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ACCESSIBILITY, SCIENCE, AND POLITICAL PARTIES

BY

GIULIA BISTAGNINO

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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*

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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 inquiry[8] 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 measle. 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 strategies[17] 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 public[18] 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" (Talisse 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.

University of Milan

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