

Parties, Public Reasons, Common Good. An Ideal Account of Political Participation

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Abstract: In this comment to Bonotti's book I focus on few issues I consider extremely relevant. In Bonotti's view, political parties play an indisputable role in accommodating diversities, even the deep ones, e.g. religious and cultural claims. Bonotti's view is strongly 'normative' since political participation through parties – thanks to their presumed mediation role – seems accessible only to reasonable people, that is, to those citizens who are actually concerned about common good.

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In his recent book *Partisanship and Political Liberalism in Diverse Societies* Matteo Bonotti aims at showing how the notion of partisanship is compatible with the liberal ideal of public reason. In Bonotti's account, partisanship as ideal plays a central role in enforcing legitimacy and stability of democratic institutions, in spite of the fact that political parties are widely contested. Such a contestation is sometimes misplaced: critics confuse parties and partisanship, although they are intrinsically different. It is true that partisanship entails partiality, but it is not the same as factionalism or even sectarianism. Partisanship is not factionalism *per se*. Coming to Bonotti's argument, it may be focused on in a double manner, normative and realistic.

Normatively, parties should be recognized a public function and should be prevented from becoming instruments for self-interest, egotism and vanity. If partisanship implies a *collective* search for common good, factionalism lays room for abusing institutions and pursuing sectarian goals. Interestingly, speaking about a *collective* or a *community* does not refer to a homogeneous whole. Parties as collectives or communities are intended to reach the majority consensus. In this sense they are partial; but, again, partiality is not the same as factionalism. Parties are partial but, normatively, are not intended to rule out any dissent. Rather, they are intended to conciliate it. By pursuing the common good, parties prove *to do* politics besides theorizing it. One may wonder whether doing politics means being realistic: that is, whether doing politics is a realistic way of actualizing political ideals. A positive answer is available insofar as according to Bonotti, doing politics through political parties might respond to the ideal of public

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reason. Public reason inspires internal dialogue within a single party and the dialogue among different parties as well. Further development of this point follows.

Realistically, given the everlasting crisis of contemporary democracies, political parties are dramatically distant from people, as they are concerned about their own survival and not about populace's needs. Parties themselves are in crisis and their crisis is an evidence of the actual transformation of partisanship into factionalism.

In light of these initial considerations, Bonotti draws an original idea of partisanship: partisanship represents the way to take part in political life through political parties within the frame of political liberalism (Bonotti, 2017, p. 1). By recalling *Political liberalism* by Rawls, Bonotti clarifies his theoretical aim: to show how partisanship and public reason cohere, since both his defence of partisanship and the Rawlsian ideal of public reason (Rawls, 1993; 1997) support to the same idea of legitimacy and stability.

In what follows I will focus on few points of Bonotti's argument. Contextually I suggest some clarifications.

Political obligations for party members. The first point is about party members and the question about their specific duties – if any – towards fellow citizens. The latter infringement of fair-play duty is called 'unitarianism': it means "denying legitimacy to other parties or even eliminating party pluralism" (see also Bonotti, 2011, pp. 109-110). According to Bonotti, beyond the duty of fair-play as peculiar to party members they have the same political obligations as their fellow citizens. These obligations are stronger for them, supposedly because they are benefiting from their special position within political community. In short, given that party members assumed their position voluntarily and are benefiting from it, they are requested to contribute to political community proportionally. Among these benefits are participation in collective decision, media access and coverage, advantages in using public space.

Then, Bonotti passes to focus on conflicting obligations; that is, for instance, those conflicts between religious precepts and legal duties. In some situations, conflict between them is structural, as in the case of the duty of proselytism for Muslims (see also March, 2011). There is no room for an accommodation of contrasting claims: the same occurs in all cases in which a true believer of any religion cannot renounce her religious integrity. With regard to those situations, Bonotti propounds his idea of political participation through parties: parties should be able to manage conflicting obligations. It implies two tasks: a) to temperate possible conflicts; b) to host dissenting voices. By performing this dual tasks parties contribute to strengthen political obligations and democracy as well. Given the democratic frame, obligations are to be intended as related to just laws or at least to quasi-just laws. Otherwise, in front of flagrant unjust laws, a (democratic) political party has the moral duty *and* the political obligation to struggle against them.

Some questions arise: how do parties play as interface between religions and democratic institutions? With regard to minorities: are parties better equipped to deal with their claims than the traditional intercultural dialogue outside of them? Such questions entail a concern about dealing with deep conflicts in public. Bonotti assumes civil disobedience as extreme measure. Honestly, much more may be developed besides calling for disobedience to

conciliate conflicts, even the deepest ones. As Bonotti himself recognizes, deliberative process in democracy is held to be the way for inventing unexplored solutions, however arduous this process may be.

Though, Bonotti articulates a deliberative solution to conflicts. Against both “radical establishment” and “radical separation” as opposed ways to cope with religious claims, Bonotti defends an idea of *democratic accommodationism*. That is, neither a regime of mono-religious governance nor an institutional endorsement of atheism can be defended as they both involve the suppression of basic rights and liberties. By contrast any democratic regime should guarantee dialogue and even contestation. In the end, no forms of accommodation should be fixed in advance, but space for accommodating contrasting diversities should be left open in the light of the principles of justice. Following Rawls, there is no preconceived exclusion of religious reasons; instead, religious positions may benefit from the so-called constitutional essentials, such as the protection of individual liberties and rights. The Rawlsian public reason is not, *pace* some authors (e.g. Laborde, 2013), an exclusivist domain or a separatist settlement. On the contrary, it is a pluralist space open to dialogue and confrontation, preventing any position from asserting its criteria on others. To comment shortly what above, Bonotti is propounding an interesting revision of Rawlsian public reason, supplemented by a deliberative process as opening a space for dialogue among religious reasons in light of constitutional essentials. Nothing may be fixed in advance, but conciliation may come from a democratic accommodation.

Partisanship and public reason. A further point concerns public reason and partisanship. Both can coherently host and accommodate religious diversities, even conflicts. Now Bonotti is arguing for the role of political parties as mediators among contrasting obligations. Mediation motivates people to overcome conflicts as much as possible. That is not the same as denying contestation. Democratic contestation is an instrument of public reason to cope with conflicts respectfully and to motivate people to pursue a peaceful coexistence. Furthermore, motivation is an indisputable ingredient of democratic loyalty and stability over time. To detail, it may be added that political parties are mediators insofar as they are expected to help people seek coherence among their own religious (or comprehensive) positions and public reasons requirements. That shows how political parties are essential for democracy: they aim (or should aim) at common good, not at the interests of one and the same stakeholder. Political parties and public reason cohere in pursuing common good.

Here a question arises about common good. Bonotti recalls the Rawlsian notion of public political culture: the common good should be rightly understood in light of such public political culture. But, analogously to Rawls Bonotti does not detail what political public culture consists in. It remains ambiguous insofar as it is not clear if it is a descriptive category or a normative one. On the one side, culture is public as long as people share it, be they aware of it or not. On the other, culture is public since people feel committed to share it, as it is the terrain of political values to be pursued over time. Moreover, in neither case it is clear if and how unreasonable positions may be accommodated. Probably political parties may do this work, provided that there can be a place for unreasonable values to be conveyed in a profitable dialogue. But,

again, how this dialogue could be conducted has to be further investigated. About that, Bonotti tries and suggests a distinction between *shared reasons* and *accessible reasons*. Reasons are *shared* when people see them as their own and justified reasons. By contrast, reasons are *accessible* when one person sees them as reasons for others: others' reasons are accessible insofar as persons happen to disagree on reasons while agreeing on the common standards those reasons differently endorse. E.g.: A finds religious reasons justified for herself while B cannot hold the same reasons justified as they refer to a religion in which she does not believe. In this case, religious reasons are neither shared nor accessible. Alternatively, A and B turn to share reasons sustaining global warming, but they disagree on possible remedies. Their mutual reasons are not shared but they are accessible: they delimit the debate for A and B to reach a common solution. An agreement starting from accessible even not shared reasons should be available to political parties: they should be able to convey disagreement in such a way.

So far, the account of parties is still normative: parties may be spaces for reasonable confrontation. Descriptively, they mostly appear as binders for unreasonable positions, and they become themselves unreasonable. Thus, parties are far from cementing society and assuring society a democratic stability. Below normative ideals, reality is too stringent to be overlooked. Unreasonableness is much more real and indisputable than any ideal of agreement if not peace. Political party as convector of dissenting but reasonable positions seems to be too an abstract ideal.

Apart from this realistic even pessimistic understanding of political parties, a less ideal role may be attributed to parties, the one of "training grounds" for citizens to learn how to pursue the common good. As Bonotti correctly observes, parties should not mirror empirical social interests: their social role is to pursue common interests as prevalent on the ones of any party. Parties should undertake to transform pre-political values into political ones, so to respond coherently to the requirements of public reason.

By emphasizing this teaching role, Bonotti's normative account of political parties seems to respond better to real times. However illusionary his account may appear during the dark times of current democracies, it represents a challenging and stimulating proposal to revitalize political parties as agents committed to the common good.

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