
Review

Just democracy: The Rawls-Machiavelli programme

Philippe Van Parijs

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Philippe Van Parijs's book, *Just Democracy: The Rawls-Machiavelli Programme*, gathers together a series of his articles which were originally published between 1996 and 2009. As Van Parijs says, each of these has been very lightly revised, and topped with a short new introduction in which the book's 'central idea' is presented (p. iii). This idea is that if faced with a conflict between justice and democracy, we should always prefer the former to the latter. This is because democracy *per se* has no intrinsic value. It is only of value if it can serve as an instrument for the achievement of justice. For Van Parijs, then, the problem is this: 'how democracy should be structured and constrained in order to best serve the objective of social justice' (p. 1).

Thus what Van Parijs calls the Rawls-Machiavelli programme involves the formulation and analysis of a series of conjectures about 'the likely effects of various possible democratic designs' on our efforts to pursue social justice (p. 1). The Rawlsian component of the programme is what Van Parijs regards as a plausible conception of social justice as a liberty-constrained maximising of material conditions. The Machiavellian component is a commitment to a form of institutional engineering, the purpose of which is to promote such a conception of justice (p. 2). Put the two together and we get a 'social-justice-guided consequentialist research and action programme' (p. 37). One might say that while Rawls provides the end, Machiavelli provides a way of thinking about which means may best advance that end.

Having laid out this central idea in Chapter 1, the chapters that follow develop it in a number of directions. The next two are largely theoretical in character. In the first of these, Van Parijs develops his argument that democracy should be regarded merely as an instrument for the achievement of justice. In the second, he contrasts his conception of 'real freedom for all' with Philip Pettit's conception of freedom as non-domination. He agrees with Pettit that 'contestatory democracy' will promote freedom, but argues that if it is to promote real freedom for all, it should not be maximally contestatory.

Chapters 4–10 then show how this approach to ‘just democracy’ can be applied in practice. The first of these asks which democratic arrangements might best take account of the interests of future generations. Considering the relative merits of four sets of proposals – including disenfranchising the old, and giving parents proxy votes for their children – Van Parijs is keen to point out that it is necessary to be aware that harmful unintended consequences may follow from such proposals.

The remaining chapters focus on Belgium and, to a lesser extent, the European Union (EU). Here, Van Parijs’s argument is that the EU needs something very like the political institutions toward which Belgium is currently striving. In both cases, he argues, the right institutions are those able to protect national democratic forums while at the same time facilitating generous redistribution of resources between regions. In the European case, Van Parijs’s conclusion is that it is necessary to shift from *demoi-cracy* to *demos-cracy* – from ‘accountability to the separate peoples of Europe’ to ‘accountability to the people of Europe as a whole’ (p. 77). In the case of Belgium, he defends the combination of a *pluri-national democracy* and a *trans-national welfare state* (p. 117). In this way, he thinks, a commitment to democracy and to justice can be successfully combined.

In this short review, I shall concentrate on Van Parijs’s key claim that democracy should be regarded as a ‘sheer instrument’ (p. 16) in the achievement of social justice. At a number of points, he formulates this claim in very strong and apparently unambiguous terms. He says, for instance, that if there is a conflict between them, then ‘let us stick to justice, and sacrifice democracy’ (p. 14). Democracy, he declares, is not an end in itself but ‘only constitutes an institutional instrument which it is legitimate to deviate from if the pursuit of the ideal [of justice] requires it’ (p. 15). More generally, he says that the Rawls-Machiavelli programme exhibits a ‘ruthless consequentialism ... in which democracy itself, however thinly defined, should not be taken for granted and in which anything goes’ (p. 39).

You might imagine, having read these – and various other – formulations, that Van Parijs thinks that there may be circumstances in which democracy should be entirely cast aside in the pursuit of justice. Perhaps there may even be circumstances in which the political arrangement most likely to secure social justice would be a benign dictatorship, in which the dictator – if not Van Parijs himself – was at least a fan his *Real Freedom for All*. In fact, this isn’t so. The Machiavellian part of Van Parijs’s programme does not lead to embarrassing or even ‘repugnant’ outcomes (p. 39). Its much less exciting but of course much more palatable conclusion is that there are very good reasons to stick with democracy. The question, in practice, is to determine which specific form of democracy ‘is the most capable of ensuring the implementation of the conception of justice adopted here’ (pp. 15–16).



So what are the reasons for sticking with democracy? Let me mention just three. First, there must be a lively public debate in order to ‘generate and ceaselessly regenerate a sense of justice that conforms to the conception of justice adopted here’ (p. 16). Second, a contestatory democracy – one in which citizens can challenge politicians’ decisions – ensures that the tracking of citizens’ interests and opinions will lead to the adoption of ‘liberal egalitarian principles’ (pp. 26–27). Third, and perhaps most importantly, central features of democratic institutions – ‘such as the maximum inclusion of all those affected’ – brings ‘the actual objectives of key political actors closer to the demands of social justice’ (p. 65). In a democracy, in short, citizens will endorse a liberal egalitarian conception of justice, and political decision makers – who are accountable to those citizens – will therefore have good reason to endorse such a conception too.

Furthermore, it is not just a matter of happy empirical coincidence that at the moment the best institutional arrangements for securing social justice happen to be democratic in character. Rather, the reasons that Van Parijs gives for thinking that some set of democratic institutions is most likely to promote social justice are reasons for thinking that no other set of non-democratic institutions could do the job nearly as well. It appears, then, that although Van Parijs says that his research programme does not take democracy for granted, it seems that not everything goes. Machiavelli recommends democracy to those who wish to realize Rawls, and Van Parijs’s programme is only ethically acceptable (p. 65) for as long as this continues to be so.

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