

No Democracy for Devils

Democratic citizenship between interests and justice

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to analyze the relationship between interests and justice in normative democratic theory. I tackle this issue from the point of view of the citizens, as I want to enquire which moral duties democratic citizenship implies. Ordinary citizens of current democratic societies are expected to endorse and act on a conception of justice, and normally political philosophers require that it be one belonging to a certain acceptable set. John Rawls is the most prominent example: contemporary democratic citizens share a reasonable conception of justice, which regulates the terms of their social cooperation. Nevertheless the liberal tradition, by focusing on individual freedoms and rights, tends to give priority to these aspects rather than to a public commitment towards a common good or a shared conception of justice. Do liberal theories of democracy need to give priority to a public allegiance over their interests?

First, I sketch a brief introduction in order to make clear the liberal paradigm within which the problem is handled. Second, I compare two positions as representatives of the “justice first” and “interest-based” approaches. First, I address the case of Rawls, who grounds his conception of citizenship on the idea of public reason and on the duty of civility. Relying on a morally oriented interpretation of the notion of reasonableness, I argue that, in Rawlsian democratic model, citizens are required to prioritize a publicly shared conception of justice with respect to their comprehensive doctrines and interests. Second, I analyze the case of Thomas Christiano, who grounds the justification of democracy on the idea of “equal advancement of interests”. In this model, citizens are encouraged to publicly discuss their interests and their broad moral considerations in order to find and further the common good.

In the last part I introduce my own proposal, which focuses on the relationship between an objective conception of interest and democratic deliberation, which appears to be greatly underestimated in the current

normative debate on democracy. Firstly, I distinguish between the notion of interest and the one of comprehensive moral values. Secondly, I separate it from a radically subjective interpretation of individual interest (i.e. what I think to be in my interest) that cannot ground more than a strictly procedural conception of democracy, with little space for deliberation. On the contrary, an objective conception of interest has different assets. First, it does not restrain citizens to considerations of justice in the public space. Second, it allows for an epistemic interpretation of both the ideas of deliberation and of the common good. Third, *contra* pure deliberative theories, it secures a link to democracy, because, in case of irresolvable disagreement, it justifies recourse to majoritarian rule in order to make a decision. Finally, it has an intuitive and direct motivational effect, as it aims at providing citizens with reasons based on their rational interest to participate and comply with democratic procedures.