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Book Review

On the Possibility of Partisan Democracy¹

by Chiara Destri

While political science has always looked at parties as a fixture of representative democracy (Muirhead and Rosenblum 2006, 100), political philosophy has long neglected them (Schattschneider 1942, 16; Biezen and Saward 2008). Such a disregard has come to an end, as in the last decade or so partisanship has received wide recognition as a rightful topic of normative analysis. Important contributions have bolstered its intrinsic value (White and Ypi 2016, *contra* see Efthymiou 2018), as well as its compatibility with public reason (Muirhead and Rosenblum 2006; Bonotti 2017) and deliberation (Rosenblum 2008; White and Ypi 2011; Wolkenstein 2016, *contra* see Muirhead 2010). The recent burgeoning literature on political parties and partisanship revolves around three main themes: 1. the opposition between parties and factions; 2. the epistemic and motivational function of partisanship; 3. the role of parties as bridging institutions between citizens and government on one hand (Muirhead and Rosenblum 2012; White and Ypi 2010), and between Rawlsian background culture and public political forum on the other (Muirhead and Rosenblum 2006; Bonotti 2017). Parties are different from factions because they put forward views of the common good rather than sectorial interests in society (White and Ypi 2016) and because they are “shapers and articulators of public reason” (Bonotti 2017, 108), by translating citizens’ comprehensive doctrines into reasons they all can accept. Furthermore, partisanship involves the capacity to develop consistent and systematic views of the common good

¹The volume here reviewed by Chiara Destri is *Interessi democratici e ragioni partigiane* [*Democratic Interests and Partisan Reasons*], Bologna, il Mulino, 2018 by Enrico Biale..

as well as the commitment to realise such views in practice by harnessing political power. When political parties work properly, therefore, they are necessary means to achieve the democratic ideal of collective self-rule, because they make possible meaningful political competition and ensure final accountability to the people. Representative democracy without parties is, in short, unthinkable (Schattschneider 1942), impracticable (Muirhead and Rosenblum 2012) and undesirable (Goodin 2008).

Enrico Biale's book *Interessi democratici e ragioni partigiane* [*Democratic Interests and Partisan Reasons*] is both part of this wave and refreshingly original in two ways. Firstly, it is not an express defence of partisanship. Rather, the analysis of partisanship is engraved in a more complex account of the relationship between conceptions of democracy and political agency. Differently put, the author looks at various normative approaches to democracy *through the lenses* of democratic citizens' political agency and argues in favour of a partisan conception of both democracy and agency. Secondly, it is an account of partisan agency that carves out an appropriate and articulated role for interests within democratic politics. While most scholars praise partisanship because – they argue – it is much closer to deliberation on the common good than it has been traditionally thought (White and Ypi 2016; Bonotti 2017), Biale acknowledges the importance of interests and defends their legitimate function in his partisan conception of democratic agency. The resulting theory overcomes the traditional opposition of market and forum while striking the right balance between individual autonomy and commitment to the common good – or so the author claims.

I think it is possible to identify three, important desiderata that Biale employs to assess various approaches. First, a conception of democratic agency must respect citizens as *autonomous agents*, entitled to make final decisions concerning their interests and ideals (8). The underlying concern is that democratic institutions truly respect citizens as free and equals only insofar as they publicly acknowledge what is important *for them* (84-85). Second, it must respect citizens as *political agents*, capable of cooperating with their fellow citizens in order to realise the common good (47). Taking democracy as a mere aggregation of brute preferences denies citizens' capacity to reflect upon and exchange reasons about what to do collectively and neglects the nature of political decisions, which are coercive and impactful and as such ought to be publicly accountable (35). Third, a conception of democratic

agency must encourage citizens to be *actual agents*, by motivating them to exercise their political agency even without taking direct part in the democratic process (76). This last requirement differs from the first one because it is directly concerned with democratic inclusion; a conception of democratic agency that is too demanding or too weak in its motivational appeal lets only those citizens who are already committed and gifted with economic and time-related resources be politically engaged. Therefore, such a conception inevitably fails to include all citizens and hence to really take the interests of all into account (58-59).

The book is divided in three parts. The first two chapters serve to introduce and discard two accounts of political agency that the author dubs “non-political” and “discursive” and that correspond, respectively, to the well-known aggregative and pluralist conceptions of democracy, on one hand, and to the participatory and deliberative conceptions of democracy, on the other. The third chapter hosts the theoretical bulk of Biale’s theory and illustrates the so-called democratic principle of fair consideration of interests, as well as an analysis of the concept of interest itself. Finally, in the last two chapters, the author lays out his conception of partisan agency and its implications in terms of decision-making processes that ought to be considered democratically legitimate. I will tackle each of these parts in the same order.

I.

In the first chapter, Biale examines the aggregative and the pluralist account of democracy, which represent a “non-political” or “subjectivist” conception of democratic agency. Apparently, the value of these theories primarily lies in their recognition of citizens’ autonomy. Since they treat citizens as the only legitimate authors of collective decisions (17), these accounts are compatible with liberalism and pluralism (20) and require that all citizens be included in the decision-making process and attributed an equal say. However, Biale’s assessment of them is quite bleak. Not only do they miss two desiderata out of three, but they also provide a contingent, weak and overly idealized justification of democracy overall. As is well known, the aggregative model compares democracy to the market and views citizens as rational utility maximisers, whose preferences are taken as fixed prior to the political game and

aggregated through the voting process (Arrow 1963; Riker 1982). On the other hand, Robert Dahl's pluralist model of democracy rejects the analogy between democracy and the market, because only the former asks citizens to have an enlightened understanding of their interests, but reduces democracy to a bargaining process among equals where everyone is entitled to act strategically and self-interestedly (Dahl 1989).

Despite their differences, these theories fall prey of similar shortcomings. First of all, they completely miss the second desideratum, as they allow any input into the democratic process, be that personal interests or unaccountable preferences, and they preclude citizens from publicly and mutually assessing them. By translating the respect for pluralism into relativism, they misunderstand the political nature of democratic agency, Biale argues. Indeed, political decisions coercively impact on other people's lives and as such they need to be publicly justified through reference to a certain idea of the common good (35-36). If that is missing, these decisions end up representing only the tyrannous will of a majority, if they represent anything at all. In fact, and contrary to what might at first appear, these approaches also fail to meet the first desideratum, because strategic manipulation of the agenda and the voting process threatens the responsiveness of collective decisions to individual preferences, hence violating the autonomy requirement (29). Additionally, the idealized model of democracy as mere voting procedure with which aggregative accounts work does not provide any guidance concerning how to fix actual democratic procedures falling short of the stylized aggregative ideal (36-36). To be fair, the last two criticisms seem mostly a problem for aggregative accounts, since they flatten democracy on mere voting and cannot prevent the manipulation of individual preferences. Dahls' view however is more articulated and, while it cannot guarantee that the common good or disadvantaged interests be protected, it seems to respect citizens' autonomy as well as to acknowledge how citizens' interests and ideals are shaped by the political process. A fourth objection the author raises against the non-political conception of agency concerns the alarmingly weak justification of democracy it is associated with. As Biale observes following other scholars (Estlund 1997; Marti 2006), if democracy is only meant to give everyone a fair opportunity of influence on collective decisions, then lottery would also do the trick. In the end only the third desideratum is clearly respected by the non-political conception of agency which does not impose demanding requirements on citizens, simply because it imposes no requirement at all.

The second chapter tackles the so-called discursive conception of democratic agency, which groups participatory and deliberative accounts of democracy. They too fail to score all the desiderata. Importantly, they both reject the view of citizens as self-interested and instead expect them to act as political agents, taking part in the democratic process in order to realise the common good. The specific modalities, however, are different. As the name suggests (Barber 1984), participatory theory explicitly requires direct participation. Although the author argues that the participatory approach is not inimical to pluralism, as it has been accused of (54-55), he still thinks that it is too demanding in terms of epistemic, motivational and simply time-related resources (57). For this reason, the participatory model misses both the third and first desideratum. On the one hand, its demandingness prevents it from motivating citizens to exercise their agency and it is hence insufficiently inclusive, specially towards those who are already at the margins (58). On the other, by asking citizens to always replace their personal perspective with the public one (Barber 1984, 200) the participatory approach denies to citizens space and relevance to their personal interests, the understanding of which, Biale argues, is instrumental in order to know what interests they have in common. The objection the author raises is, however, stronger than he lets us think. Indeed, he does claim that the participatory model cannot guarantee “the right balance between autonomy and the common good”, because it cannot guarantee citizens’ knowledge of their own interests, which is “prerequisite for a full exercise of political agency” (60). And yet, if such a knowledge is needed so that citizens can be aware of political decisions’ impact on their life and avoid being manipulated, it seems that their autonomy is not the only thing at risk. For a democratic process where only one part is truly aware of their interests will hardly identify the real common good. Therefore, contrary to the aspirations of the participatory model, the second desideratum is also possibly jeopardised.

The way deliberative theories look at political agency is substantively different. They do not expect that citizens exert direct control over any political decision; rather, citizens are considered political actors insofar as they are included in the deliberative process of opinion and will formation (Habermas 1996; Chambers 2003) and able to reasonably accept its outcomes (64). At the same time, deliberative theories do not fall prey of flaws characterizing the non-political conception of agency, because they impose on the democratic process specific constraints,

which Biale enlists at pp. 62-62 and which guarantee the quality of its outcomes. These constraints confer three significant strengths on deliberative theories if contrasted to non-political and participatory approaches. Firstly, the author observes that the deliberative model gives full recognition to the political nature of the democratic process, through and thanks to which citizens can also gather information about, reflect on and mutually assess and contest their interests and ideals (Manin 1987). Secondly, the aforementioned constraints ensure that democratic outcomes are not merely responsive to individual preferences, but substantively more just and in the interest of all (Martì 2006). Finally, the focus on rational deliberation grants to the least advantaged members of society the opportunity to challenge economic and power inequalities, which characterize any non-ideal democratic setting, by appealing to the force of reason alone (Forst 2012).

Nonetheless, Biale argues that this is not sufficient to endorse the discursive conception of agency. Even though the deliberative model scores better than the participatory one on all three desiderata, it still sits uncomfortably with the first one and straightforwardly fails to meet the third. Clearly, it is too demanding to motivate all citizens to act as political agents because it asks them to respect the procedural constraints of deliberation and draw only on public reasons and generalizable interests. By setting the bar for proper political agency very high, the deliberative model qualifies as exclusive. It is true that the deliberative model has undertaken recent important innovations, which, by loosening deliberative constraints as well as by opening the public sphere to private interests and partisan considerations (Mansbridge *et al.* 2010), may seem to render it more inclusive. However, as Biale claims (81), these innovations rather break with the deliberative model altogether. Therefore, the discursive conception of political agency is necessarily both exclusive, insofar as it fails to motivate all citizens to participation, and at least unsympathetic towards citizens' full self-determination, insofar as it fails to accommodate individual interests and partisan considerations (108).

II.

Biale lays out the theoretical foundations of his proposal in chapter three. Here, he develops an original conception of interest and employs it to flesh out the democratic principle of Fair Consideration of Interests, which he en-

dors. Interests are neither purely subjective nor objective. They differ from preferences, but at the same time they are not merely egoistic (*contra* Barry 1965); rather in the author's own words "people's interests depend on what these people have decided to be, on the values they have attached importance to, on the opportunities they have chosen to realize" (91, my translation). In short, they depend on people's life plans, which are shaped by the political and social context but also chosen by individuals, and for this reason they are susceptible of being rationally assessed and discussed within the public sphere (97). Furthermore, interests have two crucial features: they are affected by collective decisions and they are cherished by individuals holding them. The first desideratum concerning citizens' autonomy hence prescribes that all interests be taken into account by the democratic procedure. The second desideratum concerning the common good prescribes that interests be considered in a fair or impartial way. The combination of these two gives us the democratic principle of Fair Consideration of Interests. Although this principle might ring a bell for some deliberative theorists (Mansbridge 1992; Christiano 1996), Biale's reading of it bears one similarity and one essential difference with respect to the deliberative model.

First, interests only have an informative and epistemic function, but not a justificatory one (106). Differently put, Biale follows deliberative scholars in recognizing that citizens must know their interests to understand what it at stake in collective decisions but cannot appeal to them in order to justify their stand (Mansbridge *et al.* 2010). However, according to deliberative approaches, this is the case because interests are only legitimate insofar as they are generalizable and hence shared by all. Consequently, citizens have a duty to evaluate each interest at stake, including their own, in a detached and impartial way in order to see how this contributes to the common good (102). On the contrary, the author claims that citizens are required to act differently depending on the issue at stake. Questions of background justice are special, because they deal with the general framework of political and social institutions within which each citizen is allowed to pursue her own life plan. For this reason, when they take decisions over questions of background justice, citizens are expected to follow the principle of Fair Consideration and therefore to treat interests impartially. On the other hand, when dealing with ordinary political questions and within the constraints imposed by background justice all life plans are legitimate and

worth pursuing (105). Although the guiding principle is different, here the author has in mind Rawls's distinction between constitutional essentials and questions of basic justice, for which it is imperative to be guided by public reason, and all other questions of ordinary politics, where citizens might make appeal to non-public reasons as well (Rawls 2005, 215).

Therefore, contrary to the deliberative model, citizens are not required to admit only generalizable interests into the political process; rather, they ought to *politicize* their interests, i.e. translate them into “issues that are acceptable for the political community insofar as they are grounded on some conception of the common good”, towards which they are allowed to be partisan (107, my translation). To better understand what it means to politicize rather than generalize one's interests, we need to scrutinize Biale's account of partisan political agency, which he addresses in the last part of the book.

III.

The last two chapters are dedicated to three main topics: the author's partisan conception of political agency, his idea of political justification and a wider account of legitimate democratic decision-making procedures. Importantly, a partisan account allows to fully meet the third desideratum in three significant ways. Firstly, partisan commitments entail a higher motivation to participate in the political process, because they give citizens membership in a political community that has shared values, ideals, as well as a history of achievements and struggles, all of which determine their political identity and a related sense of purpose that prompts them to exercise their agency effectively. Secondly, the ambition to realise these shared values and ideals forces parties to construe their programmes in a coherent, systematic and clear way and to be “bilingual” in the sense of speaking both the language of the street and that of the state (Muirhead and Rosenblum 2006). Such a task will involve a “mindful division of labour”: some will elaborate concrete political goals to be pursued in the light of values with which all partisans identify and to which all partisans are able to give a reasoned consent even if they did not take direct part in elaborating them (127-128). Thirdly, the dynamic of party confrontation requires parties to challenge each other's proposals in order to win citizens' support and this in turn empowers all citizens by enabling them to maintain control over political decisions in a less onerous way (124).

As it is clear, Biale follows recent theoretical developments in giving a normative account of parties and in drawing a line between parties and factions. While factionalism entails defending only sectorial interests in an ideological, biased and even fact-insensitive way, true partisanship is a democratic virtue because it requires offering distinctive views, however partial, of the common good. Clearly, this shows how the partisan conception of democratic agency also satisfies the second desideratum, since citizens are expected to balance their interests with those of others and insert them within a wider understanding of the common good. However, as I observed earlier, Biale parts ways with other partisanship scholars in the way he sees the relationship between partisan and deliberative models. Indeed, the former is not a continuation of the latter, as some claim (White and Ypi 2016; Bonotti 2017). Rather, the author highlights three essential differences. First, despite acknowledging the informative role that interests play, deliberative approaches demand that citizens examine political issues in an impartial and detached way, while partisan conceptions let citizens be partial towards their own viewpoints, as long as they recognise the legitimacy, but not the equal value, of others'. Second, deliberation aims at the identification of the true common good through the selection of the best reasons in favour or against policy proposals, while partisans are meant to defend, possibly to win and to realise their own values and programmes (138). Third, underpinning the deliberative view is an idea of public justification, which involves standards of evaluation that are external to partisan proposals and identify objectively correct reasons (141). On the other hand, Biale puts forward a model of political justification, which is substantially different because it is mainly aimed at providing reasons that actual citizens can find convincing. The reasons provided should not only be accessible to all, but also persuasive and motivating for citizens. Standards of evaluation for such reasons are therefore "internal with respect to the democratic system and the values with which the members of the demos identify", the author claims (143).

Although this partisan conception of democratic agency is more nuanced and scrupulous than alternative options, it still falls prey of a major concern. Biale rightly rejects the deliberative view, endorsed by other partisanship scholars (White and Ypi 2016; Bonotti 2017), that partisans should frame political issues in terms of generalisable interests or public reason. This would in fact mean that citizens ought to be impartial towards all claims and support only

those that are truly generalisable to the whole political community. To overcome the weaknesses of the deliberative model, he states that a partisan conception of agency should rather require citizens to *politicise* their interests, i.e. “translate them into issues that the political community can accept because they are based on some conception of the common good” (107, my translation). For citizens it is therefore permissible to be partial towards and to attach more value to their own claims, as long as three conditions obtain: they should draw on acceptable views of the common good (107); they should give justifications that are accessible to their fellow citizens (142); their claims should not entail questions of background justice, because in that case they have to take all interests into account impartially (104). The actual leeway that citizens have is, however, uncertain. How should we evaluate the conception of the common good that they are asked to draw on? If such a conception is to be *acceptable* to all other citizens, as it seems (107), then it is hard to see how it can remain truly partial. Either it will be acceptable to some, but not all fellow citizens, or it will only include those interests that all citizens can accept. In the first case, citizens might be expected to provide reasons that are acceptable to their fellow partisans, but not to others, as the author seems to imply later on (146). In the second case, though, the distinctiveness of the partisan account of democratic agency appears to fade away. After all, when fellow citizens put forward a conception of the common good that is on the opposing side of the political spectrum with respect to my own, it is hard to see how this can be acceptable *from my own perspective*. To preserve the partiality of citizens’ claims and their right to assess political issues from their own viewpoints, then, we should ask something less. Indeed, Biale claims to reject standards that are *external* to the democratic game and only demands that a political justification be *accessible* to citizens (143). The democratic process does not guarantee that the best decision carries the day; rather, it clarifies the issues at stake so that citizens can understand them and act strategically to realise their own values (138). If this is the case, I can put forward my own conception of the common good even if my fellow citizens by judging *from their own perspective* cannot accept it and even if they cannot see how this is a conception of the common good at all. So long as my official reason in support of a policy proposal is not that “the policy is in my interest” but that “it corresponds to my idea of the common good” and so long as my fellow citizens can understand it, this reason will count as admissible in political justifications. Yet, this seems to require too little: what if my conception of the common good is inegalitarian?

Here we see how the third condition is the one carrying most of the normative weight. Questions of background justice, “specifying the political, social and institutional context within which individuals can develop their life plans” (104, my translation), single out the interests that are politically admissible and for this reason these questions are to be settled by citizens impartially. Biale does not spell out precisely which issues pertain to background justice and which do not. In a footnote, he gives an example by drawing a line between norms defining the rights of migrants, which belong to background justice, and policies concerning migrants’ education or accommodation, which do not (105). Later in the book, he argues that partisan justifications cannot undermine or question those ideals upon which the democratic process is grounded and thanks to which the people can exercise control over the process itself (151). Presumably then, background justice has to do with the democratic process and its underpinning ideals, such as freedom and equality of all citizens. Those conceptions of the common good that conflict with these democratic ideals are ruled out. If this is the case, inegalitarian conceptions of the common good are prevented from carrying the day. However, this also means that citizens should *not* be partisans on these matters; they should *not* put forward claims *from their own partisan perspective*; rather, they should uphold democratic principles and ideals according to the principle of Fair Consideration of Interests. Partisanship, therefore, is only conditionally valuable, i.e. insofar as it is consistent with democratic principles (Muirhead 2010; Efthymiou 2018). These set up the standards of evaluation for acceptable claims, that is, those claims that all citizens *must* accept because they follow directly from democratic ideals.

Indeed, also the fact that Biale asks partisans to respect two requirements, intellectual honesty and loyal opposition, shows how partisanship is worthwhile only within the limits imposed by democratic principles. Partisans must be intellectually honest, which entails acknowledging both factual reality and the partiality of their own perspective (144-147). Furthermore, partisans must be loyal in their opposition, which means that they ought to commit themselves to three points. First, they must address fellow citizens with proposals they can accept and review them in case of criticism. Second, they must acknowledge that the democratic process serves to take decisions in the interests of all. Third, they must insulate the democratic process from their partisan struggle and respect the principle of Fair Consideration when taking

decisions that impact on democratic procedures' structure (148-149). It is in virtue of these two requirements that partisans can be expected to take collective decisions through negotiation, rather than deliberation, in a way that is nonetheless democratically acceptable. Because they are aware of their partiality, they should be willing to respect others as equals, acknowledge their different claims, maintain mutual cooperation and strike acceptable compromises in order not to impose their partial perspective on each other. All these dispositions constitute the democratic ethos that partisan agents ought to value and embody. The problem is that citizens strongly disagree over how to interpret those democratic ideals on the basis of which they are supposed to lead their partisan struggles. Hence, even when asked to respect the principle of Fair Consideration of Interests, they might follow very different and even opposing readings of it. What should citizens do in such cases? Should they accept all proposals that claim to be consistent with democratic principles, regardless of whether *they* see the connection or not, or should they acknowledge as rightful partisan counterparts only those whose proposals *they* see as compatible with democratic principles? Notice that partisan conception of agency pulls in both directions, since it asks citizens to recognize their partiality and the legitimacy of others' claims as well as to ensure that questions of background justice be settled impartially.

This issue is particularly salient with nowadays populist movements and parties, which indeed put forward a conception of the common good whose compatibility with democratic principles is at least disputable. Perhaps this is just an insurmountable problem in democratic theory. As political theorists we want democratic institutions to be true to normative ideals of democracy and possibly to fulfil basic ideals of justice. Nonetheless, respecting citizens' autonomy also means letting them "identify what the society they live in should do to promote the common good" and "recognize that different people can and must appeal to different values" (176, my translation). Biale's partisan model fares better on all three desiderata and succeeds in showing that democracy is not a market nor a forum, but "a society of equals perpetually unsatisfied" (177, my translation). Perhaps a similar dissatisfaction must affect democratic theorists themselves in their attempt to combine the value of individual autonomy with the pursuit of the true common good.

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