this does not undermine the accessibility of science-based policy, since those endorsing such positions still recognize (while misusing) the evaluative standards of science.

The problem highlighted by Bistagnino only arises when we consider a fourth kind of position, what Barnhill and I call “pseudo-science.” Those who defend pseudo-scientific positions rely on evaluative standards that are different from those of science, and indeed some anti-vaccination positions are grounded precisely in these kinds of perspectives (Hornsey et al. 2018). To the extent that defenders of pseudo-science reject the evaluative standards of science, then the question arises of whether those

standards enjoy sufficiently widespread support to provide the basis for accessible reasons, e.g. reasons in support of vaccination policy.

The foregoing analysis does not aim to dismiss Bistagnino's criticism. It simply intends to show that we cannot simply assume that certain policy positions (e.g. anti-vaccination) undermine the accessibility of science-based policy, since sometimes these positions may still presuppose acceptance of scientific evaluative standards.

This still leaves the question of whether and how we can salvage the use of scientific reasons in party politics when the evaluative standards of science are not widely shared, as when pseudo-scientific anti-vaccination positions enjoy significant support in a society. Bistagnino suggests four potential strategies. First, she argues, we could assume that citizens generally believe in science and the scientific method. However, Bistagnino points out, the growing presence of people endorsing conspiracy views – another instance of pseudo-science – in contemporary liberal democratic societies seems to challenge this position. Alternatively, we could accept that scientific evaluative standards are only shared if they enjoy widespread acceptance, and that if/when this is not (or no longer) the case, they cease to provide grounds for accessible public reasons. This, according to Bistagnino, would have the undesirable consequence of rendering parties that advance science-based scientific proposals alike to factions, since the reasons they use in support of those proposals will not be based on evaluative standards that all/most of their fellow citizens share. Bistagnino also rejects the idea of “in principle accessibility” (Badano & Bonotti 2020, 54-56), arguing that it relies on a comprehensive philosophical conception of what science is.

I would like to set these strategies aside and focus on a fourth and final one suggested by Bistagnino. This strategy, Bistagnino,

argues, is centred around the epistemic and educational role of parties (White and Ypi 2016, pp. 90-3), which could involve “systemizing and spreading not only political, but also scientific knowledge” (Bistagnino 2011, 45-46). Yet Bistagnino finds this strategy problematic too, since parties’ promotion of a scientific mindset, she argues, would constitute a form of “epistemic perfectionism” (Talisso 2008) inconsistent with political liberalism. However, I am not convinced by this conclusion. Parties do not necessarily need to promote some form of epistemic perfectionism in order to contribute to widespread knowledge and acceptance of science’s evaluative standards.

To understand why, let’s consider a point that has been neglected so far. It is one thing to argue that in certain policy areas – e.g. vaccination policy – many citizens defend views that reject the evaluative standards of science. It is another to claim that those standards are rejected across the policy spectrum. It is likely that many of those who defend anti-vaccination positions based on conspiracy theories, for example, still accept the value of science when it comes to, say, energy policy or even other aspects of public health (e.g. cancer treatment). It may often be the case that the rejection of scientific standards in certain policy areas is driven by other factors, e.g. personal or ethical views which somehow “colour” people’s evaluation of scientific standards in those areas but leave their acceptance of those standards untouched with regard to other policy areas. If this is the case, parties that advance science-based policies will only be alike to factions with regard to specific policy areas, i.e. those in which there is significant rejection of scientific evaluative standards among citizens. In such cases, parties can play a key role in persuading citizens to embrace those standards. Since public reason is not static (Flanders 2012), parties (and social movements more generally) can be key agents of public reason change (Bonotti 2017, 135-136). Parties that advance science-based policies can therefore mobilize their resources in

order to persuade citizens to endorse the evaluative standards of science. In doing so, parties can leverage their distinctive multi-issue platforms, which distinguish them from most other civil society associations. For example, partisans can use rhetorical devices (cf. Badano & Nuti 2018) during electoral campaigns and public debates in order to show those citizens who reject the evaluative standards of science in areas x and y of their platform (e.g. vaccination policy and climate change) that they do endorse those standards in other areas also considered in their platform, and that therefore their views are internally inconsistent. Or they can expose gross epistemic errors in the way those citizens (and parties that represent them) use science's evaluative standards, thus showing that those standards are de facto accepted by them. In other words, we should not consider party platforms as homogeneous policy blocks whose components may be equally threatened by bad or pseudo-science. Perhaps very few people reject science tout court, i.e. across the policy spectrum. Parties can exploit this situation in order to ensure that the evaluative standards of science become widely endorsed across all policy areas when they are not already. This would not be a form of epistemic perfectionism as it would rely on what citizens already believe with regard to other policy areas.

Response to Chiara Destri

In her thoughtful analysis of my book, Chiara Destri argues that my account of public reason is very demanding for partisans, even more demanding than Rawls's. After initially suggesting that partisans in my account cannot benefit from the wide view of public reason, Destri recognizes that the division of justificatory labour between elected and non-elected partisans that I defend does help at least some partisans to benefit from the wide view, via vertical accountability and interaction with constituents. While that

is correct, I would also like to stress that elected partisans can also benefit from the wide view during the process of horizontal accountability. For example, when defending a policy in parliament, partisans can appeal to comprehensive doctrines as long as in due course they also provide public reasons. The main difference between them and non-elected partisans is therefore that while both categories of partisans can benefit from the wide view, non-elected partisans do not need to fulfil the Rawlsian proviso when engaging in the process of vertical accountability.

But Destri also raises another issue regarding my account. More precisely, she argues,

while such a division of labour helps us draw a line between elected and nonelected partisans, it does not help clarifying what Bonotti means by “constituents.” If by constituents he means any person who could possibly vote for the party, this explicitly contradicts the requirements [to comply with public reason] he mentions in chapter 4 and opens the possibility for partisan, widely intended, to speak their mind without following public reason constraints (at least in conversations with friends and relatives). If, on the other hand, by constituents he means people who usually vote for a certain party, then the line between constituent and partisan as party sympathizer (Bonotti 2017, 67, 73) becomes much more blurred. Accordingly, partisans would be justified in exchanging reasons based on their comprehensive doctrines only between themselves, but never with citizens who are not already known to be party supporters (Destri 2021, 60).

I do not find this conclusion entirely persuasive. For a start, the fact that all partisans have an intrinsic duty to comply with public reason is not necessarily in tension with the rest of my account. The main purpose of my analysis of partisanship and political

liberalism is precisely to articulate what partisans' fulfilment of the duty of civility requires, moving beyond the simplistic dichotomy compliance/non-compliance. Furthermore, since I endorse an indirect approach to public reason, in which the main goal is to ensure that laws and policies are publicly justified, rather than compelling every individual citizen or partisan to comply with public reason (Bonotti 2017, 124), my account creates a space for the use of non-public reason among partisans and between partisans and constituents. Hence, whether by constituents we intend any potential voters or those who already vote for a party, the substance of my argument does not change. Ultimately, it is up to elected partisans to comply with public reason. Deliberation among non-elected partisans within parties, and between partisans and non-partisan constituents (however the latter are defined), can be conducted based on non-public reasons.

A second issue highlighted by Destri concerns the fact that my account of partisanship only applies to well-ordered societies. This, she argues, might have two puzzling implications. First, “[in] societies [that] share illiberal evaluative standards, this entails the somehow odd consequence that a liberal party campaigning for freedom and equality...would count as a faction exactly because this party would not provide reasons based on the illiberal political culture of its society” (Destri 2012, 63). However, as Flanders (2012) points out, and as I also stress in my book (135) and elsewhere in this paper, public reason is historical and mutable and its vocabulary, so to speak, may change over time. Parties, and social movements more generally, can play a key role in this process of change. This does not entail that parties employing reasons that are not widely shared (or accessible) in their society do not display factional features based on the political culture of the country in which they operate. But it does imply that such parties can, so to speak, “de-factionalize” over time, if they are able to change the terms of public reason in their society.

Furthermore, Destri points out that based on my account of partisanship and public reason, “a perfectionist party in a well-ordered society would also count as a faction...even if it addressed all citizens with its proposals, in order to convince them of the desirability of its claims, and even if these proposals were more than a mere collection of sectorial interests” (Destri 2021, 65). I am not convinced by this conclusion. As I argue (for example in Bonotti 2017, 88-89), many of the proposals advanced by Green parties in Europe a few decades ago would have probably been considered perfectionist and controversial. Yet, these parties managed to gradually change and enrich the terms of public reason, by rendering concepts like “sustainability” broadly endorsed (White & Ypi 2011, 390) and de-factionalizing their political agendas. As in the case of liberal parties in illiberal societies, we encounter again the mutability of public reason, a process to which parties (including perfectionist parties) can make a key contribution. Therefore, in both cases, and contrary to what Destri argues (Destri 2021, 64), “the transformative potential of partisan agency” is not jeopardized. And to the extent that parties fail to produce this change, then they may indeed be alike to factions. But it is important to stress that between pure idealized parties and pure idealized factions there is a spectrum of possibilities, and that real-world parties may sit more or less close to either end of the spectrum, depending on how strong and diffuse across their political platform their failure to comply with the public reason of their society is.

Response to Steven Wall

In his rich and engaging contribution to this symposium, Steven Wall offers an account that aims to expand the scope of political partisanship beyond the boundaries present in my analysis. Wall especially focuses on the fact that, due to the burdens of judgement

and the fact of reasonable pluralism, citizens may disagree regarding which conceptions are included in the family of reasonable political liberal conceptions of justice. When two groups of partisans, Wall argues, display this kind of disagreement, this does not undermine political liberalism. In his view,

[t]here is a difference between thinking that one's opponents are mistaken, and thinking that they are not fighting fair, or acting in bad faith. Since the first group of partisans in our example accept the burdens of judgment, they should be open to the possibility that the second group is making a reasonable mistake, and not furtively rejecting the political liberal project. Correspondingly, the second group should be open to the possibility that the first group of partisans are making a reasonable mistake in excluding PL4 from the family of reasonable conceptions of political justice (Wall 2021, 82).

I do not object to this conclusion. But I believe that what appears to be a disagreement about the family of reasonable conceptions of justice normally presupposes agreement on shared fundamental political values, based on the accessibility conception of public reason that I defend. That family contains a broad variety of political conceptions of justice, depending on how shared political values are combined and prioritized by different people. To understand this, consider Jonathan Quong's (2011, 205) example of Tony and Sara, two members of the public who are debating whether the Catholic Church should be legally compelled to hire female priests. Tony appeals to the value of religious liberty to justify the Church's right to only employ male priests, while Sara appeals to the values of gender equality and non-discrimination to justify the view that the Church should be obliged to hire female priests. Since both religious liberty, on the one hand, and gender

equality and non-discrimination, on the other hand, are widely shared political values in liberal democratic societies, and assuming that Tony and Sara are committed to both of sets of values (even though they assign different weight to them in their reasoning, and even if each of them believes that the other is mistaken in doing so), then they are both providing accessible reasons for the policies they defend. In this sense, an accessible reason must provide a “plausible [or reasonable] balance of political values... [i.e. it must recognize] that there are multiple political values at stake, and [offer] a plausible explanation as to why one public value ought to be prioritized over the other in cases of this kind” (Quong 2011, p. 209). It is likely that both Tony and Sara endorse comprehensive doctrines that influence the way in which they weigh the shared political values at stake. But while each of them may think that the other is mistaken, they both recognize that their views belong to the family of political conceptions of justice. I believe that the pluralism of political conceptions of justice resulting from the different ways in which citizens weigh shared political values is central to party politics and partisan divisions in contemporary liberal democracies.

Despite my doubts concerning Wall’s argument, I find one of the implications of his analysis very interesting. According to him, sometimes we must be content with what he refers to as “Tier-2 legitimacy.” This kind of legitimacy “does not require partisans to agree on the criteria of liberal legitimacy for matters of basic justice in a political liberal order. But it does require agreement on the presumptive authority of the order itself. It requires something akin to what Rawls had in mind when discussing a constitutional consensus” (Wall 2021, 87). As a result, Wall argues, we should not think of public justification as uniform across the party system. Instead, he claims,

[r]ecognizing the futility of efforts to secure public agreement on a family of acceptable conceptions of political justice, and the consequent futility of efforts to publicly justify all matters relevant to public justification in their society, partisans might aspire to achieve broad-based, rather than full, public justification for their proposals. This would complicate the horizontal responsibilities of partisans. They would now need to distinguish those partisans who were potential partners, as it were, and with whom they would aspire to reach mutual justification on their proposals [Tier-1 legitimacy], from other partisans, who while remaining political liberal citizens in good standing in their eyes, would not be potential partners. The responsibilities owed to the former group would mirror the horizontal responsibilities Bonotti highlights, but the responsibilities toward the latter would differ. With these latter groups, the partisan responsibilities would encompass fostering and maintaining trust among them, and efforts to reassure them that they are not viewed as unreasonable members of the society despite their reasonable disagreement over the boundaries of political liberalism [Tier-2 legitimacy] (Wall 2021, 88).

While I reject Wall's sharp distinction between Tier-1 and Tier-2 legitimacy, I agree that a more nuanced account of the horizontal relationship between parties across the political spectrum would enrich my account of partisanship and political liberalism. What would distinguish close from distant parties in this more nuanced account, however, would not be the type of legitimacy that characterizes their relationship but, based on the accessibility conception of public reason, the way in which different parties interpret and weigh shared political values. While distant parties and partisans may interpret and weigh those values in different ways, close parties and partisans (e.g. those that participate in coalition governments) are likely to endorse more similar interpretations of them and weigh them in similar ways.

Acknowledging these differences could help to develop a more refined account of partisanship and political liberalism within the boundaries of an accessibility conception of public reason.

Response to Fabian Wendt

In his insightful commentary, Fabian Wendt focuses on my account of partisan political obligations. According to him, neither of my main arguments for partisan political obligations – based, respectively, on consent and fairness – is particularly persuasive.

When it comes to consent, Wendt argues, it is difficult to understand what (if anything) exactly one (expressly or tacitly) consents to when they decide to join a political party. “The problem,” he argues, “is that the notion of partisanship is fuzzy and vague not just because formal party members, activists and supporters are partisans to different degrees and in different ways, but also because different formal party members are partisans to different degrees and in different ways” (Wendt 2001, 94). I am happy to accept this criticism, since I believe that the consent argument, as I also state in my book (Bonotti 2017, 14), does not provide a comprehensive justification for partisan political obligations.

But what about my fairness-based account of partisan political obligations? For a start, Wendt argues, it is not clear that party politics (like a football match) is a “cooperative venture”, since “[t]he players in the football match as well as partisans in a party system at best produce some benefits as a *side effect* of what they’re doing. They do not do what they do in order to produce the benefits” (Wendt 2021, 96-97). However, I am not convinced by this observation. I believe that parties do not only aim to win elections but also (at least to some extent) to produce good governance for the whole political community. Compare, for

instance, the rhetoric of politicians with that of footballers. The former, of course, ask citizens to vote for them but, in doing so, they normally also explain in what ways their (and their party's) proposed policies will benefit the whole community. That benefit is not simply a side effect of their actions but one of their key goals. Footballers, instead, only aim to win games and trophies, and the fact that a good game of football may result from two teams' self-interested endeavours – something that neutral observers, as well as supporters of both teams, are likely to appreciate – is indeed a mere side effect of what they are doing.

But even if we assume that party politics is a cooperative venture, Wendt argues, this is still not sufficient to show that partisans have fairness-based political obligations, since partisans (and, more generally, all citizens) already have a natural duty to comply with liberal democratic values and institutions and refrain from using violence. As I explain elsewhere in the chapter, however, this does not necessarily undermine my argument. If Wendt is correct, then that still leaves open the possibility that partisans have further (fairness-based) political obligations in addition to the natural duty-based obligations that all citizens already have. Wendt does consider this possibility but rejects it, arguing that “one’s duties in general – the duty not to kill other people – are not altered (made more stringent or intense or continuous) when natural duties get accompanied by voluntarily incurred [or fairness-based] duties of the same content” (Wendt 2021, 99). But laws against murders are not the only laws partisans have to comply with in order for the cooperative venture of party politics to work and produce its benefits. Partisans also have to comply with more specific laws which are distinctive of their polity. And the natural duty argument, as some have pointed out, does not seem to be capable of justifying these distinctive obligations (e.g. see Simmons 1979, 2005). If that is the case, then fairness-

based partisan political obligations are no longer redundant, contrary to what Wendt seems to suggest.

Wendt also observes that sometimes the benefits I ascribe to party politics – e.g. the greater visibility and influence that some partisans (e.g. party leaders) enjoy – are private rather than public. According to him, these kinds of benefits are “not the result of party politics understood as a cooperative venture that is beneficial because parties bundle societal demands into platforms and help to organize democratic decision-making” (Wendt 2021, 100) and do not depend on other partisans restraining themselves but rather on other factors such as a partisan’s rhetorical abilities, intra-party dynamics, etc. I would like to reject this conclusion. While these other factors are of course also relevant, their ability to produce partisans’ “private” benefits depend on the presence of a functioning democratic system, a public good which does rely on all partisans’ restraint. And, as Rawls (1999a, 302-303) also argues, this intuitively seems to generate stronger political obligations for those who benefit more than others from this public good.

Relatedly, I would also like to resist Wendt’s conclusion that “[my] reply to Simmons’s objection does not succeed...[because]...[t]he good of living in a working democracy, to which political parties contribute, is non-excludable; no one can willingly accept or refuse the good of living in functioning democracy, and this is why fairness considerations do not arise” (Wendt 2021, 101). One answer to this question could be that goods need not be excludable in order to generate fairness-based political obligations, if they are “presumptively beneficial” (Klosko 2004, 39) or “indispensable for satisfactory lives” (Klosko 2005, 6) – and a working democracy seem to fit these criteria, especially when it comes to partisans, at least in liberal democratic societies. But even if one rejects this conclusion and argues that excludability still matters, it is not clear that the implications are similar for

ordinary citizens and partisans. While we cannot tell whether ordinary citizens accept or refuse the benefit of a working democracy, this it is not true about partisans. By voluntarily deciding to engage in party politics, and often enjoying benefits that are even more distinctive and significant than those a working democracy provides ordinary citizen with, partisans proactively accept the good of living in a working democracy. The fact that they may not be able to reject that good no longer matters since (unlike most ordinary citizens) they have proactively accepted it, and this generates fairness-based political obligations for them.

Response to Fabio Wolkenstein

In his thoughtful analysis of my book, Fabio Wolkenstein takes issue with my account of parties and partisanship which, he argues, is overly idealized and pays little attention to the empirical reality of party politics, and especially to how party politics has changed in liberal democracies over the past few decades. Wolkenstein especially highlights how contemporary party leaders, thanks to traditional and social media, have gradually become capable of communicating directly with citizens via what Nadia Urbinati calls “direct representative democracy” (Urbinati 2015, 480), thus rendering the mediating linkage function of parties increasingly obsolete. “We can safely conclude from examining these arguments,” Wolkenstein argues, “that PPL [*Partisanship and Political Liberalism*] is operating with an ideal of socially rooted parties that is dramatically out of sync with the organisational reality of contemporary party democracy” (Wolkenstein 2021, 116).

I would like to resist Wolkenstein’s conclusion, also in view of his own extensive and groundbreaking work on party linkage and intra-party deliberation. As Wolkenstein argues in one of his

several works on this topic, parties, including local party branches, can still be viewed as key institutional channels that can connect citizens with government, especially if rendered more internally deliberative. For example, Wolkenstein argues,

In the deliberative model...the emphasis is not only on channelling the inputs of citizens into the party, but also, and more strongly so, on processing these inputs discursively by pooling relevant arguments and specifying interpretations in discussions and debates. Thus party members are not merely messengers, but deliberative agents who jointly subject the information provided by citizens to critical scrutiny (Wolkenstein 2016, 303).

Intra-party deliberation, Wolkenstein argues, must start at the grassroots level, and specifically within party branches, since these are the only sites which “are closely linked to the local communities in which their members are based. They are directly in touch with the local constituency, and have the authority to delegate representatives to hierarchically higher party bodies to make local concerns heard...[as well as being]...‘natural’ deliberative fora” (Wolkenstein 2016, 303).

The picture of parties and party politics that emerges from these and other similar analyses provided by Wolkenstein in his work seems to bear little resemblance with the kind of “direct representative democracy” that he argues my account of partisanship neglects. On the contrary, it seems to rely on a similar assumption: that parties still present organizational structures which offer key sites for communication and interaction between party leaders, members and citizens. True, the linkage role of parties may have weakened over the past few decades and there is much scope for improvement – e.g. via intra-party democratic and

deliberative reforms, as Wolkenstein himself has extensively argued. Indeed, the task of normative political theorists is not to develop normative arguments that simply reflect and legitimize empirical facts and processes. Instead, it is to explain whether, why and how certain empirical trends and processes ought to be countered. This is what Wolkenstein has extensively done in his work on intra-party deliberation and party linkage, and this is what I have aimed to do in my work on parties, partisanship and public reason.

In sum, while it is undeniable that something like “direct representative democracy” has become a more prominent feature of contemporary liberal democracies, we should not assume that the traditional organization and functions of parties have disappeared. And it is precisely this organization and functions that provide the framework within which the kind of partisan public reasoning that I defend in my book can play an important role.

Wolkenstein’s second main criticism of my account of partisanship concerns the relationship between parties’ “discursive” and “organizational” ideals (Wolkenstein 2021, 109). He rightly points out that, in my analysis, the vertical two-way relationship between citizens and partisans is important for parties’ ability to justify their policies based on public reasons. And I do not object to the idea that where this vertical linkage has weakened, it should be restored or strengthened. But, Wolkenstein argues, this may result in a paradox for my account since “[t]rying to re-anchor parties in the background culture of society in order to make sure that they do not violate public reason norms might in practice unleash forces that eventually come to violate public reason norms because they demand an altogether different society” (*ibid.*, 120). I believe that this point neglects a very important aspect of my account. Public reason is not static, it can change (Flanders 2012). And, as I emphasize in my analysis (Bonotti 2017, 135-136), parties

(like social movements) can be key agents of public reason change. This is where parties' organizational and discursive ideals meet, so to speak. Not only is parties' vertical communication with citizens crucial for helping them relate their comprehensive doctrines to public reason. It can also help (re)define public reason itself, e.g. by introducing new shared political values or new interpretations of existing ones.

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PARTISANSHIP AND PUBLIC REASON



BEYOND UNREASONABLENESS
AND FACTIONALISM

NOTES ON BONOTTI'S THEORY OF PARTISANSHIP

BY

JAVIER GIL AND DAVID SÁNCHEZ PIÑEIRO

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Beyond Unreasonableness and Factionalism

Notes on Bonotti's Theory of Partisanship

Javier Gil and David Sánchez Piñeiro

Introduction

Matteo Bonotti's *Partisanship and Political Liberalism in Diverse Societies* joined an outstanding recent theoretical literature that urges us to think of parties and partisanship as a major issue within political theory and political philosophy. The book was preceded by a series of noteworthy articles by Bonotti that appeared in the 2010s and has received considerable attention and debate recently among specialists in these areas. A common denominator in this research community is the conviction that parties and party systems continue to be a central political institution for both the performance and development of representative democracy, and that this centrality extends to the practice of partisanship that it is inherent to them rather than merely a concomitant factor. Analogously to a series of contemporary phenomena with which this subject is related (as, for example, the high levels of citizens' disaffection and electoral

abstention, and the duties and commitments of representatives and public servants), partisanship and parties are now considered from a normative point of view and not only analyzed in purely empirical terms and as a subject of specialized disciplines of sociology and political science. Matteo Bonotti expresses a shared concern among the new pro-party theorists in stating that the political parties are in crisis and that “how that crisis could be reverted is a question which is becoming increasingly central to scholarly debate, and deservedly so” (Bonotti, 2017, 175). The ambitious claim that a normative perspective on political parties as indispensable components of pluralist democracies should contribute to face the crisis of political parties is to be understood, in turn, as a part of the major concern on how to deal with the crisis of greater magnitude that threatens today’s representative democracies worldwide.

However, Bonotti’s book does not support its normative proposal with a detailed diagnosis of the current crisis of political parties nor is it involved in a reflection on the causes thereof. It assumes, rather than analyzes, the answer to the questions of what the true situation of the parties is, how these have gotten this far and what realistic prospects are opening up for them in the present, issues that are closely related to some of the most pressing problems facing contemporary democracies. The book focuses instead on the questions of how the reasonable partisans should understand themselves and which duties they should honor. Generally speaking, Bonotti’s approach is closer to those of Jonathan White and Lea Ypi in *The Meaning of Partisanship* than to other challenging and innovative approaches that have been published in the major books that mark out the scholarship on the topic to date (White & Ypi 2016). *On the Side of the Angels* by Nancy Rosenblum and *The Promise of Party in a Polarized Age* by Russell Muirhead were mainly concerned with defending partisanship and exploring its characteristics, rationale, and history, and offered an

ethics of partisanship centered on the norms and virtues of adversarialism and the intraparty ties (Rosenblum 2008, Muirhead 2014). On the other hand, the more recent *Rethinking Party Reform* by Fabio Wolkenstein reorients the focus to the importance of parties' internal structure and makes the case for a deliberative model of intra-party democracy (Wolkenstein 2020). In contrast to both the ethics of partisanship and the deliberative reformism of parties, White and Ypi as well as Bonotti have introduced a "theoretical turn" (White & Ypi 2016, 3) that links partisanship as a normative ideal to public reason and political justification. Moving inside the analytical political philosophy, the goal of Bonotti's book is to rescue "Rawls's theory from the widespread accusation that it is inhospitable to real-world politics, and especially to party politics" (Bonotti 2017, 175). Certainly, Rawls' theory did not concern too much with political parties and even expressed disdain for party politics (Muirhead & Rosenblum 2006, 99). However, Bonotti makes explicit a sophisticated account of partisanship as a distinctive associative activity according to the ideal of public reason and specifies the role political parties can legitimately play within political liberalism (as defined by Rawls, 2005 and 1997).

In the first two sections, we will analyze the distinction between factions and parties that serves as a benchmark, a foundation, and a normative axis of most of the normative theories of partisanship, placing it in relation to a Burkean-Sartorian tradition that contemporary pro-party theorists continue and rework. The second section also tries to identify a common ground among them to trace a shared understanding of the current crisis of party politics and its degenerations. In the third section we will present some critical considerations on the paramount role of the notion of reasonableness in Bonotti's account of partisanship, notion that serves as a liberal mold for reinterpreting the aforementioned distinction. These critical considerations concern the inadequate

accommodation of political pluralism (or, at least, the insufficient inclusion of those who fall outside reasonable pluralism), the vagueness of the adscriptions of factionalism in the melting pot of the so-called unreasonable parties and partisans, and some lack of clarity about the admitted need to contain the potentially dangerous parties or factions.

I

Factions vs Parties

Like other normative theorists of political parties, Bonotti gives credit to the distinctions between factions and parties offered by the conservative English philosopher and politician Edmund Burke among the modern thinkers and the Italian political scientist Giovanni Sartori among the contemporaries.

Burke was the first author to propose a positive conception of parties that differentiates them from factions. Famously, he defined the party as “a body of men united, for promoting by their joint endeavors the national interest, upon some particular principle in which they are all agreed” (Burke 1770, 271). In contradistinction to a vast majority of relevant authors in the history of political thought well into the nineteenth century, Burke valued parties as political associations whose members unite around a shared understanding of the common good and its consequences. Burke’s historical vision and political experience also led him to establish an original contrast with factions as partial associations binding by the interest of a few. An influential anti-party tradition harking back to the ancient world and still dominant in Burke’s times placed these political realities on the same level. Even later famous theorists and prominent practitioners of parliamentarism on either side of the Atlantic – among them, the American founders and French revolutionaries – took parties and

factions as ontologically overlapping entities. Burke, a partisan himself, argued that parties, unlike factions, are not merely expressions of particular interests, nor do their members aspire to achieve and exercise power to promote and assert their own particular welfare. Rather, they are partial associations that promote the interest of the community as a whole, seeking thereby a common good that, far from being given in advance, they contribute to shape.

Giovanni Sartori takes up this Burkean distinction, updates it and turns it into the normative benchmark of the theory presented in *Parties and Party Systems: A Framework for Analysis*, a book published in 1976 and reedited by Peter Mair in 2005 (Sartori 1976, 3-38). Sartori contends not only that Burke's conception that parties are a respectable instrument of government supposes "the turning point in the realm of intellectual history" (*ibid.*, 12) and that anticipates on a theoretical level some crucial aspects of what would still have to be done in political practice with the institutionalization of elections and the development of the representative function of the legislatures and the interplay of government and opposition. He also shows that Burke's parliamentary conception is still aristocratic, in Tocqueville's sense that parties organize "connections" in parliament and not members outside of parliament, as in the democratic conception. Such connections would not yet be those of an electoral party, turned outward in search of the majority vote, which ended up forming the party system of twentieth-century democracies. Certainly, Sartori's definition is of Burkean lineage. For him, parties are not factions, the latter being "only a part for itself" and harmful to the common interest; parties are rather "parts-of-a-whole", because, although they channel particularistic values and interests, they serve the entire political community: "The difference is, then, that parties are instrumental to collective benefits, to an end that is not merely the private benefit of the

contestants. Parties link people to a government, while factions do not... If a party is not a part capable of governing for the sake of the whole, that is, in view of a general interest, then it does not differ from a faction. Although a party only represents a part, this part must take a *non-partial* approach to the whole” (Sartori 1976, 22 and 23). However, Sartori’s view goes beyond the Burkean one insofar he contends that “parties are the central intermediate and intermediary structure between society and government” (Sartori 1976, xxi) and, thanks to their linkage function, “parties are upgoing transmission belts of claims and grievances” and “channels of expression..., an instrument, or an agency, for *representing* the people by *expressing* their demands” (*ibid.*, 25 and 27).

Sartori envisions the relapse into factionalism as a degeneration of parties that are unable and unwilling to govern in view of the general interest. More on that later. But, as Bonotti reminds us, he also warns against the danger of unitarism, meaning “the tendency of a party to be ‘engluted by the whole’ (Sartori 1976, 58) and increasingly merge with the state apparatus”, which “in extreme circumstances involves denying legitimacy to other parties or even eliminating party pluralism” (Bonotti 2011b, 109-110; 2012, 155; 2017, 10). Parties, themselves plural and the product of pluralism, translate the pluralism into the political sphere. So, they must avoid both factionalism and unitarism and evolve through achieving a balance between their own partial and holistic tensions. Again, in Bonotti’s (2011a, 23) words: “The ideal meaning of party politics lies therefore in this permanent tension between plurality and unity, partiality and wholeness, that is, the contrasting tendencies that parties ought constantly to keep in balance.”

In sum, Sartori assumes the basic evaluative markers that have become the distinctive traits of the Burkean tradition: the party retains the virtuous and desirable sense of public-minded promotion of the common good, while the faction holds a

dangerous and undesirable meaning of the prevalence of sectarian interests. However, in contrast to the pioneering treatment of the topic by Burke, Sartori defends a democratic, two-faced, and deep pluralist view of parties, and it is this Sartorian version that has become the true benchmark of the distinction between factions and parties to which the current pro-party theorists adhere. Let us mention a few instances.

In one of their early collaborations, Russell Muirhead and Nancy Rosenblum argued that parties are both connective and divisive in a singular way. They are performative agents, since “they discover and define politically relevant differences [and] create the terms of contest” (Muirhead & Rosenblum 2006, 103). In addition to the ability to draw the borders of the social, they have a “unique status as bridging institutions... with one foot in both the background culture and the public forum” (Muirhead & Rosenblum 2006, 103). They are Janus-faced and bilingual at the same time: as associations with roots in the civil society and quasi-official actors in the state public sphere, they can act as “points of connection” between both domains and articulate particular interests and affiliations with general interests and principles of justice (Muirhead & Rosenblum 2006, 104-105). Around the same time, Nadia Urbinati suggested that parties have the ability of not being lost in translation: “A political party translates the many instances and particularities in a language that is general and wants to represent the general. No party claims to represent only the interests of those who belong to or side with it” (Urbinati 2006, 37).

In her seminal book *On the Side of Angels*, Nancy Rosenblum makes a distinction between two types of anti-party currents within

the history of political thought¹. While the advocates of the “holistic” tradition censure parties as organisms that either do not recognize or betray the common good of society, those aligned with the tradition of “fatal divisiveness” recognize the existence and legitimacy of political parties, but criticize their irrepressible tendency to fracture and polarize. According to some exponents of the latter tradition, parties can make positive contributions as long as they maintain their loyalty to party spirit and do not degenerate into selfish and conflicting factions. However, the turning point in the modern appreciation of the reality and normativity of parties and partisanship comes from Burke’s preventative view of them as a form of regulated rivalry and his acknowledgment of managed conflict as an achievement (Rosenblum 2008, 18-19, 119-126, 130 and 364-365). Partisanship’ commitment to regulated rivalry involves the recognition that parties are just a part in a permanently pluralist politics: “Partisans see themselves as firmly on the side of the angels, but regulated rivalry demands acknowledging their partiality, that they do not and cannot speak for the whole, and that their exercise of power is provisional” (Rosenblum 2008, 124). Parties, for their part, are creative and inclusive agents that draw the lines of political conflict and attempt to win the support of the majority, that are willing to search for compromises and look for comprehensive political views. Hence, unlike “interest and advocacy groups [which] are typically “single-issue” pressure groups”, parties are wide-ranging associations, and it is morally distinctive of partisanship “a

¹ This historical reconstruction of antipartyism involves a productive reworking of Sartori’s deeply pluralist approach, mentioned before. Something similar can be said of Urbinati’s view of the populist phenomenology of factionalism (Urbinati 2019c) and of her characterization of the paradox of populism (Urbinati 2019b).

comprehensive account of what needs to be done” (Rosenblum 2008, 260 and 361).

Although Muirhead initially treated the distinction as a sort of *differentia specifica* (Muirhead 2006, 717), it seems to be not so decisive in later writings as to Bonotti and other authors. For him, factions cannot be entirely avoided in politics, so “they must be attended to, and somehow included, in any stable polity” (Muirhead 2014, 35). One way to tame factions is to make partisanship as widespread as possible among the citizenship as a whole and to promote the civic education for partisanship. These tasks involve regaining a normative conception of partisanship and indeed an ethics of partisanship. According to this, the good partisan is one who stands with a political group striving for democratic legitimacy and making a claim to rule, and who possesses principled convictions and a more or less accurate understanding of the common good, which motivates her to take an interest in office and aspire for her party to garner the widest possible majority. Therefore, she might be willing to adapt her principles to attract other political agents, be they rival partisans or even copartisans (Muirhead 2014, 19). This characterization embraces the aforementioned virtues of partisanship outlined by Rosenblum (2008, 356-362): loyalty, comprehensiveness, inclusiveness, and disposition to compromise. Although these virtues are often intertwined, it is above all the second one that marks the relevance of the distinction between party and faction: “Comprehensiveness is what definitionally separates a party from a faction. Comprehensiveness means that partisans take a view on the full range of issues that constitute the public interest. In contrast to single-issue advocacy groups, parties address the public good in the widest sense. This is why parties have platforms that do not claim to benefit just one group at the expense of others, but to benefit the nation. At their best, partisans attempt to address the common good, even though they do not presume to speak for the

whole” (Muirhead & Rosenblum, 2020, 105; see also Muirhead 2006, 717 and 719)².

In the two first chapters of *The Meaning of Partisanship*, Jonathan White and Lea Ypi address the Burkean distinction as a normative criterion for their conception of partisanship. Unlike factions, political parties should serve ends that are “irreducible to the interests of a sectoral grouping” and provide citizens with a “wider normative vision involving claims that can be generalized” (White & Ypi 2016, 21, 59). Such generalizable political claims are those that bind a party together while addressing to all citizens. Therefore, the normative understanding of partisanship “appeals to a non-particularist constituency” and “involves efforts to harness political power not for the benefit of one social group amongst several but in the name of the people as a whole” (White & Ypi 2016, 57). Following Sartori’s pluralist formula that parties “should exhibit a non-partial commitment to the whole”, the distinction between partisanship and factionalism points to the normative view that unavoidable disagreements of principle, which “may persist where efforts are made to advance generalizable views, ... can be channeled by appeal to reasons that can be generally shared [and so] contribute to identifying the general interest rather than undermining it” (White & Ypi 2016, 39 and

² For Wolkenstein, the distinction is further displaced as an internal problem of the parties consisting in a case of bad deliberation. The relevance of factions is based on the inability of rival groups not only to agree on the central issues of their agendas, but also even to talk to each other in a respectful and constructive way, which can generate a drift of dissolution due to the pervasiveness of “corrosive internal conflicts” (Wolkenstein 2020, 130). Not surprisingly, Wolkenstein regards Burke’s influence distantly. His main reference in history is Hans Kelsen’s “sober and non-moralistic approach to understanding collective political agency” (2020, 11), as well as his arguments for both the internal democratization of parties and its positive impact on the exercise of the popular sovereignty.

48). Once the Burkean distinction is reviewed in this way for the purpose of critical evaluation alongside the ideal of a party as essential to collective self-rule (White & Ypi 2016, 5, 34, 53-54), it provides a foundation for White and Ypi's sophisticated approach of the relationship between partisanship and political justification (White & Ypi, 2016, 57; see also 2011, 382). In sum, parties differ from factions precisely in their ability to articulate principles and aims that could in principle be endorsed by everyone or, in other words, that meet deliberative criteria for general and reciprocal justifiability.

The distinction is taken up in chapter 6 of *Partisanship and Political Liberalism in Diverse Societies* (Bonotti 2017, 103-111). As other authors before him, Bonotti identifies an anti-partisan current with prominent advocates such as Thomas Hobbes, David Hume and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who saw the parties as factions whose interests interfere with the general interest of the political community. The pro-party tradition started by Bartolo da Sassoferrato and Edmund Burke established instead a conceptual difference between associations whose principles and motivations are essentially divergent. Bonotti mentions Robert von Mohl and Johann Kaspar Bluntschli's praises of the "public-spirited" character of the parties as opposed to the sectarian nature of the factions and, like White and Ypi, endorses Sartori's idea that parties should "take a *non-partial* approach to the whole" (Sartori 1976, 23; Bonotti 2011a, 23; 2017, 105). This historical retrieving combines with a philosophical argument that clears up the ideal of partisanship in terms of the commitment to the common good through the public use of reasons. Hence, Bonotti can equally write either that "partisanship (unlike factionalism) involves a *commitment to the common good* rather than the sole advancement of merely partial interests", or that "partisanship involves a *commitment to public reasoning* that rules out sectarian and factional politics" (2017, 101 and 36; emphasis added). As we will see later, this philosophical

argument renews the Burkean and Sartorian distinction with the Rawlsian notion of reasonableness, which make political liberalism compatible with partisanship and, therefore, detach them from factionalism: “There is a correspondence between the normative demands of political liberalism and those of partisanship, as both of them require that policies and laws be defended on the basis of public reasons, rather than by appealing to sectarian and factional values that only reflect the interests and conceptions of the good of a specific group of citizens” (Bonotti 2017, 111; see also *ibid.*, 63).

II

Parties as factions

The new theories of parties and partisanship have adopted the Sartorian revision of the Burkean distinction for at least three reasons. First, Burke’s definition connected parties to a form of association and political practice that bore a collective understanding of, and a search for, the common good. The current theorists focus on the “meaning” and the “spirit” of partisanship as an associative political practice – White and Ypi (2016, 83-85) even characterize it as a form of political friendship –, moving beyond the purely empirical view of parties as organizations with a high level of institutionalization (Wolkenstein 2019). By recoupling the lifeworld practice to the systemic organization, they prioritize a form of political intersubjectivity and reconsider the traditional linkage function of parties from this perspective. Second, the distinction between party and faction serves as one of the theoretical bases for this family of normative theories that agree on resisting, to a greater or lesser extent, the “empiricization of the idea of party” (White & Ypi 2016, 8; Bonotti 2017, 105). The distinction should be understood not as an architectural

foundation but rather as providing coherence along with the rest of theoretical elements. The above-mentioned theories draw different consequences from the shared basic distinction, although all of these theories, to a greater or lesser extent, integrate deliberative components. And third, the distinction centers the normative relevance in the political construction of the common good, which is the concern par excellence of political philosophy. Partisans are political subjects united around a series of ideologies and particularistic values and interests, but they are not sectarian as far as they assume commitments and obligations that are based on principles that refer in turn to the search of a generalizable understanding of the common good. “Presenting partial values and demands in a way that takes into account general ends and the common good, therefore, is the distinctive normative attribute of partisanship” (Bonotti 2017, 105).

The distinctiveness of parties and partisans “at their best” should enable to critically assess the actions and interactions of the really existing parties. This critical and potentially transformative perspective connects with the idea of party-faction reversibility that can be found with varying intensities in Sartori and Urbinati among others. According to Sartori, factions have long preceded the rise of parties and have always been a part of politics for “simple and compelling” reasons. It is just because of such longevity and inertia that “parties may well relapse into something resembling faction. In this sense factionalism is the ever-present temptation of a party arrangement and its ever-possible degeneration” (Sartori 1976, 22-23). Urbinati also warns that parties can be reverting into factions insofar as today they are mostly “seen as detrimental to the general good... [M]ature democracies are characterized by a mass reaction against parties, whose progressive separation from society makes them resemble factions”. For her, the recent political theories of parties invite “to think that at the bottom of this phenomenon [i.e., the reaction

against parties and the growth of anti-partyism] there is precisely the erosion of partisanship and its transformation in factionalism” (Urbinati 2019d, 101; see also Sala 2019, 229). Arguably, the new theorists aim to face the contemporary crisis of political parties - and, in part, the mutations of democratic societies- by adhering to the normative view with which Sartori (1976, 23) responded to the inescapable propensity of parties to factionalism: “The actual distinction between party and faction may indeed become fine; but precisely for this reason it should be kept conceptually firm. The more parties come to behave like factions, the more it is important to realize that our rebuke is directed less against the idea of party than against its factional degeneration.”

The diagnosis of such crisis and mutations has been pointed out and analyzed by several contemporary political scientists (Mair 2013, Ignazi 2017). Parties should bridge between the state and society, as Sartori stated, but they no longer do so, Peter Mair sentenced in his book *Ruling the void*. They have become so disconnected from society and have been integrated to such extent into state structures while having turned economically dependent, that they are no longer able to function as political mediations and linkage. It is their development in representative democracies that has led them to degenerate on both sides: on the one hand, the establishment of the cartelization that favors technocracy and, on the other hand, the fostering of the disaffection of the masses that fuels the populist moment. The kernel of the matter reappears once and again in the advocates of the new party theories. For instance, Rosenblum and Muirhead identify the current crisis in “the failure of parties to do their fundamental job: they are not connecting representative legislatures to the people” (Muirhead and Rosenblum 2012, 102-103; see also 2020, 97-98 and Muirhead 2019). The problem animating *Rethinking Party Reform* by Wolkenstein is to counter the inability of contemporary political parties to mediate between citizens and the state (Wolkenstein

2020). Quotations could be multiplied at will. Contemporary parties that increasingly lead to the decoupling while turning into factions obviously betray their traditional functions, such as those of representation and mobilization. As a consequence of the fact that the rise of populisms derives from, and takes advantage of, the failure of traditional parties to fulfill their mediating and motivational functions, some theorists see populism's strength as consisting precisely in the delegitimation of party democracy and party pluralism (Bickerton and Invernizzi Accetti 2015, Urbinati 2015, 2019a and 2019b; for the case against the new conspiracism, see Muirhead and Rosenblum 2019, 81-100).

Certainly, the reasons for resisting the “empiricization of the idea of party” remain responsive to the reasons explaining the decline of membership-based party politics, the dealignment between parties and constituents, the erosion of their traditional social anchorage, and the electoral volatility and growing abstentionism. The new pro-party theorists are quite sensitive to the concomitant processes of the endogenous mutation of both our audience democracies (Manin 1997) and the cartelization of parties (Katz and Mair 1995), which have turned them ideologically blurred and dependent on the media, as well as to consumerist and market logics that increasingly colonize and confiscate the autonomous dynamics of the political, whose operation has to be guided by social and collective principles. Their shared concern is that the strengthening of partisanship should contribute to reactivate or reform above all party justificatory and linkage functions. The aspired reconnection would be possible only if ordinary partisans regain prominence. Parties would distance from factions insofar as more and self-conscious partisans join and organize themselves according to shared understandings and interpretations of the common good. Partisanship is here an associational practice that overlaps but also takes precedence over parties as organizations that have become “public utilities” (Van

Biezen 2004). On the one hand, only by placing engaged partisanship at the center of political life would it be possible for the parties to recouple the functions they should activate into the political system with the functions they are responsible to develop in the lifeworld. On the other hand, the central role of partisanship in political life and its extent to broader layers of citizenship should better channelize the expression of political claims and reasons to influence the decision-making and be included in laws and policies. For deep pluralist theorists as Rosenblum and Muirhead, the practices by which partisanship is oriented to the common good rely on the virtues of loyalty and regulated and non-violent rivalry, that is, on the duties of honestly engaging and confronting others on the basis of the political recognition thereof as opponents with different or even contrary but legitimate views. For the theorists of public reason, the orientation to the common good relies on specific duties of justification that are internal to the partisan practice and positionality (Bonotti, 2017, 100) or is due to “an attempt to move beyond a particularist viewpoint with the aim of demonstrating how a certain claim has public appeal” (White & Ypi 2011, 385). In both cases, the normative understanding of parties as particular associations that promote the good of the whole political community highlights them as bilingual agents with the abilities to speak both to the fellow partisans and supporters and the general public, to articulate particular perspectives and values through justifications based on public reasons, and to monitor the further translation of laws and policies in the real life of the people. Moreover, the *defactionalization* of parties would be presumably a crucial contribution to solving the hitherto decaying motivation of the masses to participate democratically, a hope which the deep pluralist advocates of the ethics of partisanship think to focus more realistically than the approaches centered on public reason (Muirhead 2019).

III

Beyond unreasonableness and factionalism

To counter the usual accusations directed at Rawls' theory for being "inhospitable to the kind of democratic contestation of which political parties are the main channels", Bonotti intends to show that "there is in fact considerable scope for democratic contestation within political liberalism" (2017, 40). Political liberalism nurtures party politics and party pluralism precisely because it leaves key issues open to democratic disputes, among them – as Bonotti mentions towards the end of Chapter 3 of his book – the controversies around religious issues and, more importantly, the highly contested socio-economic matters that have drawn the longstanding parties' borders on the left-right political spectrum in most of the Western party systems: "This disagreement [regarding issues of social and economic justice], we might add, is grounded in the burdens of judgement and it is here to stay. To ignore it, or to minimize its significance, would be highly problematic" (2017, 60). Certainly, Bonotti's preference for the democratic openness qualifies some Rawlsian views, such as the scope of the guarantee of constitutional protection of the freedom of speech. Regarding the latter, he states more generally that "granting constitutional recognition to certain principles and rules removes them completely from democratic contestation only in ideal terms. Even the most undisputed and 'permanent' constitutional provisions, that is, can in practice be revoked or amended [...] After all, many rights and liberties are constitutionalized within liberal democracies but people may still disagree regarding how these are best realized" (2017, 50 and 60). In contrast to this sort of second-level disagreement, contentious questions of social and economic justice in contemporary liberal democratic societies should not even be constitutionalized, or only could be so under penalty of being unreasonable. For Bonotti, who

here agrees with Rawls while criticizing Cécile Fabre (2000), the constitutionalization of social and economic rights would not be respectful of the reasonable disagreement on liberal and egalitarian principles neither consistent with political liberalism. Therefore, the issues concerning the implementation of these rights, which inevitably fuel further disagreements, are both reflected in and projected by the partisan debates and party programs. As the ‘wide’ conception of public reason allows comprehensive conceptions to enter public discussion, provided that public reasons are offered in due time, it is up to the members of parties to identify and articulate the reasons with which the decisions concerning these highly contested issues will have to be justified.

Despite Bonotti’s willingness to accommodate diversities and dissents and ensure a wide scope for democratic contestation within political liberalism, central elements of his idealized account of parties and partisanship seem to hinder such a democratic openness and limit the real range of what might be contestable. Parties and partisans are explicitly restricted to liberal societies and view the political community as united by “certain broadly shared values and principles such as freedom and equality” (Bonotti 2017, 106). By inescapably moving within the boundaries of political liberalism, parties and partisans cannot but express and shape reasonable disagreements –that is, disagreements that are nonetheless in accordance with the shared evaluative standards of political liberalism- if they are to avoid relapsing into factionalism. In other words, they are constrained to be reasonable, that is, to ground their proposals on accessible reasons while adhering them to shared liberal values; otherwise, they turn into factions. In the pages that follow we make some comments on the apparent selectivity of this view of parties as carriers of reasonableness in a Rawlsian sense, and on the difficulties to host in this way the wide and abstract category of “parties and partisans that endorse unreasonable doctrines” (Bonotti 2017, 175).

It should be noted first that the very meaning of factionalism is largely resignified by the constraints of reasonableness. Bonotti's argument combines an intrinsic defense and an instrumental defense of partisanship (Efthymiou, 2018): internal obligations to party practices and partisan positions support the prevailing justification-based account, which aims in turn at ensuring democratic legitimacy and stability. Partisans' location within the public political forum, their influence upon coercive state institutions, and the specific normative demands of partisanship provide the rationale to the claim that partisans ought to display a singular commitment to public reasonableness (Bonotti 2017, 173 and 156). Even if fair play obligations do not exhaust the range of duties and commitments that underpin the intrinsic defense of partisanship, the constraints of public reason that partisans need to meet by justifying their claims signal the specific difference with factionalism, since such constraints publicly frame and shape the range of proposals and contestations that serve as instruments for the public good that partisans endorse.

Hence, the key to distinguish parties from factions is not only the Burkean-Sartorian distinction, but above all the Rawlsian idea of "reasonableness". More precisely, it is the former molded and reinterpreted through the latter. According to Bonotti, the good partisan seeks to promote that which from the perspective she shares with other partisans is the good of the entire political community; moreover, she strives to justify her political and legislative proposals to the whole political community, not just the like-minded citizens, constituents and fellow partisans; and in undertaking this justificatory task she collaborates to shape the common good: "commitment to the common good [is] manifested specifically in a commitment to providing public reasons in support of legislation" (Bonotti 2019b, 498). In contrast to these partisans' commitments, members of factions and interest groups

do not have to respect the common good if what they seek is their own partial interests and their particular conception of the good. Likewise, factionalists are not obliged to reason their claims or at most they reason them from their own and exclusive points of view. Partisans are instead committed to publicly reason and debate with other parties and other citizens their proposals constrained by a non-particularistic conception of the good.

While Bonotti wants to reconstruct the normative dimension internal to the partisan practices, one can still wonder whether his idealized view of parties as agents of justification, as Muirhead and Rosenblum point out, “revolves around an independent concept of justification and stands apart from existing political institutions”, and whether it neglects in this way other democratic functions “such as representation, political mobilization and the definition of the terms of the political division” (Muirhead and Rosenblum 2020, 102). Bonotti has reacted to this kind of objection and has discussed the tension between linkage and public justification functions of parties (Bonotti 2020). However, it is also worth asking whether it offers at least an operational criterion to sharply differentiate between genuine political associations that aspire to discover and build the general interest and those that pursue objectives of a purely particular or even sectarian nature. Certainly, democratic parties often strive to show that their ideological foundations provide reasons for endorsing shared values and institutions more generally. Yet it might be argued that real-world partisans continually take into account the common good thanks to a sort of “civilizing force of hypocrisy” mechanism. Alongside their legitimate aspiration to win and unite as many wills as possible, they may well be “extrinsically motivated by the fear of social sanction due to widely accepted norms concerning how partisanship or political speech ought to look; ... or by the dynamics of party competition to present their proposals in terms

of the common good” (Wolkenstein 2018, 258).³ Further, it might be argued that a clear dichotomy can hardly be sustained in pluralistic societies where real politics understandings and expressions of the public good are overdetermined by particular interests. Many self-interested agents in society try to speak to the general public and pass themselves off as democratic parties, and parties that primarily stand for particular interests or single issues (for instance, animal and agrarian parties) dress up and conform to the convenient rhetoric of a non-particularistic conception of the good. Yet local and regionalist parties or environmental parties, for instance, are not necessarily more factional than national and catch-all parties. It is not only, as White and Ypi often recognize, that there is a continuum rather than a dichotomy (White & Ypi 2016, 5, 34; Bonotti et al. 2018). Rather, the entanglement between parties and factions is so inextricable and ubiquitous that a critical assessment is pretty often impracticable. Moreover, the “self-attributions of reasonability” frequently abound (Ferrara 2019, 225). The rhetoric of culpable transgression of the dichotomy is not less uncommon than the rhetoric of the common good in ordinary political contest, where self-attributions of reasonableness often enough become delegitimizing charges against political adversaries.

Moreover, even if the distinction would offer a non-arbitrary criterion to demarcate overlapping entities, “it does not give us the means to evaluate a wealth of discourses and practices that may

³ Sartori argued in a similar vein when differentiating parties from factions: “To be sure, party members are not altruists, and the existence of parties by no means eliminates selfish and unscrupulous motivations. The power-seeking drives of politicians remain constant. What varies is the processing and the constraints that are brought to bear on such drives. Even if the party politician is motivated by crude self-interest, his behaviour must depart – if the constraints of the system [of parties’ competition] are operative – from the motivation” (Sartori 1976, 22).

run counter to the principles of political pluralism without directly challenging democracy's minimal institutional framework" (Herman 2017, 741). At the end of the book, Bonotti briefly mentions the broad and internally plural category of "parties and partisans that endorse unreasonable doctrines" (2017, 175). This category extends to that of "unreasonable parties and partisans", which, according to Bonotti, are those that do not recognize Rawls's definition of reasonableness, which means that they disregard the burdens of judgment and do not endorse fair terms of cooperation (Rawls 2005, 49, 375). Given the restrictive internal connection that he establishes between partisanship and reasonableness, it is not surprising that such parties do not only fall outside the domains of political liberalism but are also excluded from the very concept of party and partisanship: "Parties that fail to do this [i.e., to honor the commitment to reasonableness] therefore lie outside political liberalism and, more importantly, outside the very realm of partisanship, intended as a normative ideal. In this sense, they are factions rather than parties" (2017, 137-138). The category of "unreasonable parties and partisans" seems to encompass a broad range of specimens of nonliberal factionalism: not only those who hold racist claims, misrecognize and attack minorities, or explicitly support fascist platforms, but also all sort of populist parties, as well as all sort of the so-called "anti-system parties", i.e., "parties that are not fully committed to liberal democratic norms" (2017, 137). The label "anti-system parties" was once applied to (former) communist parties and green parties. Yet, presumably, they could include among others anti-establishment parties that take advantage of liberal and democratic institutions they do not believe in and that even would drop or undermine them whenever they could. At the end of the book, Bonotti also declares that he has neglected the assessment of those "unreasonable parties that are truly inimical to the central tenets of political liberalism" (2017, 175). Although he left this unanswered

question as a worthy subject for a future research, such an absence seems to be actually a problem for his theory.

What Bonotti (2017, 137) does reveal in the book is that it is consistent with his liberal theory to try to curb such factions or self-styled parties that violate the criterion of shareability while they participate in a democratically governed polity. In this regard, he reminds us Rawls's expression concerning the existence of unreasonable "doctrines that reject one or more democratic freedoms", which "gives us the practical task of containing them – like war and disease – so that they do not overturn political justice" (Rawls 2005, 64). In his response to an objection from Enrico Biale urging him to clarify how populist parties could be contained (Biale 2019, 220-221), Bonotti declares in favor of different forms of intervention according to "degrees of unreasonableness." For this reason, while softer measures will usually suffice to graduate the tolerance to the intolerant, "more drastic interventions (e.g., in the spirit of militant democracy)" (Bonotti 2019a, 233) should not be ruled out in exceptional cases. Severe, even aggressive liberal measures of militant democracy might come to be applied to "more extreme types of unreasonable parties." That seems to be the case when explicitly fascist and authoritarian parties, segregationist parties or parties promoting terrorism seek to undermine constitutional essentials, reverse liberal democratic values, and violate fundamental rights. As we are told elsewhere, Bonotti also considers a proportionate measure the banning of parties that resort in a continuous, persistent and recalcitrant way to vituperative forms of hate speech: "partisans should be subject to the same penalties incurred by citizens in general when they use hate speech. Furthermore, in exceptional circumstances this might also justify banning those political parties that make a systematic and sustained use of hate speech, as Nancy Rosenblum, for

example, suggests” (Bonotti 2017, 173-174)⁴. Arguably, these types of interventions that restrict the political rights of some groups of citizens to protect the rights of other groups should not only be exceptional and proportionate, but also temporary and subject to independent and regular evaluation (Kirschner, 2014). On the other hand, it is not entirely clear whether Bonotti would support the dominant model of court-centered “judicial review”, also known as the constitutional paradigm of militant democracy, or he rather favor that the political mechanisms for guarding democracy should be publicly discussed and decided in view of the political contingencies.

However, rather than the self-contained democratic self-defense that should guide the proportionated measures of militant democracy (Kirschner 2014), Bonotti seems to prefer that “milder forms of intervention” be applied in response to the degrees of unreasonableness that characterize most populist parties, which are an expression rather than purely a rejection of democracy. As much as these parties legitimately claim to embody democratic values and give a legitimate role to competitive elections and the decisions by majority, they cannot help but continue to be factions that oppose the democratic system as it is understood by political liberalism. Bonotti cites approvingly the “duty of pressure”, which Badano & Nuti (2018) define as “a moral duty requiring that ordinary reasonable citizens press the unreasonable they know (e.g., relatives, friends and colleagues) on their political views to change their mind and push them towards greater reasonableness”. While for Badano and Nuti it is an imperfect moral duty assigned to all reasonable citizens in their encounters in nonpublic forums

⁴ Along with the incitement to hate, Rosenblum (2008, chapter 9) critically assessed other three justifications for banning political parties: violence, existential threat to the political identity, and outside support, interference, and control.

with their unreasonable acquaintances, Bonotti suggests that “parties could play an important role in fulfilling this duty in a more systematic way” (Bonotti 2019a, 33). Again, it is not clear how such measures would be implemented. Moreover, it is not always possible (or even advisable) to promote the assimilation and respect of civic duties “to discursively engage the unreasonable that befalls citizens” nor to press rhetorically and persuasively the alleged factionalists to change their minds. Bonotti could perhaps accept the institutionalization of other ordinary practices to contain the spread of unreasonableness at the level of the party system as well. The potential of tailored engagement in the private censure of unreasonable citizens could be publicly transformed and institutionally encouraged with the introduction of measures that could be viewed as contemporary forms of ostracism (Malkopoulou 2016 and 2017). These de-presentative measures would be alternatives to militant democracy that place the *demos* at the central stage of the struggle against extremist parties and rely on political commitments resulting from self-imposed duties by all reasonable parties.

We think that Bonotti roughly shares the argument of the parties as factions and the picture of the current crisis of party politics as outlined in section 2 of this paper. By concentrating the essence of partisanship in the norm of reasonableness, he aspires to signal the criterion for normatively taming distorted political practices in our contemporary democracies. Obviously, the theorist cannot but speak from a particular and situated point of view. However, the position of the enunciation hardly avoids revealing traces of moral superiority, seemingly so invested as to decide who are eligible to have their membership card for liberals, democrats or for both withdrawn. However, the absence of a clear answer to the questions of the severe and effective containments or, at most, the appeal to a defensive position and “sterilizing strategy” (Urbinati 2019b, 1072) against those who contest what

should not be questioned reveals precisely what a democratic theory of partisanship has to reframe in a more radical way: the political relevance and the democratic challenge of what Bonotti calls those “parties and partisans that endorse unreasonable doctrines” and those alleged factions that, while contesting the liberal-democratic model, are nevertheless democratic agents that have legitimate interests and therefore rights to participate in our really existing democracies.

The idealization that partisans should build the common good in terms of reasonableness deflates once partisanship is regarded from the perspective of a deeply pluralist and adversarial conception of democracy. Then the notion of reasonableness itself (combining the recognition of the burdens of judgment and the endorsement of mutually acceptable terms of cooperation) can only become useful to appease contemporary partisans’ discrepancies insofar as it has had a historical development and retain a contextual character. To say it with Muirhead, “our agreement is the residue of earlier partisan fights” (Muirhead 2014, 74) and even our most foundational values are but products of partisan conflicts. Reasonable partisans, in this sense, recognize the persistence of conflicts in such a way that regard their political community itself “as a site of contestation in which even our foundational commitments nourish disagreement” (Muirhead 2014, 77). In brief, political disagreement runs so deep that it cannot be reasonably overcome, and all social and political agreements are therefore contingent, provisional, and reversible.

The search of solutions to the current crisis of parties does not consist so much in the avoidance of their alleged propensity to relapse into factionalism, as in reacting in the first instance to their increasing inability to propose attractive and transformative horizons and to solve problems that citizens consider as their most relevant and high priority concerns. A radical-democratic

alternative could be in a position to reframe the normativity of the parties and the demandable qualities of partisans in light of this need to reform political organizations and to revitalize the associative spirit among free and equal engaged citizens. This doesn't need to be seen as a sort of crusade for the *defactionalization* of parties. There are at least two senses of radical democracy involved here, one that urges to rethink the centrality that socio-economic issues have for parties and partisan practices from the perspective of their democratizing interventions, and another that takes conflict as pivotal in political communities and calls for vigorous partisan contestation as the central mechanism for the mediating parties to articulate demands and influence decision-making. These meanings address the linkage function of parties, but neither of them requires to be burdened with the liberal ideal of reasonableness. According to the second meaning, democracy has rules and actors, no restrictions and guardians in advance. Contrarily to liberal measures of militant democracy, it is incumbent on partisans themselves to identify the range of permissible contestation and to fight for compromises among democratic parties rather than amputations or sterilizations of extremist ones. According to the first sense, Bonotti's misguided view of good partisans in a sufficiently just liberal society when real societies remain deeply unjust (Ypi, 2019) disregards the inequalities of power and wealth that undermine and disturb the social and economic conditions of democratic practices, including those of partisans. In a radical-democratic view of partisanship, parties should work both as advocates of the political rights generally, also those their partisans exercise and represent, and as an instrument of influence and control over the state and, from the public institutions themselves, also over the economic powers that factionalize politics. Ultimately, a radical democratic position takes partisanship as an indispensable political intersubjectivity that should deepen and ensure the wide conditions in which collective

self-rule can be exercised and to contribute in this way to habilitate citizens with the democratic channels for the civic appropriation of power.

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PARTISANSHIP AND PUBLIC REASON



PARTISANSHIP BEYOND CIVIC FRIENDSHIP

BY

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Partisanship Beyond Civic Friendship

Kris Klotz

The introduction of Matteo Bonotti's *Partisanship and Political Liberalism in Diverse Societies* highlights several motivations for the book (2017, 1-2). Despite the influence of John Rawls's *Political Liberalism*, the existing literature connecting this theory to partisanship is very limited.¹ Even beyond Rawls, there has been limited engagement with this topic by normative political theory. Bonotti's book, then, addresses an urgent need for more normative political theories of partisanship. Focusing on political liberalism in particular, Bonotti argues that "political liberalism needs and nourishes political parties" (*ibid.*, 175). With this argument, Bonotti "hope[s] to have at least partially rescued Rawls's theory from the widespread accusation that it is inhospitable to real-world politics, and especially to party politics." Since this paper will ultimately

¹ Following Bonotti, I use partisanship in the sense of "participation in politics through political parties," bracketing (for the moment) its negative connotations (2017, 1).

conclude that Bonotti's rescue attempt fails (though it nonetheless contributes to the more general project of developing a normative theory of partisanship), it is necessary to introduce the accusations that require Rawls to be rescued in the first place.

As Bonotti notes, this "rescue attempt" originated with an article by Russell Muirhead and Nancy Rosenblum (2006). The criticisms of Rawls identified by this article arise from "certain democratic theorists who, armed with the elusive notion of 'the political,' charge him with shrinking in disgust from politics generally and action by 'the demos' specifically" (*ibid.*, 99). Among the representatives of "the political," they cite Sheldon Wolin and Bonnie Honig as critics of Rawls, but also reference Hannah Arendt and Carl Schmitt. In contrast to these critics, Muirhead and Rosenblum focus on more concrete, institutional, and "ordinary" forms of politics. From this perspective, where democracy is characterized by competitions between political parties, they argue that political liberalism is not "antipolitical" but rather "needs and invites" parties, that they are "essential to political liberalism *even as an ideal*" (*ibid.*, 99-100, emphasis in original). To "rescue" Rawls from such accusations, then, means to shift to another sense of politics: the ordinary politics of parties, not "the political." Bonotti – who describes his argument as developing Muirhead and Rosenblum's article more comprehensively – follows suit.

This paper, too, will proceed according to the terms of ordinary party politics, as its primary aim is to evaluate Bonotti's claim about political liberalism's relation to partisanship. However, this distinction between ordinary politics and "the political" misses the relevance of the criticisms from representatives of the latter. These critics direct attention to the motivations of political liberalism – and even share these to some extent, but they interpret political liberalism's response to these motivations in such a way that political liberalism – in its own terms – seems to question the

normative value of partisanship, ordinary or extraordinary. In the terms of political liberalism, this common ground is represented by the valorization of pluralism. Political liberalism claims to understand pluralism not as a “disaster but rather as the natural outcome of the activities of human reason under enduring free institutions” (*PL* xxiv). This insight might indicate why normative political theory – even one with an “abstract and unworldly character” (*ibid.*, lx) – should be concerned with partisanship (beyond the fact that this topic is neglected in normative political theory).² From this perspective, partisanship is valuable not merely because parties are ordinary and therefore must be accommodated theoretically, but because we think they express a necessary or desirable feature of political life. Since “the common good is ever a matter of dispute,” as Muirhead claims in a more recent defense of partisanship, “[t]o serve the common good implicates us in a contest” (2014, x-xi).³ Attempts to articulate “a rational basis for agreement about the common good” – a longstanding goal of political philosophy, Muirhead says – “take the politics out of politics,” inevitably excluding and silencing some perspectives. Theorists of “the political,” especially those critical of Rawls, emphasize these same claims (despite their hostility to ordinary or institutional forms of politics). Yet, these claims motivate their critique of Rawls. They find political liberalism “antipolitical” – as Schmitt considers liberalism in general – because it seems to

² Bonotti has an answer beyond this: the critique of parties – that they are in crisis, for instance – implies that we need a theory of how partisans ought to be and what their duties are, though this presupposes the value of partisanship (2017, 175). Of course, he also argues that parties contribute to the aims of political liberalism, though this presupposes the value of political liberalism.

³ In this work, Muirhead in fact characterizes partisans as “adversaries,” citing Chantal Mouffe, another representative of “the political” critical of Rawls (cf. 2004, 107; Mouffe 2000).

eliminate, suppress, or neutralize political conflict (regardless of the place of parties in political liberalism).

For a theory founded on a positive recognition of pluralism, this is a potentially troubling accusation, especially if this theory is used as the source of a defense of partisanship. Yet, as Rawls's critics emphasize, the pluralism that primarily concerns political liberalism – having its historical origin in “the Reformation and its aftermath” – results not from disagreements over “the right” but over “the good,” or “the highest things,” as articulated by comprehensive moral, philosophical, and religious doctrines (*PL* xxiv, 4). Given these disagreements, political liberalism seeks to articulate the conditions of a basis of public justification – fair terms of political cooperation acceptable to all (reasonable) citizens. Although this project removes from the political agenda the most divisive issues and gives priority to the right over the good, this is meant to enable and protect conflicting doctrines of the good (cf. Forst 2002, 68). To achieve this goal, political liberalism removes, or at least severely constrains, other notable sources of political conflict, limiting (for instance) the scope of permissible conceptions of justice. Relatedly, Rawls claims that, through the recognition and realization of its fair terms of cooperation, conflicts deriving from differences in identity (such as class, race, ethnicity, and gender) “need not arise, or arise so forcefully” (2005b, 487). According to this reading, Rawls sacrifices “the political” – or at least disagreements over the just society and persistent sources of political conflict – in order to enable the non-political pursuit of the good life (cf. Wolin 1996).

This is not to say that Rawls completely eradicates political disagreement. He recognizes, within the context of a higher-order agreement on principles of justice, that unanimity is not to be expected, even on questions related to constitutional essentials and matters of basic justice. Yet, even here, his critics have reason to

be skeptical. Such disagreements call for *civic friendship*, which – as an embodiment of reciprocity – is the ideal political relation of political liberalism (2005b, 447). Those who reject this ideal transform political cooperation into a relation of friends and enemies. Since it “does not engage with those with think this way” (*ibid.*, 442), political liberalism again seems hostile to “the political.”

Bonotti rejects this antipolitical reading of Rawls’s political liberalism. He argues that political liberalism “needs and nourishes” partisans. While such partisans may not embody Schmitt’s distinction between friends and enemies or Wolin’s idea of fugitive democracy, they are – in Bonotti’s view – agents of significant democratic contestation over the common good. Moreover, insofar as they are necessary to achieve the aims of political liberalism, this kind of conflict is both necessary and desirable (from the perspective of those aims, at least). In this sense, his position rescues Rawls from the critics identified by Muirhead and Rosenblum, even if indirectly or “partially.”

This paper argues, however, that Rawls’s political liberalism is much less hospitable to real-world partisanship than Bonotti claims (though from a theoretical perspective different from that of representatives of “the political”). In order to accommodate reasonable disagreements characteristic of such partisans, Bonotti’s version of political liberalism must diverge from Rawls’s political liberalism. This should not suggest that Bonotti’s theory of partisanship is intended merely to accommodate realistic forms of partisanship. After all, Bonotti’s goal is to develop a normative theory of partisanship within the framework of political liberalism. Moreover, insofar as political liberalism aims at a *realistic utopia*, we might expect it to reflect – to some degree – partisan disagreements found in real liberal democracies (cf. Rawls 1999b, 6). From this perspective, Bonotti’s divergence from Rawls might suggest only a family quarrel internal to political liberalism over what degree of

ideological diversity it ought to permit. However, Bonotti's model of public reason introduces further differences – particularly, its use of overly general “evaluative standards,” which (I argue) provide an inadequate basis of public justification. This problem becomes evident when framed in terms of a broader (normative) limitation of political liberalism's relation to partisanship, namely, the “criterion of reciprocity.” This criterion is not only foundational to the aims of political liberalism but also specifies “the nature of the political relation in a constitutional democratic regime as one of civic friendship” (2005b, 447).⁴ Rawls's use of civic friendship raises questions about whether political liberalism provides an adequate or appropriate framework for understanding partisanship.

As I argue, Bonotti's partisan-friendly reading of political liberalism (especially his conception of public reason) undermines the conditions of reciprocity and civic friendship, indicating political liberalism's incompatibility with partisanship (as understood by Bonotti). The latter is too political for Rawls. While this conclusion challenges the success of Bonotti's rescue attempt, his view – when more clearly divorced from Rawls's – leads to an alternative: Bonotti's partisans or Rawls's civic friends. From this perspective, Bonotti better articulates the normative demands of partisans, while Rawls offers a political relation unsuited to a partisan world. This comparison is not merely an exegetical problem for Rawls's political liberalism (as important as that may be), but rather facilitates the evaluation of the normative value of partisans.

⁴ Lister 2013 and Leland & van Wietmarschen 2017 also stress the importance of civic friendship to political liberalism, though not in the context of partisanship.

I

Partisanship and the limits of political liberalism

Bonotti finds support for his claim that political liberalism “needs and nourishes” parties by identifying a number of key areas of this theory, especially public reason, that allow for some degree of partisan pluralism or ideological diversity.⁵ He argues that political liberalism does not require that principles of social and economic justice be entrenched in a constitution, thereby leaving such issues open to democratic contestation (2017, 61). This partisan pluralism at the level of principles of justice is reflected in the content of public reason, which is “given by a family of political conceptions of justice” (*ibid.*, 111; citing Rawls 2005b, 450). In addition to this argument about the content of public reason, Bonotti argues that the normative demands of public reason not only allow for partisanship but also coincide with those of partisans (*ibid.*, 3). This section focuses on conceptions of justice and the content of public reason, while the next section examines the normative demands of Bonotti’s “accessibility” conception of public reason.

While Bonotti rightfully identifies room for some degree of political pluralism in Rawls’s discussions of conceptions of justice, the question is whether this pluralism sufficiently reflects disagreements of “real-world” party politics to warrant the claim that political liberalism can be rescued from the accusation that it

⁵ This paper focuses on public reason, since that is where Rawls emphasizes the ideal of civic friendship. But Bonotti also finds partisans important to political liberalism outside this context. He argues, for example, that partisans can contribute to an overlapping consensus by facilitating connections between citizens’ comprehensive doctrines and the shared political values of a liberal democratic society. Muirhead & Rosenblum (2006) make a similar, though less developed, argument. As the latter note, this aspect of partisanship is, at the very least, underdeveloped by Rawls.

is inhospitable to such politics. As we will see, Bonotti diverges from Rawls's political liberalism – specifically, the egalitarian conditions of conceptions of justice – in order to accommodate real-world partisanship (at least to some degree). In light of Bonotti's response to these objections, this section leads to the question of whether Bonotti's departure from Rawls is merely a family quarrel internal to political liberalism or a more significant, normative departure.

I.1. Partisan conceptions of justice

Let's consider more thoroughly the evidence that political liberalism permits partisan pluralism. Recognizing that a public political culture may contain different fundamental ideas and that different social and economic interests may support rival conceptions of justice, Rawls argues that it is more realistic and more likely that the focus of an overlapping consensus will be a family of liberal conceptions, rather than a single conception (like justice as fairness) (*PL* 164ff.). Relatedly, in specifying the content of conceptions of justice, Rawls argues that while some principles of distributive, or socio-economic, justice (which include equality of opportunity and “a social minimum providing for the basic needs of all citizen”) are constitutional essentials, fair equality of opportunity and the difference principle (from the second principle of justice as fairness) are not (*ibid.*, 228-229). Since there is generally more widespread disagreement about such principles and their realization (unlike principles specifying equal basic rights and liberties), political liberalism avoids entrenching specific principles of socio-economic justice in a constitution, leaving such issues open to democratic contestation. Like disagreements over comprehensive doctrines, Bonotti argues, disagreements over these issues are a permanent feature of the political culture of liberal democracies, grounded in the “burdens of judgment” (2017,

48). Public reason thus will often become an orderly contest over different conceptions of justice that reflect these disagreements, though with an underlying agreement on constitutional essentials (*PL* 227). This further supports Bonotti's argument that Rawls's family of conceptions is hospitable to parties. In fact, Rawls even refers to the agreement on constitutional essentials reflected in this orderly contest in terms of the partisan idea of "loyal opposition" (*JF* 49).

However, a closer examination of Rawls's family of conceptions of justice reveals the limited degree to which partisanship is permitted by political liberalism, thus restricting its relevance to real-world politics. While specific socio-economic principles of justice would be open to democratic contestation, political discussions of such principles (like the difference principle) – and the reasons for and against them – are "to be decided by the political values of public reason," as these principles concern matters of basic justice (*PL* 229n.10). Public reason is constrained by a family of conceptions, along with the conditions that define these. To be eligible for this family, a liberal political conception of justice must meet the following conditions: (1) protect familiar basic rights; (2) assign them a special priority; and (3) include "measures to insure that all citizens have sufficient material means to make effective use of those basic rights" (*ibid.*, 156-157). The idea behind the third condition, Rawls explains, is "that below a certain level of material and social well-being, and of training and education, people simply cannot take part in society as citizens, much less as equal citizens" (*ibid.*, 166). The failure to guarantee the "fair value" of the political liberties, Rawls claims, has been one of the main defects of constitutional governments historically, which further indicates political liberalism's otherworldliness (see *TJ*, 198).

While Rawls allows that different conceptions will have different principles to meet the third condition, the range of ideological diversity or partisan pluralism permitted by this condition is quite restricted - according to Rawls's interpretation of this condition, at least. Rawls is explicit, for example, that libertarianism, defined in terms of purely formal constitutional liberties without the all-purpose means to make effective use of those rights, does not qualify as liberal (*PL* lvi). Additionally, libertarianism "allows excessive social and economic inequalities [as the] invisible hand...favors an oligopolistic configuration of accumulations" (*ibid.*, lvi, 267). This conception of justice cannot secure stability "for the right reasons," which would require public financing of elections, fair equality of opportunity, "especially in education and training," a "distribution of income and wealth meeting the third condition of liberalism," "society as employer of last resort," and the assurance of basic healthcare for all citizens (*ibid.*, lvi-lvii). More generally, these measures are necessary for the form of public deliberation contained in the ideal of public reason to be possible and fruitful.

Disagreements over such measures are characteristic of partisan divides in many actually existing liberal democracies. By excluding these disagreements in advance with such egalitarian restrictions, it might seem that Rawls uses a partisan conception of justice to define the family of acceptable partisan views – a "disguisement instead of a solution," as Wolin says in the very critique that motivates (via Muirhead and Rosenblum) Bonotti's rescue attempt (1996, 119). The egalitarian demands that political liberalism places on conceptions of justice and political institutions indicates that its form of partisanship would bear limited resemblance to the partisan conflicts characteristic of existing liberal democracies, as would the more highly idealized citizens capable of agreeing on this more restricted family to contemporary partisans.

For similar reasons, Lea Ypi suggests – in her critique of Bonotti – that it is not clear that “any existing liberal society actually meets the demanding standards” of Rawls’s political liberalism (2019, 467). Furthermore, abandoning those demanding standards – via an accommodation of empirical forms of partisanship – risks affirming existing balances of power. For instance, Ypi worries about “the constitutional subordination of political power to the economic interests of property-owning elites in existing liberal democracies” (2019, 467). For Ypi, this means that public reason will inevitably reflect an “economic bias that undermines” political equality. This objection relates, of course, to Rawls’s concerns about the third condition of liberalism: “in the absence of this condition, those with wealth and income tend to dominate those with less and increasingly to control political power in their own favor” (*PL* xlvii). From this perspective, Ypi questions one of the central assumptions of Bonotti’s use of political liberalism, namely, that he argues from the perspective of a “reasonably just” society, or the type of society assumed by political liberalism (cf. Bonotti 2017, 12; *PL* lx).

Bonotti recognizes this problem to some extent, but must, then, diverge from Rawls’s political liberalism in order to accommodate real-world partisanship (though this divergence is not stated explicitly as such in his book). Building on his argument that Rawls’s political liberalism allows for more democratic contestation on socio-economic issues than generally assumed, he suggests (in his response to Ypi) that reasonable disagreement about such issues should be taken more seriously than Rawls does (2019, 499). He argues, for example, that “the realization of the fair value of political liberties is the object of reasonable disagreement”

(*ibid.*, 499).⁶ Therefore, public reason and conceptions of justice should not be restricted by egalitarian socio-economic principles or conditions. On this point, he adds, “it is my conviction that Rawls’s gradual shift of focus from justice [in *TJ*] to political legitimacy [in *PL*] should also have implications for how we view the place of socio-economic matters under political liberalism” (2019, 499). In this way, political liberalism and public reason become more hospitable to real-world partisanship, allowing for a more inclusive family of conceptions, permitting, for instance, both classical liberal and egalitarian views.

Admittedly, Rawls is also willing to accommodate “different fundamental ideas and different social and economic interests” (*PL* 167). This motivates, for instance, his support of a family of conceptions with distinct principles of justice. From this perspective, Bonotti’s defense of greater ideological inclusivity would more accurately express the aims of political liberalism, and it would seem that his divergence is consistent with Rawls’s project, the difference being only a family quarrel over the extent of this inclusivity. As such, his differences from Rawls would not undermine his rescue attempt. However, as I discuss in the next section, Bonotti’s accessibility model of public reason leads to additional divergences from Rawls, which call into question whether his theory of partisanship can sustain the normative demands of public reason.

⁶ He also suggests that Rawls provides alternative ways of guaranteeing the fair value of political liberties (e.g., public financing of elections) that are capable of “insulating politics from economics rather than by making politics dependent on a certain kind of egalitarian economics” (2019, 500). Admittedly, Bonotti’s suggestion is brief, but it is not clear how such measures would be immune from the socio-economic contestation he valorizes.

I.2. The normative demands of partisans and public reason

Bonotti's argument that political liberalism is hospitable to certain disagreements characteristic of existing liberal democracies does not mean his theory lacks normative demands. This is most evident in his model of public reason. Nonetheless, as we will see, this model is significantly less demanding than Rawls's.

In further support of his argument that political liberalism “needs and nourishes” partisanship, Bonotti argues that Rawls's conception of public reason permits partisanship and that the normative demands of public reason are harmonious with those of partisanship. He describes these normative demands as following from a commitment to the common good, including a commitment to treating others as free and equal and “therefore to not imposing upon them rules based on reasons that we cannot expect them to accept” (2017, 112). Bonotti's interpretation of the normative demands of public reason – namely, his view of what counts as an acceptable or public reason – shows how these demands coincide with those of partisans and further supports his claim that public reason supports partisanship.

Bonotti defends an accessibility conception of public reason: “reasons are public if they are accessible, i.e., if they are grounded in evaluative standards that all citizens accept, even if they do not accept certain specific reasons grounded in them” (2019, 499). Like Rawls's notion of *reasonableness*, these evaluative standards have both normative and epistemic aspects (cf. Forst 2017, 137; *PL* 49n.1). Normatively, they refer to “broadly shared political values [of] the public political culture of liberal democracies” (Bonotti 2017, 114-115). They also include “epistemic rules for the gathering of factual evidence and for drawing inferences” (2019, 501). In addition to permitting unshared reasons (unlike a “shareability” standard), Bonotti's accessibility conception allows

for conflicting public reasons to enter the process of justification, barring any “gross epistemic errors,” thus permitting publicly justified decisions on the basis of a balance of public reasons that includes conflicting reason (Badano & Bonotti 2020, 38). Permitting both unshared and conflicting reasons, this conception “allows for many more laws and policies to be publicly justified, thus broadening the scope of party politics and partisan pluralism” (Bonotti 2019, 508). At the same time, because partisans’ public reasons must “respect the limits imposed” by the broadly shared political values included in their evaluative standards, the normative demands of partisans coincide with those of public reason (2017, 115). Put positively, this reflects the “distinctive normative attribute of partisanship, [namely, p]resenting partial values and demands in a way that takes into account general ends and the common good” (*ibid.*, 105; cf. White & Ypi 2016, ch. 3).

Related to his defense of a more inclusive family of conceptions of justice, Bonotti’s accessibility conception is more inclusive due to the generality of its evaluative standards, particularly the shared political values of the public political culture of liberal democracies. While this generality supports his claim that public reason is permissive of ideological diversity, it risks undermining the normative demands of public reasons and further demonstrates his divergence from Rawls’s more demanding conception of public reason.

Admittedly, Rawls does say that public reason requires that we “sincerely think that our view of the matter is based on political values everyone can reasonably be expected to endorse”, seemingly reflecting the evaluative standards of Bonotti’s model (*PL* 241). However, for Rawls, public reason requires the use of reasons specified by a family of conceptions (with their three conditions). In contrast, Bonotti’s partisans are limited, from a normative perspective, only by indeterminate shared political values, like

equality and freedom. This difference reinforces the greater inclusivity of Bonotti's theory. Bonotti argues, for example, that "both classical liberal and egalitarian policies are in principle publicly justifiable, since the reasons in their support are grounded in shared liberal values (equality, fairness, liberty, etc.) that classical liberals and egalitarians share but interpret and rank in different ways" (2019, 499). Of course, in interpreting, ranking, and ordering these values, partisans render "those indeterminate values" more relevant and concrete (2017, 115). But, normatively, they are constrained only by such "indeterminate values."

For this reason, it is not accessibility in itself that leads to Bonotti's divergence, but rather his use of indeterminate political values as a shared evaluate standard. Relatedly, this issue is not (merely) the result of Bonotti's "family quarrel" over whether public reason needs to be more rigidly egalitarian, but rather indicates a disagreement over what level of generality public reason can tolerate in its evaluative standards (general political values or more particular limiting conditions). Moreover, this calls into question his assumption of well-ordered society (like Ypi's objection to his use of "reasonably just"), that is, a "a society effectively regulated by a public political conception of justice," as Rawls defines the "highly idealized concept" of a well-ordered society (*PL*, 35).⁷

⁷ Even though Rawls himself diverges from this definition by allowing for a family of conceptions, this family is more highly determined than Bonotti's conception. We could also say – since Rawls allows for an overlapping consensus on this family – that a well-ordered society would be regulated by such a family or, more generally, by the three conditions of liberal political conceptions of justice (cf. Quong 2011, 139n.2). On this point note the ambiguity in how Bonotti defines a well-ordered society. On the one hand, he appears to follow Rawls, by defining a well-ordered society as having a "shared and publicly recognized political conception of justice" (Bonotti 2017, 110;

This problem is reinforced by Bonotti uses of “public political culture” as part of the evaluative standards of public reason. Of course, as noted above, Rawls also appeals to public political culture: the content of a political conception of justice, for example, “is expressed in terms of certain fundamental ideas seen as implicit in the public political culture of a democratic society” (*ibid.*, 13). However, it should be stressed that the ideas and principles contained in this culture are *only* implicit (cf. Forst 2017, 131-132). As Rainer Forst argues, they need to be “reconstructed” in order to provide an adequate standard for public reason, or a public basis of justification, determining the conditions of which is the aim of political liberalism (cf. *PL* 38n.41). After all, the “shared” political values implicit in such a culture can be ranked and interpreted in many (and conflicting) ways, not all of which are necessarily acceptable or “reasonable” (consider Rawls’s exclusion of libertarianism, discussed above). Nor is it obvious that every interpretation of the values implicit in this culture would recognize “the idea of society as a fair system of cooperation” as the preferable idea of society implicit in this culture.⁸ Appealing to a liberal political culture, as Bonotti does – without also defining liberal conceptions of justice (or what counts as an acceptable conception), as Rawls does – suggests an insufficient public basis of justification, from the perspective of political liberalism.

citing *PL* 249). On the other hand, Bonotti explicitly defines such societies – much more loosely (reflecting his accessibility model of public reason) – as “societies with a shared liberal political culture” (*ibid.*, 110). Bonotti clearly departs from the former definition, as it would contradict the ideological inclusivity necessary for a theory of political liberalism amenable to partisanship.

⁸ Bonotti appeals to the latter idea (2017, 106). But his description of shared political values are brief and at times ambiguous. For our purposes, it is important to note that he presents the evaluative standards of public reason only in terms of general values, like equality and freedom (cf. *ibid.*, 114-115; 2019, 501).

Bonotti does claim that some conceptions are unacceptable, namely, illiberal conceptions that “contravene those basic liberal political values that are widely shared in liberal democracies (e.g., equality, freedom, etc.)” (2017, 115). In a footnote, he adds that “not all rankings may be permissible under political liberalism” (*ibid.*, fn. 8). Here he quotes Rawls’s claim that “not any balance of political values is reasonable” (*PL* 227). As an example, he writes, “a conception that ranks civil liberty so high that equality of opportunity is seriously undermined, or vice versa, will not provide a reasonable balance of political values” (*ibid.*). Notice that this example embodies the egalitarian judgment of libertarianism, discussed earlier. Yet, this is representative of the kind of reasonable disagreement Bonotti defends. The point is not that Bonotti contradicts himself, but rather that it is not clear that his view has the resources to determine which rankings, if any, are impermissible (or unreasonable), given the evaluative standards of his model of public reason.⁹

In the following section, I argue that these evaluative standards offer an inadequate public basis of justification and that this model cannot ensure the normative demands of public reason, as it diverges significantly from Rawls’s model. I frame these normative demands in terms of civic friendship because it both emphasizes the question of political liberalism’s relation to partisanship and

⁹ Ypi also raises an objection to Bonotti’s use of a public political culture. She suggests that Bonotti’s view, by relying too heavily on the political culture of existing liberal democracies, “collapses the distinction between the normative ideal and the empirical practice of partisanship” (Ypi 2019, 468-469). This objection focuses on whether Bonotti’s partisans, from this empirical perspective, could intrinsically develop the normative demands of public reason, as Bonotti claims such demands are intrinsic to partisanship (cf. Bonotti 2017, 62ff.). In contrast, my concern is with the generality of these normative demands and whether they can be sustained by partisans, even when they have an intrinsic commitment to public reason.

expresses a deeper normative commitment of political liberalism, namely, reciprocity.

II

Preserving the ties of civic friendship

Rawls's use of the criterion of reciprocity – “a duty arising from the idea of reasonableness of persons” (*PL* xlv fn. 14) – represents a broader normative limitation of political liberalism's capacity for partisanship, especially in the context of public reason. This is evident, for example, in the restrictions Rawls places on conceptions of justice: Rawls excludes libertarianism because it “allows excessive social and economic inequalities as judged by the *criterion of reciprocity*” (*PL* lvi, emphasis added). This criterion is the “limiting feature” of this family (2005b, 450). It is necessary in order to be able to reasonably accept fair terms of cooperation “as free and equal, and not as dominated or manipulated, or under the pressure of an inferior political or social position” (*PL* xlii). More generally, the criterion of reciprocity is inseparable from “the aim of political liberalism,” namely, “to uncover the conditions of the possibility of a reasonable public basis of justification on fundamental political questions” given the fact of reasonable pluralism (*ibid.*, xix). The criterion of reciprocity provides this condition in the form of the liberal principle of legitimacy: “our exercise of political power is proper only when we sincerely believe that the reasons we offer for our political action may reasonably be accepted by other citizens as a justification for those actions” (*ibid.*, xlv). Additionally, civic friendship expresses a commitment to the principle of legitimacy or, more generally, reciprocity: “the role of the criterion of reciprocity as expressed in public reason...is to specify the nature of the political relation in a constitutional democratic regime as one of civic friendship” (2005b, 447).

As an expression of reciprocity, civic friendship provides a framework to examine whether Bonotti's model has an adequate basis of justification that can ensure the normative demands of public reason. After introducing civic friendship's role in public reason in more detail, the remainder of the paper argues that Bonotti's model cannot maintain the conditions of civic friendship (and reciprocity).

II.1. Civic friendship and public reason

This use of civic friendship as an expression of reciprocity – or, more generally, as the ideal political relation of public reason – might reinforce (at least tentatively) the concern that Rawls's political liberalism is incompatible with partisanship. However, there are a number of initial reasons to doubt that the two political relations are necessarily opposed. First, Rawls opposes civic friends to those that reject reciprocity and public reason. This rejection produces a political relation of friends and enemies: “the political relation may be that of friend or foe, to those of a particular religious or secular community or those who are not; or it may be a relentless struggle to win the world for the whole truth” (*ibid.*, 442). As Bonotti's normative view of partisanship emphasizes, partisans do not reject public reason. Parties are not (necessarily) factions, or enemies. As discussed earlier, Bonotti claims that the normative demands of partisans coincide with those of public reason. From this perspective, they formulate public reasons that are acceptable (that is, accessible) to all. On the surface, this suggests that Bonotti's partisans are compatible with Rawls's civic friends (perhaps as two aspects of the same relation).

Moreover, civic friendship is compatible with one of the chief characteristics of partisans, namely, political disagreement. In public reason, Rawls notes, “unanimity of views is not to be

expected” (*ibid.*, 479). Nonetheless, civic friendship (and reciprocity) is maintained by acting in accordance with the idea of public reason, which “asks of us that the balance of those values we hold to be reasonable in a particular case is a balance we sincerely think can be seen to be reasonable by others” (*PL* 253). Bonotti’s partisan-friendly accessibility conception of public reason is designed for this very kind of disagreement.¹⁰ Again, Bonotti’s view allows for unshared and conflicting public reasons as long as they are grounded in shared evaluative standards. That is, despite a lack of unanimity, the partisans can recognize the (unshared and conflicting) public reasons of their rivals as reasonable (or, accessible, in Bonotti’s terms).

For Rawls, civic friendship remains possible even “failing this” mutual recognition. That is, even when we cannot regard another’s “balance of values” as reasonable, “we think the balance can be seen as at least not unreasonable in this sense: that those who oppose it can nevertheless understand how reasonable persons can affirm it.” He adds, “This preserves the ties of civic friendship” (*PL* 465). The situation described in this passage is worth examining more closely, because it indicates the limits of civic friendship – that is, where this relation is preserved, “failing,” as Rawls says, to achieve the ideal of public reason and legitimacy.

From the perspective of this ideal, citizens mutually recognize each other’s “balance of values” as reasonable (even if they disagree about what is most reasonable). In the limit case, however, this mutual recognition fails to occur: some balance of values is seen as unreasonable (that is, there is disagreement about whether it is reasonable at all). Nonetheless, Rawls says, the ties of civic friendship can be preserved, as long as it is possible to understand how a reasonable person could affirm that unreasonable position.

¹⁰ In fact, Bonotti & Badano (2020) use this passage in support of their argument that Rawls affirms an accessibility conception of public reason.

That is, we might view a certain balance of values – whether at the level of particular laws or conceptions of justice – as unreasonable (that is, unjustifiable), while nonetheless understanding either how a reasonable person could affirm that balance since, for instance, the burdens of judgment – the epistemic aspect of reasonableness – shapes our moral and political judgment, or since this person sincerely believes her position is justifiable (cf. *ibid.*, 57).

Since this kind of disagreement falls short of the ideal of public reason and legitimacy, it is undesirable if laws are enacted on the basis of reasons viewed by some as expressing an unreasonable balance of political values – that is, laws they believe are unjust. Yet, insofar as the “ties of civic friendship” are preserved in such situations, they are tolerable for Rawls’s political liberalism. In fact, “on some questions this may be the best we can do” (*ibid.*, 253). Moreover, Rawls thinks such undesirable outcomes are inevitable (cf. *TJ* 312). Defending the duty to comply with unjust laws, he notes that, even when citizens of a nearly just (or well-ordered) society act with “best of intentions” (or sincerely), “opinions of justice are bound to clash.” On the other hand (from a less ideal perspective), majority rule requires accepting “the risks of suffering the defects of one another’s knowledge and sense of justice” (*TJ* 312).

The question, then, is determining when such conflicts become intolerable (from the perspective of political liberalism). For Rawls, unjust laws are acceptable on certain conditions, namely, when “in the long run the burden of injustice [is] more or less evenly distributed,” assuming citizens are “committed to the principles of justice” (*TJ* 312).¹¹ More generally, when is civic friendship no longer – or at least less likely – to be possible or maintainable? The next section explores this question through an analysis of Bonotti’s

¹¹ Bonotti cites this passage, acknowledging that in such circumstances citizens are “relieved of any fair play political obligations” (2017, 25).

model of public reason. The question for Bonotti's model of public reason, then, is whether partisans can preserve the ties of civic friendship.

II.2. The limits of civic friendship

As discussed earlier, the evaluative standards of Bonotti's model of public reason are much more general than those of Rawls's, since the former consist in the general political values of liberal democracies, as opposed to the latter's specific conditions of liberalism. As I will argue, this generality, and the greater ideological inclusivity it entails, undermines conditions of reciprocity crucial to public reason, namely the condition that we "sincerely think that our view of the matter is based on political values everyone can reasonably be expected to endorse" (*PL* 241). That is, Bonotti's model of public reason increases the likelihood that some partisans, on the basis of their own conceptions of justice, will view their rivals' conceptions of justice and the public reasons based in those conceptions as unreasonable, or non-public or inaccessible, thus increasing the likelihood of disagreements about which reasons and conceptions qualify as reasonable (public or accessible). This is because the determination of what counts as accessible – as a reasonable balance of political values – will inevitably be influenced by one's own conception of justice (one's own interpretation of those values), not just the political values themselves.¹²

Consider the Rawlsian egalitarians' view of classical liberals (as discussed above, Bonotti accommodates both and views this a benefit of his theory). The former might say, according to their own interpretation of public political values, that the latter's

¹² As Rawls says, public reason requires that we "conduct our fundamental discussions in terms of what we regard as a political conception" (*PL* 241).

conception of justice is unreasonable (or even non-liberal, as Rawls thinks) because it ranks civil liberty so high that equality of opportunity is seriously undermined, its policies cannot preserve background justice, or, more generally, it undermines the conditions of reciprocity necessary for public reason to be possible in the first place (as Rawls thinks) (cf. Bonotti 2017, 115n.8). Such an understanding of one's own conception of justice will certainly influence one's estimation of other conceptions and the reasons based in and supporting them.¹³

Moreover, from the perspective of the egalitarians, it is possible that they would be subjected to publicly justified decisions on the basis of reasons they judge as non-public according to their own conception but which count as public according to "shared political values" (that is, according to Bonotti's accessibility conception of public reason). For this reason, they might view such decisions as inimical to themselves and their fellow citizens, as preserving – even if unintentionally – "the benefits of previous injustice" (cf. *PL* 17), for instance. From the perspective of their own conception, the justificatory process – by admitting non-public reasons and yielding decisions supported by them – would seem to violate the criterion of reciprocity – and the principle of legitimacy, as the former grounds the latter.

Again, the egalitarians' evaluation of such decisions, the justificatory process, and their rival's conceptions and reasons are made from within their own, more determinate, conception of justice, rather than from the general perspective of public reason, as understood by Bonotti. On the other hand, consider how the egalitarians appear from this general perspective. According to the perspective of public reason, the egalitarians might appear

¹³ This would indicate, against Bonotti's supposition, that it is not feasible to separate justice and legitimacy, from the perspective of partisans at least (cf. 2019, 499).

unreasonable, refusing to acknowledge public reasons as public or the classical liberal conception as reasonable.

Of course, even while it has more demanding standards, Rawls's political liberalism acknowledges that such situations happen – situations which I described earlier as undesirable from the perspective of public reason, where the “ties of civic friendship” are preserved. For Rawls, civic friendship is preserved when those who view a certain balance of values as unreasonable can nonetheless understand how someone reasonable could affirm that balance (cf. *ibid.*, 253). Notice that the conclusion from the preceding example resembles this situation. For instance, the egalitarian might understand – consistent with the burdens of judgment – how someone could come to hold a classical liberal conception of justice. However, from the normative perspective (or the perspective of justice), they interpret the classical liberal's position as unreasonable or inaccessible because their evaluation of other conceptions is tied up with their own interpretation of “shared political values.”

Even if such conflicts emerge, Rawls's rivals (or civic friends) have substantial common ground to fall back on, or to preserve the ties of civic friendship: “When citizens share a reasonable political conception of justice they share common ground on which public discussion of fundamental questions can proceed” (*ibid.*, 115). This common ground provides a “public framework,” enabling “mutually recognizable reasons.” Even without a single conception of justice, they “cohere around a family of political conceptions,” as Muirhead and Rosenblum say (2006, 103). They also have more socio-economic (though perhaps not philosophical or religious) common ground due to “fair background conditions.” That is, in a well-ordered society that thus coheres, Rawls claims, socio-economic conflicts “need not arise, or arise so forcefully” (2005b, 487).

In comparison, Bonotti's partisans have significantly less common ground. The greater generality of his evaluative standards – the shared political values of a public political culture – are not equivalent to Rawls's "public basis of justification." This generality makes Bonotti's view more ideologically inclusive, thus making ideological disagreement more likely. Additionally, this greater ideological inclusivity – a consequence of its generality – increases the scope of what is publicly justifiable, including decisions involving unshared and conflicting reasons. For instance, his view encourages conflict over socio-economic issues and deems justifiable those conceptions that would permit socio-economic inequalities viewed as unacceptable from the perspective of the family around which Rawls's civic friends cohere.

Again, Bonotti views it as a virtue of his theory that it accommodates deep disagreement over issues of socio-economic justice – like those that divide the egalitarian and the classical liberal – and leaves them open to democratic contestation. However, allowing more room for contestation or reasonable disagreement does not settle the problem of disagreements about what counts as *reasonable* (accessible) disagreement or whether public reasons and publicly justified decisions are viewed as reciprocal. Furthermore, the generality and inclusivity of "shared political values" cannot resolve such disagreements, because conceptions of justice can reflect incompatible rankings and interpretations of these values and thus incompatible standards of accessibility. Without a more determinate standard of public justification (like Rawls's more restrictive conditions of liberalism, but not necessarily these), it cannot prevent situations where public justification on the basis of conflicting and/or unshared reasons is viewed (by some at least) as a violation of reciprocity (and civic friendship).

Despite not having the common ground that enables Rawls's civic friends, Bonotti's partisans could still pursue civic friendship.

After all, civic friendship is not reducible to the enabling conditions of this common ground. In the undesirable conflicts that test the ties of civic friendship, parties are not necessarily trying to “win the world for the whole truth.” They are not (necessarily) factions or enemies. Instead, they disagree about what is an acceptable conception of justice. The partisan whose position is regarded as unreasonable by a rival might sincerely believe that her position is reasonable. Although partisans might view their rival’s position as unjustifiable, they do not have to regard the other as an enemy. They might seek to maintain a less hostile political relation, even if this requires sacrificing their own view of what is right, and potentially subjecting themselves to an outcome they regard as unjust – if they occupy a minority position, for example. The pursuit of such a path could have moral motivations: to respect their fellow citizens as free and equal. When this respect is mutual, rivals remain civic friends.

The problem for Bonotti’s view, though, is that it is less likely to maintain the conditions of this mutuality or reciprocity, because it lacks a substantial public basis of justification and is more susceptible to the conflicts Rawls hopes to mitigate. Moreover, these problems increase the likelihood of an unacceptable form of social order that falls far short of that envisioned by political liberalism, namely stability “for the right reasons.” Such form of stability requires a common framework of justification, making possible conditions of justificatory reciprocity. In contrast, a regime without these conditions suggests a regime that is stable (and political) “in the wrong way” (or merely contingently) and also potentially less stable, or more discordant, in general (cf. *PL* 142, 147).

This should not suggest that Bonotti’s partisans would inevitably become factional, only that such an outcome is more likely for them than for Rawls’s civic friends. Moreover, on

Bonotti's view, partisans could – potentially – contribute to the realization of higher forms of stability. Related to this point, in response to an objection from Ypi, Bonotti suggests that his accessibility conception of public reason has the resources to do just that (Bonotti 2019, 500-501). While general political values constrain partisans' public reason, they also enable them to “act as agents of change” in the context of public reason. That is, since these reasons do not need to be shared, partisans can introduce unrecognized and potentially transformative interpretations of shared political values. I do not deny that this is possible, but rather argue that his conception lacks the resources to maintain the conditions necessary for the form of stability envisioned by political liberalism.¹⁴ This question – of whether Bonotti's partisans could bring about such transformations – is a separate consideration from the question of whether Bonotti has developed a theory of partisanship compatible with political liberalism. After all, like Rawls, he assumes a well-ordered society (as I discussed above). If Bonotti were to position his partisans in these less stable or non-well-ordered contexts, that would only reinforce his divergence from Rawls's political liberalism.

Admittedly, these potential conflicts – from disagreement about the acceptability of rival ideologies to the threat of instability – are real problems and should not necessarily embarrass a theory of partisanship. However, such conflicts are too “political” for Rawls's political liberalism. They undermine the conditions of reciprocity and civic friendship. In this sense, Bonotti's family quarrel has become too quarrelsome to complete its “rescue attempt,” that is, to establish that Rawls's political liberalism is not inhospitable to real-world party politics.

¹⁴ Rawls, for instance, thinks that the transformation from lower forms of stability – from a *modus vivendi* to a constitutional consensus and from the latter to an overlapping consensus – is possible (cf. *PL* 158ff.).

III

Partisanship beyond civic friendship

While hospitable to realistic partisanship, Bonotti's accessibility model of public reason cannot ensure the conditions of justificatory reciprocity or civic friendship. This suggests that civic friendship – as an expression of reciprocity – is incompatible with partisanship, as understood by Bonotti. On the one hand, the conditions enabling Bonotti's partisans risk being too conflictual or too political to secure those of Rawls's civic friends. Conversely, we could say that Rawls's civic friendship, or the society that enables them, is too utopian, or antipolitical. In this regard, when compared to Rawls's, Bonotti's theory reminds us of the accusations that motivated his rescue attempt of Rawls's political liberalism.

While Bonotti presents his theory as an interpretation of Rawls, Bonotti's inability to complete this rescue attempt reinforces his divergence from Rawls. However, this is not necessarily a negative conclusion. Instead, we could read Bonotti's view not as "an implication or further development of Rawls's political liberalism" but rather as an independent contribution to theories of public reason and partisanship, as Ypi recommends (2019, 470). Viewed in this light, the comparison of Rawls and Bonotti is not merely about how to read Rawls (though this exegetical task is not unimportant) but rather facilitates the examination of the normative value of partisans (and civic friendship). That is, this comparison motivates a dilemma: Bonotti's partisans or Rawls's civic friends. The following (admittedly speculative) remarks, which are encouraged by Bonotti's contribution, only hint at the stakes of such an examination.

On the one hand, Bonotti's view is more hospitable to the partisan disagreements of actual liberal democracies. Despite its

concessions to reality (perhaps necessary for a theory of partisans), it contributes to a normative understanding of partisanship, one of Bonotti's initial aims. That is, it offers – when knowingly severed from Rawls – a normative theory of partisans for a (non-Rawlsian or non-well-ordered) society. Such a theory is not undemanding. After all, it asks partisans to look to the common good (even if this is inherently contentious on his model). This “distinctive normative attribute of partisanship” counters, to some degree, the threat of parties becoming factions (even if such a threat is more likely for his view than Rawls's). Moreover, by being more hospitable to ideological diversity (perhaps valuable in itself), Bonotti's theory expresses political liberalism's concern for pluralism.

On the other hand, this comparison of Bonotti and Rawls might call into question the lasting value of partisanship. It is not clear what value partisans (in any substantive sense) would have in a well-ordered society that could assure the conditions of justificatory reciprocity and civic friendship. Such a society, as understood by Rawls, precludes many of the disagreements characteristic of partisans in actual liberal democracies. Even if we assume partisans can help to achieve a more just society, then their role is ultimately provisional from an ideal perspective (cf. Muirhead and Rosenblum 2006, 105). Partisans would become civic friends, members of a “family” of conceptions.

Yet, this conclusion itself might challenge the value of a such an ideal. Imagining a world without partisans reinforces political liberalism's utopianism, perhaps to the detriment of its realism. Whereas Bonotti's model promotes political pluralism, Rawls's suppresses it, or at least restricts its scope and enabling conditions. Does this indicate an “unfaithfulness to the insights of political liberalism,” where pluralism is not a disaster but “the natural outcome of the activities of human reason under enduring free

institutions” (Muirhead and Rosenblum 2006, 105; *PL*, xxiv)? Of course, we should recall that the pluralism that primarily concerns Rawls arises from disagreements about the “highest things” (comprehensive doctrines), not about the just society (political conceptions of justice). Rawls imagines a society that limits the latter in favor of the former, where many of the conflicts motivating the latter “need not arise, or arise so forcefully” (2015b, 487).¹⁵

This perspective not only reinforces political liberalism’s opposition to partisans, as obstacles to the aim of political liberalism, but also reaffirms the accusation that political liberalism cannot do justice to “the political,” understood at least in the sense of acknowledging the persistence of disagreement – or “the perpetuity of political contest” – over the common good or the just society (cf. Honig 1993, 3). A further question, left unanswered by this comparison, is whether or to what extent such disagreement is an ineliminable or desirable condition of political life.

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¹⁵ For this reason, the conclusion that Rawls’s political liberalism is incompatible with partisanship would likely hold even if the evaluative standards of Bonotti’s model of public reason were less indeterminate.

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PARTISANSHIP AND PUBLIC REASON



DOES PARTISANSHIP CONTRIBUTE
TO STABILITY?

BY

JAY RUCKELSHAUS

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Does Partisanship Contribute to Stability?

Jay Ruckelshaus

Introduction

Many of the ills of contemporary liberal democracy concern political parties and partisanship. In the United States, partisanship is polarized, and many fear the citizenry is divided into warring camps, making compromise impossible (Campbell 2016; Iyengar et al., 2019). In many European democracies, where the party landscape is increasingly fragmented, declining rates of partisan affiliation instantiate generalized political disengagement, alienation, and distrust in democratic institutions (Ignazi 2017; Mair, 2013). Political scientists warn, in a vast empirical literature, that both forms of partisan pathologies threaten to destabilize democratic governance.

Yet despite the abundance of empirical examination, the topic of parties and partisanship has been greatly neglected within normative political philosophy. Political philosophers have tended to think about politics at such a high level of abstraction that parties and partisanship have become almost totally invisible, due no doubt in part to John Rawls's influence on the field. It is particularly fortunate, then, that there has begun to emerge a

literature on parties and partisanship – a literature to which Matteo Bonotti’s *Partisanship and Political Liberalism in Diverse Societies* is a significant contribution (Bonotti 2017, see also Rosenblum 2008; Muirhead 2014; White and Ypi 2016; Wolkenstein 2019).

One of Bonotti’s distinctive claims is that partisanship is vital to liberal-democratic politics because “parties contribute to the overlapping consensus that for Rawls guarantees stability in diverse societies” (Bonotti 2017, 3). To show this, Bonotti points to various features of political parties that enable them to contribute to overlapping consensus and stability, including, for instance, the fact that partisanship “involves a commitment to the common good rather than the sole advancement of merely partial interests” (Bonotti 2017, 101). This argument is highly significant, as it promises not only to remedy the anti-party bias within Rawlsian political liberalism, but to do so by arguing, against the trends just mentioned, that partisanship is essential for liberal-democratic stability, properly understood.

In this paper, I question this argument from partisanship to stability, and hence question stability-based arguments for partisanship’s normative value. I do so by claiming that Bonotti’s argument faces a dilemma generated by the fact that real-world partisanship does not typically display the stability-supporting features he supposes, such as a commitment to the common good, but, on the contrary, often exerts destabilizing effects. If Bonotti modifies his conception of partisanship to make it more closely resemble real-world partisanship, then his argument from partisanship to stability is put in jeopardy. Yet if he continues to conceive of partisanship in terms of features that do not closely resemble real-world partisanship, then it is unclear whether this argument is particularly interesting or significant. Furthermore, I will show how Bonotti’s likely response – an appeal to the

normative status of his account – fails to provide a solution to the dilemma, and instead raises further problems and questions.

In addition to posing challenges to Bonotti’s argument, the paper offers a dose of methodological self-consciousness that has so far been fairly absent in the new partisanship literature. My discussion casts light on certain issues within the debate over ideal and non-ideal theory – a debate that has so far played out, ironically enough, at a fairly ideal level, rather than in relation to first-order political phenomena such as parties and partisanship.

In this paper, then, I first summarize Bonotti’s stability-based argument for partisanship (Section II). I then present the dilemma for Bonotti’s argument (Section III), before exploring each horn of this dilemma in more detail (Sections IV and V).

I

From partisanship to stability

The overarching goal of Bonotti’s book is to defend the place of parties and partisanship within Rawlsian political liberalism, so it is natural that the notion of stability he thinks partisanship supports is that of Rawls. Concerns relating to stability play a prominent role in Rawls’s later work – indeed, the canonical view is that stability is the core motivation for Rawls’s revision of *A Theory of Justice*. *Political Liberalism* investigates how the liberal state should respond to “the fact of reasonable pluralism” of comprehensive doctrines (or “conceptions of the good”) (Rawls 2005, 3, and *passim*). The conditions of freedom in modern societies rule out agreement on the good. But, partly because of this pluralism, it remains important to “establish and preserve unity and stability” (133) amongst reasonable citizens around the “basic structure of society” – “a society’s main political, social, and

economic institutions, and how they fit together into one unified system of social cooperation” (Rawls 2005, 11). Thus, as Rawls frames the problem (a framing which Bonotti endorses (Bonotti 2017, 1)): “How is it possible for there to exist over time a just and stable society of free and equal citizens, who remain profoundly divided by reasonable religious, philosophical, and moral doctrines?” (Rawls 2005, 3).

Rawls believes such stability can be achieved via “an overlapping consensus of reasonable comprehensive doctrines,” which I will first explain before recounting how Bonotti believes political parties are essential to achieving it (Rawls 2005, 133). Although citizens hold a great diversity of comprehensive doctrines, what they all share is endorsement of society’s basic structure of institutions and foundational laws: “the political conception is a module, an essential constituent part, that in different ways fits into and can be supported by various reasonable comprehensive doctrines that endure in the society regulated by it” (Rawls 2005, 144). Whenever acceptance of the basic political structure conflicts with one’s more sectarian beliefs – those not party to the overlapping consensus – then the former outweighs the latter (Rawls 2005, 145, 154). Rawls believes it is the existence of an overlapping consensus – the “congruence” between one’s views and support of the political conception – together with the assurance that one’s fellow citizens are similarly inclined that ensures societal stability.

The fact that political allegiance “rests on the totality of reasons specified within the comprehensive doctrine affirmed by each citizen” gives one reasons to maintain such allegiance even in cases where one’s interests are not (or are perceived not to be) adequately considered in the political process (Rawls 2005, 170). This helps clarify that Rawlsian stability is a highly moral concept; it is stability “for the right reasons.” This is distinguished from a “mere modus

vivendi,” which is “founded on self or group interests” and contingent on circumstances (*ibid.*, 147, 145-148). Society’s basic structure is “affirmed on moral grounds” and not “a compromise compelled by circumstances” or political expediency (*ibid.*, 147, 169). The motivation for Rawls’s political turn therefore appears less concerned with practical worries about societal collapse or insufficient citizen virtue and more concerned with the philosophical justifiability of the modern state under terms diverse citizens can all endorse.

This explains the importance of the final relevant element of Rawls’s notion of stability: its relationship to the liberal principle of legitimacy – justification through public reason. The overlapping consensus demarcates, for Rawls, a kind of shared deliberative space – a “common currency of discussion” based around citizens’ common endorsement of the political conception (*ibid.*, 165). This makes it “rational,” Rawls thinks, for citizens “to move out of the narrower circle of their own [comprehensive] views and to develop political conceptions in terms of which they can explain and justify their preferred policies to a wider public” (*ibid.*, 164). This is public reason – the demand to appeal only to reasons that are generally shared when entering public discourse, rather than relying on one’s more contentious, comprehensive views. As such, the process of public reasoning plays an essential role in the achievement and maintenance of an overlapping consensus, while also ensuring that such consensus is legitimate according to liberal standards.

What role might political parties and partisanship play in this understanding of stability? This question, virtually unaddressed in the vast secondary literature on Rawlsian political liberalism, is the subject of a key argument in Bonotti’s book. As part of his broader argument for partisanship within political liberalism, Bonotti maintains that “parties are carriers of an overlapping consensus

and, they are desirable for the stability of liberal democracies within the confines of Rawls’s political liberalism” (Bonotti 2017, 120). The key way in which parties support the overlapping consensus, according to Bonotti, is by encouraging public reasoning, “helping citizens to relate their comprehensive doctrines to political liberal values and institutions” (Bonotti 2017, 100).

To develop this case, Bonotti distinguishes between parties and factions – a distinction common to other recent rehabilitative accounts of partisanship. Factions are political associations that promote interests or values that are in some sense narrow, sectoral: “the sole advancement of merely partial interests” (Bonotti 2017, 101). Factions do not speak to all of society, nor do they offer a plausible interpretation of the common or public good. Parties, in contrast, “promote the interests of the whole political community” (*ibid.*, 104). In Rawlsian terminology, factionalism involves the promotion of specific conceptions of the good not widely shared across the citizenry, whereas partisanship involves a commitment to move beyond reasoning on this basis toward public reasoning. Partisanship helps citizens in “presenting partial values and demands in a way that takes into account general ends and the common good” (*ibid.*, 105). Bonotti’s understanding of partisanship, then, involves “just the kind of commitment that underlies Rawls’s political liberalism” – commitment to public reason (*ibid.*, 105).

Bonotti identifies three features of real-world parties in virtue of which they contribute to the overlapping consensus. First is parties’ linkage function, much discussed by political scientists. Parties are unique among vehicles of political participation in that “they are located halfway between state and civil society and provide a unique, hybrid, and semi-institutional connection between the two domains” (*ibid.*, 120). Partisanship therefore encourages translation between citizens’s comprehensive doctrines

and the demands of the public sphere. “Given that they must appeal both to their members and supporters, on the one hand, and to the broader public, on the other hand, they are in a unique position to show how comprehensive doctrines and values relate to widely shared political principles” (*ibid.*, 100). Second is the fact that parties “are not mere vehicles for promoting single, contingent, and temporary issues,” but stitch individual concerns together into a credible, broad party platform (*ibid.*, 120). This encourages, Bonotti thinks, partisans to “relate particularistic values and interests to the broad range of policy areas and long-term political issues that the government of a modern nation-state normally involves” (*ibid.*, 120-121). Third, the creative power of parties to “actively create political divisions and choose how to reframe societal demands” provides a suitable environment for citizens to experiment with new ways of relating their comprehensive conceptions to political conceptions of justice (*ibid.*, 121-122).

For Bonotti, these features demonstrate that partisanship involves an “intrinsic” relation to public reasoning at the center of Rawls’s account of stability (*ibid.*, 108). Rawls briefly notes that there is something about democratic competition that makes it “rational” for citizens “to move out of the narrower circle of their own views and to develop political conceptions in terms of which they can explain and justify their preferred policies to a wider public” (*ibid.*, 164). Bonotti’s argument gives us reasons to believe that, in practice, it is political parties that most often and most effectively perform this broadening role. Contrary to what previous theorists assume, then, there is “no inherent tension between” a normative understanding of partisanship and “the demands of the Rawlsian overlapping consensus” (*ibid.*, 5). Instead, there exists a “correspondence between the normative demands of political liberalism and those of partisanship, as both of them require that policies and laws be defended on the basis of public

reasons, rather than by appealing to sectarian and factional values that only reflect the interests and conceptions of the good of a specific group of citizens” (*ibid.*, 111). So, even though Bonotti’s defense of parties is idealized, in that he declines to argue that all real-world parties display these stability-promoting features, his argument still turns on functions core to the logic of parties. (I return to this point below.)

If successful, this argument about the broadening effects of partisanship on public discourse would support the overlapping consensus at the heart of Rawls’s conception of stability. Stability requires citizens to converge on a set of fundamental political principles and the basic political structure – attachment that is moral, not strategic or a matter of compromise. Parties help citizens reconcile the partiality of their own views with the basic structure necessary for securing such convergent allegiance. And stability requires such allegiance to consist in terms and forms of reasoning that abstract away from their more partial commitments; the political imperatives of party competition encourage such reasoning, thereby contributing to the moral and justificatory autonomy of the political conception from private comprehensive doctrines. Thanks in large part to parties and partisanship, then, Rawls’s goal of achieving a freestanding yet stable conception of justice is achieved.

II

A dilemma

Bonotti’s argument from partisanship to stability is sophisticated and powerful. If successful, it would significantly advance the case for partisanship’s role in our normative understanding of liberal democracy. However, the argument faces a dilemma, which I introduce in this section before exploring in

more detail each horn in the following two sections. To summarize upfront: the gap between the picture of parties within Bonotti's account and how they operate in the real world means that his argument from partisanship to stability is either false or of limited relevance.

The dilemma begins by asking: how similar is the picture of parties and partisanship presented by Bonotti to the way those phenomena look in the real world? That is, how often does real-world partisanship contribute to processes of public reasoning, thereby helping secure a Rawlsian overlapping consensus? The empirical evidence from the social sciences, I fear, does not give us much reason for optimism. Party competition in contemporary liberal democracies is rife with stability-detracting properties at odds with the idealized conception of parties Bonotti presents. I highlight three in particular: partisanship's factionalism, identity-based attachment, and gamesmanship.

Bonotti claims that partisanship involves a commitment to generalizable forms of reasoning according to which partisans "speak to all citizens as citizens, not as socially situated in this or that social class or income group or as having a particular comprehensive doctrine," and that this is what distinguishes partisanship from factionalism (Bonotti 2017, 107). In reality, though, appeals to narrow, particularist interests and constituencies are commonplace features of both campaigning and governing. Parties make "widespread" and "strategic use of group-based appeals," targeting certain groups in the public as a matter of course and promising to support their interests once in power (Thau 2019, 64). In giving voice to sectional interests, parties engage in forms of reasoning that very often fail to achieve strict standards of accessibility, eschewing public reason constraints. Consider, for instance, the United States Republican Party's 2020 campaign platform, which frequently fails to restrict its policies or

their justification to the realm of the political right, instead drawing on contested comprehensive doctrinal reasoning (often evangelical Christian). Or consider the British Labour Party's 2019 campaign slogan: "For the many, not the few." This is a clear appeal to a non-universal class of the citizenry that the party takes itself to be representative of that draws its power precisely by treating citizens as differentiated, not as universalized citizens.

Of course, it would be unfair to Bonotti to construe his argument as denying any role for group-based appeals. What he claims is that parties significantly broaden the terms of partial interests, situating them always within a broader, universalizing story about the common good using accessible reasons. But is it plausible to suppose that parties do this in a manner that is consistent and genuine – faithful to the spirit of public reason morality? This latter clause alerts us that offering halfhearted attempts to describe as good for the public what is actually a sectoral demand do not count, common as they are ("generous farm subsidies ought to be supported by any right-thinking citizen"). Do parties meaningfully encourage citizens to conceive of their comprehensive doctrines as merely partial, and do they regularly filter out the controversial aspects of such doctrines and direct discourse exclusively toward issues concerning the public political conception of justice?

I am skeptical. As the examples above show, parties frequently make no effort to broaden the terms of positions aimed at securing the support of their narrow constituencies. Indeed, it seems conceivable that the imperative to discipline their messaging in this way would be counterproductive – viewed by the constituency, perhaps, as unacceptable "selling out" or "weakening" the spirit of what it means to truly stand up or fight for our group. I think it is safe to say that real-world parties very often make appeals to their actual or desired coalition of groups with little effort to translate

their demands into a broader, citizen-wide idiom, whose reasoning could be accepted by all citizens in a non-trivial way (Hicken 2011; Kitschelt and Wilkinson 2007; Thau 2019).

And the tendency for parties to appeal to narrow bands of citizens only seems to be increasing. As noted above, the landscape of party competition in many European democracies is increasingly fragmented, owing to the collapse of parties' traditional ideological linkages to class and religious cleavages – partisan dealignment (Dalton & Wattenberg 2002). While it may be tempting to think that partisan dealignment would create favorable conditions for parties to channel partial interests to a public unconstrained by old attachments, recent work suggests that it is “precisely because political parties can no longer” rely on traditional coalitions that “they now feel a stronger push to highlight which categories of people they represent” in distinctively factional terms (Thau 2019, 64). This undercuts Bonotti's optimism that parties' “creative character” in drawing and reshaping the lines of political contestation “offers a crucial contribution to the overlapping consensus” by guiding discourse toward generally-shared political values (Bonotti 2017, 121-122). In fact, party leaders often use this very creative capacity opportunistically to identify “wedge issues” that purposefully divide the citizenry. Contemporary trends in Western politics indicate that the manipulation of political salience (particularly by insurgent right-wing populist parties) has moved in a narrowing, not a broadening direction, from a traditional redistributive left-right dimension to a culturally-divisive, “open versus closed” dimension (Dalton 2018; Kitschelt & Rehm 2019).

A much-discussed feature of the fragmentation of the party landscape is the way it has allowed the rise of populist political parties. Populist parties adopt a moralized division of the citizenry, elevating a conception of the “true” or “authentic” people over the

rest (usually especially historically marginalized groups) and aiming to govern in the former's name only (Müller 2016). Though addressed in a superficial sense to the whole citizenry, populist appeals rely on an understanding of the people "unreasonable" from a Rawlsian point of view, given that they frequently rule out the political equality of all citizens.

In addition to providing another (particularly pernicious) instance of sectoral appeals in party politics, populist partisanship calls attention to another widespread feature of empirical partisanship absent from Bonotti's picture: its affective dimension. A significant part of party politics is the cultivation and mobilization of a distinctive form of identity that is separate from ideological- or policy-based components of partisan appeals. So even setting aside the interpretive question of whether partisan claims are truly generalizable or not, and therefore instances of public reasoning, we must contend with this additional difficulty of empirical partisanship. A wealth of social-scientific work demonstrates how partisanship is often not a carrier of a citizen's prior beliefs as they pertain to politics, but is a deep-seated source of belonging and attachment that guides political thinking (Bankert et al. 2017; Green et al. 2002; Huddy & Bankert 2017). Under conditions of polarization, such as those obtaining in the contemporary United States, partisan identity is strengthened, contributing to dangerous forms of inter-partisan animosity and the development of an us-versus-them, zero-sum political conflict (Iyengar et al. 2012; Mason 2018b). Such dimensions of partisanship are missing from Bonotti's idealized account.

Partisanship's affective and identitarian nature makes more likely a third destabilizing tendency of contemporary parties: gamesmanship over electoral rules. Party competition depends on an architecture of laws and norms, incorporating such elements as the content of voting rights, honesty and fact-sensitivity, and

generalized faith in free and fair elections as the means of transitioning power. These laws and norms help constitute, for Bonotti, party competition as “a fair scheme of cooperation” (Bonotti 2017, 23). But in reality, party competition is an adversarial enterprise, characterized by competition, not cooperation. Adversarial competitions “present special ethical dilemmas, because they often incentivize or even require behaviors of participants that are normally considered unethical” – including, for partisans, the temptation to subvert faith in or otherwise tamper with the electoral architecture in ways that yield their side an advantage (Bagg & Tranvik 2019, 973). The development of such “arms race dynamics” (Bagg & Tranvik 2019, 976) does not happen all the time, in all places, but there are features inherent to the logic of partisanship itself – its competitiveness, its high stakes, its group-based nature – that invite the possibility of electoral gamesmanship. The choice of countries’ electoral systems is frequently the result of “ruling parties [seeking] to maximize their representation” (Boix 1999, 609), such as the adoption of a proportional-representation system in France in significant part to benefit the Socialist Party (Knapp 1987). Gerrymandering in the United States and partisan control of the timing of district drawing in the United Kingdom are other common examples (Rossiter, Johnston, and Pattie 1999).

The disjunction between partisanship as a real-world practice and partisanship as a component of Bonotti’s theory presents the following dilemma for his argument. Making his conception of partisanship more in touch with its empirical realities will threaten his stability-based argument for its normative value, while continuing with the current level of idealization does not provide a convincing defense of partisanship as we are likely to find it. I argue for each of these conclusions in the following two sections.

III

The first horn: getting real

One response Bonotti might make to this dilemma is to revise his conception of partisanship to make it more closely resemble real-world partisanship. He can, in other words, decrease the amount of idealization in his theory and accept that partisanship very frequently involves factional claims, identity, and gamesmanship. The problem with this move, though, is that it immediately threatens the soundness of his argument from partisanship to stability, and therefore threatens his project to defend the role of partisanship in normative democratic theory (at least in this respect). I note in advance that Bonotti is highly unlikely to make this move, for reasons explored in the next section. But in order to fully appreciate the impact partisanship's non-ideal empirical realities have on his argument, it is necessary to spell out, in more detail than last section's preliminary remarks, precisely in what ways empirical partisanship threatens the overlapping consensus.

Factional partisanship by definition fails to reason publicly. When parties make factional claims, they make free use of controversial reasons stemming from comprehensive doctrines. But even if parties fail to engage in public reasoning, might they still play some role in fostering the kind of moral attachment to the basic structure Rawls takes stability to consist in? In other words, how necessary for the possibility of an overlapping consensus is the practice of public reasoning? Someone interested in making a stability-based argument for the normative value of partisanship might insist that even partisanship that does not conform to public reason constraints can still support the overlapping consensus.

There does seem a sense in which public reason is tangential to, or instrumental to – not constitutive of – the overlapping consensus. Public reasoning is a mode of citizen interaction in which citizens commit to justifying policy in a certain way, whereas the overlapping consensus signifies “concordance” between citizens’ private moral reasoning and acceptance of the basic political structure (Rawls 2005, 171). Rawlsian stability seems concerned, in the first instance, with the moral character of the (vertical) relationship between each citizen and the basic structure of the state, rather than the character of the (horizontal) modes of discourse among citizens. We can imagine a society in which the former obtains but not the latter. We can imagine a society, that is, in which all support the political conception based on “a balance of reasons as seen within each citizen’s comprehensive doctrine,” (Rawls 2005, 168) thus apparently satisfying the overlapping consensus, but whose citizens fail consistently to generalize (or who support parties or other groups who fail to generalize) the justifications for their arguments in political discourse to all others. Here we appear to have an overlapping consensus of affirmation of the political conception without public reason – and, perhaps, a reason for assuaging the fear that the prevalence of factionalism prevents an overlapping consensus.

This rescue attempt, however, is unconvincing. Even in cases where many citizens do genuinely support the political conception on the balance of their own private reasons, it is difficult to imagine such allegiance continuing – remaining stable – in the face of any significant amount of political associations who consistently reinforce more factional forms of reasoning. The reason for the practical, if not conceptual, linkage between the overlapping consensus and public reasoning is the mediating and social roles of the public sphere – public discourse and participative institutions such as parties. The public sphere is not simply a one-way channel of engagement whereby citizens register their prior, relatively static

political beliefs. Instead, it has an important shaping function; the arguments and narratives circulating in the public sphere help citizens make sense of their political beliefs, which they update and contextualize in a reciprocal manner. Parties do not just passively mirror an existing landscape of opinion, but provide more precise articulations of individual comprehensive views and how they might be related to the basic structure. It follows, then, that if the public sphere is populated by factional parties that constrict the deliberative pool to reasons and forms of analysis that encourage sectoral attachment to the state, then many, perhaps most, partisans will conform. In practice, factions' particularist forms of reasoning are very likely to be accompanied by substantively particularist policies, encouraging the belief among their followers that allegiance to the political structure is conditional on satisfaction of their sectoral interests. Factions' nonpublic reasoning, that is, "helps" citizens conceive of their relationship to the state in terms that conflict with the demands of the overlapping consensus.

The failure of public reasoning is, in all likelihood, indicative of a concomitant failure to endorse the political conception for the right reasons; the lack of one is a publicly-visible signal of the lack of the other. The imperative that all citizens endorse the basic structure based on moral reasons from within their own comprehensive doctrines may be, strictly speaking, and as a matter of conceptual analysis, separable from the requirement that the state (and citizens) refrain from supporting laws that cannot be justified to all. But, at least when it comes to partisanship, public reasoning seems contingently necessary for the overlapping consensus given the social nature of public discourse and the mediating role it plays between the private moralities of individual citizens and the basic structures of the state that must be endorsed. The attempt to rescue the stability argument for partisanship in the face of factionalism, therefore, appears unlikely to succeed. This is

not, of course, to deny that forms of factional partisanship may yet have a great many other democratic virtues, nor even that some of these virtues may plausibly be describable as yielding political stability. But it is to suggest that when factional partisanship is widespread, the very specific form of stability operative in Rawlsian public reason liberalism, and the one Bonotti is explicitly interested in – an overlapping consensus of freestanding moral allegiance to the basic political structure – becomes unlikely.

How serious a challenge is the second common feature of empirical partisanship, its identitarian and affective nature, to the overlapping consensus? I submit that this kind of partisanship threatens the overlapping consensus in two main ways. First, affective polarization distorts public discourse in ways that make public reasoning less likely. The “strengthening of partisan affect,” together with the rise in echo chambers and partisan sorting along manifold demographic lines, increase the incentives for partisans to speak primarily to their own audience. It becomes more important to confirm one remains loyal to the “partisan team,” rather than seek to persuade those who disagree (Iyengar & Krupenkin 2018; Mason 2018a). Under conditions of polarization, such as those obtaining in the United States, partisanship begins to look more like a social identity (or, perhaps, a comprehensive doctrine), in that it marks an associative group that itself drives political beliefs and behavior (Huddy et al. 2015; Huddy & Bankert 2017). This means, among other things, that when inter-partisan communication does occur, it is more likely to take the form of sheer denigration rather than the exchange of accessible justifications.

Second, and on a deeper level, partisanship’s identitarian and affective nature replaces the propositional, belief-based nature of party competition with an expressive politics that minimizes the sense in which partisanship could even be the type of phenomenon

that could play a role in a justificatory enterprise such as the overlapping consensus. When partisanship becomes an identity that one cannot reflect upon, it encourages a type of argumentation (if, indeed, it can be called argumentation) in which partisan identity is asserted as a fact rather than a set of propositions. Partisan identity transforms the content of political beliefs from “claims about the world” to “mere characteristics of persons” leading partisan argumentation to consist not of genuine disagreement, but “cheerleading” one’s side and “bad mouthing” the others’ (Jones 1999, 82). On this reading, Bonotti’s distinguishing criterion between party and faction – the type of reasoning each engages in – is not so much wrong, as irrelevant. It fails to capture that what is interesting (and worrisome) about affective polarization is not degradation in the quality (i.e., publicity) of reason, but displacement of reason simpliciter. Not only do partisans not endorse the political conception for the right (moral) reasons, in line with Rawlsian stability, but, if this vein of empirical research is to be believed, it is not clear that many of them endorse the political conception for any reasons beyond the maintenance of partisan identity.

The third and final empirical feature of partisanship, its tendency toward gamesmanship, also threatens the overlapping consensus. Agreement on basic procedural rules of liberal democracy is, for Rawls, a prerequisite for an overlapping consensus and state stability. Stability entails “the urgent political requirement to fix, once and for all, the content of certain political basic rights and liberties, and to assign them special priority...thereby establishing clearly and firmly the rules of political contest” (Rawls 2005, 160). But this is precisely what the competitive nature of partisanship, especially when combined with certain other non-ideal features such as polarization, calls into question. Parties frequently push for policies “insincerely,” hoping primarily to maintain power (Blau 2018, 207). Indeed, such

gamesmanship threatens not only the overlapping consensus, but also the less ambitious constitutional consensus, which requires universal acceptance of “the political procedures of democratic government” (Rawls 2005, 159). Even in the best of times, absent such divisive gamesmanship, the adversarial nature of partisan competition makes concerns of political expediency such as coalitional bargaining core to the institution – undercutting the moral grounds and moral objects that are essential features of Rawls’ overlapping consensus (Rawls 2005, 147).

It is certainly true, as both Rawls and Bonotti note, that the imperative of winning elections is a powerful incentive for parties to seek the support of a majority of voters (Rawls 2005, 164; Bonotti 2017, 107-108). But parties’ commitment to public reasoning does not follow from this. Electoral incentives may sometimes push partisan rhetoric and strategy in the direction of public reasoning, but it may just as often involve denigrating minorities or political scapegoats to mobilize the “true” majority (as in the case of populism) or the partisan base (as in the case of polarization). And the temptation looms to strike at the bedrock rules of political competition. These realities are a long way from Bonotti’s pristine picture of partisan competition as “a fair scheme of cooperation” (Bonotti 2017, 23); there is much about partisanship in the real world that stands in the way of its contribution to stability.

IV

The second horn: sticking with the ideal

If Bonotti wishes to save his stability-based argument for partisanship, then he must accept the fact that his conceptions of parties and partisanship diverge significantly from many real-world instances of those phenomena. In fact, he does seem to recognize

as much; I suspect none of the arguments in the preceding section would surprise Bonotti, since he is concerned with an idealized form of partisanship. Bonotti, then, would seek to challenge the second horn of the dilemma I have constructed. I consider such a response in this section, but ultimately conclude that it yields an argument limited in significance.

Bonotti's scattered methodological comments make clear that he is interested in constructing a normative theory of partisanship. As he explains, one should resist "the tendency (encouraged by most contemporary political scientists) to conceive parties solely as real-world organizations that contest elections, with no reference made to any normative ideal establishing how they ought to behave" (*ibid.*, 105). As theorists, we should be concerned primarily with what partisanship ought to be, not with what it is, and so "the fact that many (perhaps most) partisans do not actually fulfill this commitment to public reasoning does not undermine the claim that they ought to" (*ibid.*, 109). Bonotti's conception of partisanship, then, is meant normatively – meant to retain some contact with the practice of partisanship we see in the world, but be revisionary or reformist in some way. As with Rawls, and the bulk of public reason liberals who follow him, Bonotti works in ideal theory, insofar as he aims to provide a defense of partisanship for "liberal democracies [that] are reasonably just" (*ibid.*, 12, and *passim*). As such, he would likely claim, the gap between partisanship in his theory and partisanship in practice does not trouble his argument from partisanship to stability.

But the appeal to ideal theory, I argue, leaves Bonotti open to further problems and questions. The first is a worry that Bonotti's argument is made true by mere definitional fiat, and thus threatens an unedifying circularity. There are many instances in the text that encourage the suspicion that much of the argument from partisanship to stability hinges on definitional matters. Bonotti

claims to show how “in fact the very normative demands of partisanship are in syntony with those of public reason” (*ibid.*, 3). The nature of the connection between partisanship and the commitment to public reasoning is intrinsic, on his account: “partisanship itself, as a normative conception, embodies an *intrinsic* commitment to public reason” (*ibid.*, 108, emphasis in original); and: “once we understand the distinctive normative demands of partisanship, we can see that there is no inherent tension between them and the demands of the Rawlsian overlapping consensus” (*ibid.*, 101). The language of “intrinsic” and “inherent” – as well as the repeated usage of stressing modifiers such as “in fact” and “itself” and “once we understand” – indicate Bonotti thinks there is something inevitable, almost natural, conceptually speaking, about the connection between partisanship and public reason (and hence stability). There seems a real sense, on this account, in which the proposition that “political parties threaten societal stability” is simply unintelligible.

The question to ask here is: Is this the right way of understanding partisanship? Is the political party, at least as an ideal type, as naturally committed to public reason, and as inevitably facilitative – at least, given the proper normative guidance – of the overlapping consensus and stability as Bonotti supposes? The book contains surprisingly little motivation for the move of building the normative demands of public reason into the very concept of partisanship, as opposed to other candidate normative functions partisanship might fulfill. Instead of partisanship’s intrinsic connection to public reason, why might partisanship not suggest an intrinsic connection to, say, a morally-valuable form of loyalty, as Russell Muirhead has argued, and which does not involve an intrinsic commitment to public reason? (Muirhead 2014, Chapter 5). This latter view, to emphasize, is also a normative one. True, Bonotti does point to various historical and empirical reasons to suggest that parties naturally, at their best, but also in

political practice, exert the sort of broadening effects on public discourse that may plausibly be distilled into a commitment to public reason (Bonotti 2017, 120-122, 104-109). This is the kind of motivating story that is needed to convince that his normative definition is the right one, but, alas, I do not think it is up to that challenge. Equations between partisanship and other normative functions can equally lay claim to plausible emergence from partisanship as an empirical practice – consider, again, loyalty. Partisan loyalty, for Muirhead, involves “a kind of commitment that goes beyond what reason alone can underwrite,” and is rooted in the “partisan community” as an enduring political identity (Muirhead 2014, 16). The fact that this (and other) normative values do not require a commitment to public reasoning, and therefore might not necessarily support the overlapping consensus, suggests that Bonotti’s argument trades in significant part on the definitional move.

The worry then becomes that it is not very interesting that Bonotti’s idiosyncratic normative conception of partisanship contributes to stability, since it seems to be made true, in significant part, by conceptual assertion. How surprising is it that partisanship contributes to stability, given that partisanship is defined as the very thing that stability happens to require? To the extent this is true, it gives us no independent reasons to value political parties or partisanship. In this light, Bonotti’s statements such as “once we understand the distinctive normative demands of partisanship” assume a question-begging ring (Bonotti 2017, 5). Nor is this issue avoided by Bonotti’s construal of the commitment to public reasoning as something that partisans automatically take on when they decide to become partisans: “when citizens decide to promote their religious or other comprehensive doctrines qua partisans, that is, via political parties, they are already committing to public reason and to an overlapping consensus” (*ibid.*, 109). Bonotti is proposing that public reason is not really constraining of partisanship, since

being a partisan simply means conforming to public reason. But this simply moves back the constraining effects a level, to the definitional question of who counts as a partisan. Again, definitional work looms large.

Another way of framing the problems with Bonotti's definitional argument is to say that he connects a highly idealized and technical concept with another highly idealized and technical concept. He defends, that is, the value of partisanship (understood as something fairly esoteric from the perspective of everyday partisans) with reference to its support of the normative value of stability (understood as an equally esoteric overlapping consensus of a particular kind of moral allegiance to the state). But one problem with this argument is that, where neither the concept being argued for nor the concept it is supposed to support is particularly self-evident from the perspective of everyday political observation, it invites the question: So what? Why care about this phenomenon describable as "partisanship," when to do so, we must also get on board with this other phenomenon describable as "stability"? Bonotti has not provided much motivation or argumentation for why Rawls's notion of stability is correct, or important – important enough to ground a defense of a concept of which democratic theorists (and many democratic citizens) have long been skeptical. Those predisposed to either agnosticism or hostility toward the contribution of parties to democratic politics are unlikely to be persuaded. I do not mean to say that we are therefore doomed to merely descriptive analysis of partisanship. One might, for instance, argue that partisanship-as-public reasoning fosters recognizably-valuable democratic goods, such as motivation to get involved in politics. Such an argument connects a technical concept with a familiar concept, thereby making the argument for partisanship more plausible.

At this point, Bonotti might insist that there is still value to the normative nature of his conception of partisanship, since it provides valuable critical purchase on real-world political pathologies. Politics would be better – and stability would be supported – if more partisans conformed to the demands of public reason more often. The action guidance of normative theory justifies its idealization. But a relevant issue here that he does not explore – one essential to addressing critical usefulness – is the feasibility of his normative project. Concerns of feasibility have generated a rich literature as part of broader inquiries into non-ideal theory and political realism (See, e.g., Stemplowska 2016; Lawford-Smith 2013), but I limit myself to a relatively simple thought: that the degree of action guidance of a normative theory of partisanship is limited by infeasible conditions (a simple version of “ought implies can”). More specifically, I want to suggest that, in the case of partisanship, the likelihood of a given normative ideal being realized matters for its normative validity. This is already to move away from Bonotti, with his claim that “the fact that many (perhaps most) partisans do not actually fulfill this commitment to public reasoning does not undermine the claim that they ought to” (Bonotti 2017, 109). What he should have said is that the empirical reality does not necessarily undermine the normative claim – for, as non-ideal theorists have long emphasized, there are cases in which stubborn, unfavorable empirical realities should indeed influence the character or attractiveness of normative ideals.

It is worth examining, then, the feasibility of the idealizing conditions Bonotti sets out – what politics and partisans would have to look like for partisanship to contribute to stability – and the nature of the barriers that stand in the way of their realization. Bonotti enumerates a number of background conditions that must be met in order for party politics to be “a fair scheme of cooperation,” largely in the context of his discussion of political obligation (*ibid.*, Chapter 2). These criteria also seem central to the

broader political-liberal project within which he situates his general defense of partisanship, including the argument from stability. How realistic are these conditions? I call attention, in particular, to the stubbornness of motivated reasoning, group-based thinking and other psychological mechanisms that underpin the three destabilizing features of partisanship identified above. Summarizing the relevant findings on these “formidable obstacles to thinking rationally” about politics, Aaron Ancell notes that “since these obstacles arise from normal features of human psychology together with features endemic to politics,” – and, I would add, especially endemic to partisan politics – “there is no reason to believe that they will disappear in [even] an ideal liberal society” (Ancell 2019, 420). An explanation for the unlikelihood of Bonotti’s idealizing conditions focusing on the structural features of partisan competition can supplement the psychological explanation. The contention is that parties are more likely to foster a strategic attachment to the basic structure rather than the deeply moral one that the overlapping consensus requires. The reason is that compromise, bargaining, coalition-building, and logrolling are central to the partisan experience. Due to the fact that at least some of contemporary partisan pathologies are rooted in structural features of party competition and in certain tendencies of human psychology, there is reason to think they will be relatively stubborn.

I do not wish to overdraw the point. It is not impossible for some partisans to heed the call to engage in public reasoning; Bonotti’s normative recommendations do not completely lack action guidance. But given the nature of the barriers – the inherently adversarial nature of party competition, and the way this exacerbates tendencies with deep roots in human psychology – I remain skeptical on grounds of feasibility that partisanship will contribute to the overlapping consensus and stability for any great proportion of the citizenry. This helps show why the likelihood of a normative ideal of partisanship being realized is relevant for its

normative validity. David Estlund, notably, has argued that “it is not the case that ought implies reasonably likely” (2014, 116). But there is a crucial difference, as Ancell has argued (2020), between something being reasonably unlikely because it is random or out of character (such as Estlund’s example of dancing like a chicken in front of a lecture (*ibid.*, 118)), and something being reasonably unlikely because it is difficult – rooted in deep psychological tendencies or structural-political circumstances of electoral competition. Partisanship is more like the latter. Hence, the fact that the realization of Bonotti’s normative criteria for achieving stability is technically possible, but importantly unlikely for a large swath of the population, matters for the normative relevance of public reason constraints sufficient to generate or support societal stability.

And this, I think, severely limits the scope of Bonotti’s argument. Even if we grant Bonotti’s claim that partisans who strictly adhere to public reason can contribute to the moral stability of a well-ordered liberal regime, the relevance of this argument to our own world may be fairly called into question. Even if, that is, Bonotti has shown that there are stability-related reasons to value some specific practice describable as “partisanship,” if that “partisanship” consists in a rarefied practice that few actual partisans can live up to or perhaps even recognize, then he has not shown that there are stability-related reasons to value partisanship as we find it in the real world. This argument risks becoming idealized in the pejorative sense of the term, vindicating the criticisms of non-ideal and realist thinkers, and encouraging the wrong attitude toward the relationship between partisanship and stability in our own politics. For the fact that a form of partisanship we are unlikely to see in the near future (if ever) would contribute to stability does not tell us what kind of partisanship best contributes to stability today.

The extent to which one thinks this is a loss will partly depend on one's deeper commitments about the nature and purpose of political theory. My own position should, by now, be obvious. But whatever one's position on the role of feasibility constraints in normative political theory in general, there is a sense, I argue, in which they ought to apply a fortiori in the realm of partisanship. As Patrick Tomlin has pointed out, different kinds of concepts warrant different levels of idealization, and there are some – including democracy and discourse – about which we should be especially “utopophobic” (Tomlin 2012). These concepts, and here I would include partisanship, are distinct from “first-order normative/deontic” concepts such as justice and equality in virtue of the former's role in adjudicating disagreements about the latter (Tomlin 2012, 45). Concepts such as democracy and partisanship must be “significantly more embedded in social and physical reality” than concepts like justice, because otherwise we risk idealizing away the very problems such concepts are meant to address – thereby limiting action guidance. In the case of partisanship, these might include substantive trade-offs between support of party and support of basic liberal-democratic norms putatively part of the overlapping consensus (Bagg & Tranvik 2019). This and other problems are assumed away by definition, in Bonotti's account, as he attributes all the destabilizing characteristics of real-world partisanship to its sinister conceptual cousin, factionalism. A complete defense of this claim would require further argumentation. But I hope this is enough to cast doubt on the action guidance of Bonotti's argument due to the level of idealization it incorporates.

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