

Introduction: Democracy as *Pharmakon*

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In his “Introduction” to the *Philosophy & Social Criticism* Symposium on Alessandro Ferrara’s *The Democratic Horizon* (henceforth *DH*), written just a few months ago, David Rasmussen described the project of the book as that of reshaping and expanding Rawlsian liberalism in order to “meet the demands of a world society half of which can be classified as democratic [...] while the other half may be aspiring to be part of a democratic movement but hindered by various forms of repression”.¹

Yet to our ears – mostly after such events as Brexit and Trump’s presidential election –, the word “democracy” sounds like a *Pharmakon*, which, according to the Greek etymology, is both poison and drug at the same time, because too often populist and neo-oligarchic leaders attempt to legitimize their policies by invoking the people’s consensus. As a result, the same assumption that there exists a multiplicity of civilizational models – one of the leading ideas of political liberalism – gets employed to pave the way to the discomfoting inference that we must “immunize” our values.

Actually, however, it is fair to say that Rawls’s very model, being committed to the possibility of drawing a distinction between different kinds of value systems according to their reasonableness, is likely to be interpreted in terms that justify the distinction between different classes of people. Therefore, it needs to be reworked and strengthened in order to match the challenges of our “troubled times”. Ferrara in *DH* takes Rawls’s political liberalism as the starting point of his enquiry but departs from it in several important respects. The aim is that of building a *normative* theory, which is nonetheless *empirically adequate* to the “inhospitable conditions” of our time.

Let’s pause to clarify the meaning of this double proviso. Ferrara aims to offer a theory that is empirically adequate, in the sense of taking into account the contextual conditions threatening contemporary democracies. And in fact, in the “Introduction” of *DH*, Ferrara, in the footsteps of Frank Michelman, sets forth the menaces – extension of the electorate, stratification of citizenship, increased cultural pluralism of constituencies,

¹ D. Rasmussen, “Introduction”, *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, 42 (2016), pp. 635-639, p. 635.



prevailing of finance within the capitalist economy, transformation of the public sphere, to name just a few examples – that threaten to kill the plant of democracy. Moreover, since democracy is like a living organism, in that it can flourish or wither, there is room for a normative theory expounding the precepts that secure its well-being. This theory shall neutralize the toxic conditions that risk destroying the plant of democracy. In this sense, Ferrara’s stance has a normative twist: it stems from empirical knowledge but does not content itself with depicting the status of political institutions. Instead, it aims at providing a kind of recipe for revitalizing democracy and making it capable of meeting future challenges.

The first step is redefining the core of democracy: democracy does not consist solely in a bundle of procedural rules but also in a kind of *ethos* that leads to the adoption of these norms. In this way, reason and imagination work together: democratic politics is at its best when good reasons move the imagination. But in which sense can reasons be termed “good”? Ferrara maintains that an essential ingredient of the democratic ethos, and hence of the goodness of reasons, is a public propensity or passion for “openness”, that is a positive attitude towards the exploration of new possibilities and new life forms. This implies also the attempt to enlarge the democratic sphere. Societal and cultural pluralism are not threats to be confronted. Rather, they represent opportunities to enlarge the democratic horizon.

Thus, the chapters from 3 to 6 of *DH* address the issue of pluralism from several perspectives. First, Ferrara argues for a transition from “monopluralism”, which urge us to embrace a pluralist stance assuming the existence of just one set of valid reasons for accepting pluralism, to *reflexive pluralism*, that is the position according to which pluralism can be accepted on the basis of different sets of justifications. In this way, reflexive pluralism advocates the idea that each justification must be internal to some comprehensive conception. This is the skeleton of conjectural reasoning, the style of argument that Ferrara borrows from Rawls: according to this methodology, liberal values cannot be imposed through law; rather, the resources for upholding them must be found within each particular conception.

However, it is fair to say that contemporary pluralism is deeper than Rawls’s, since it extends along an array of different dimensions, including cultural, religious,



linguistic and ethnic ones. Hence, Ferrara aptly introduces the category of *hyperpluralism* in order to highlight these specific traits. In some cases, such pluralism is so pervasive that even conjectural reasoning cannot bridge the gap between liberal values and particular conceptions. In those instances, Ferrara advocates a *multivariate democratic polity*, that is a kind of political system in which most citizens agree – from their respective viewpoints – on the basic rules, but relate in a *modus vivendi* with minorities whose comprehensive conceptions endorse only a subset of the constitutional essentials.

Hyperpluralism has a historical dimension as well. In *DH* Ferrara aptly contrasts Rawls’s “Western” conception of societal pluralism with his own. In this vein, the rise of pluralism is rooted in the model of *Multiple Modernities*, hence the idea that democratic cultures emerge from different civilizational contexts producing different versions of the “just and stable society of free and equal citizens”. This move marks a further step towards what we could call the “pluralization” of pluralism, that is the process through which Ferrara attempts to subtract the same notion of “pluralism” to an ethnocentric understanding. Finally, in the sixth chapter, the issue of pluralism is investigated through the lenses of contemporary multiculturalist approaches in political theory. Ferrara draws on Will Kymlicka in order to elucidate four arguments for the justification of differential attribution of non-fundamental rights and prerogatives to citizens according to their cultural affiliation. He intends to show that Rawls’s theory is the better starting point for a new multiculturalist liberalism, free from essentialist presuppositions.

In the last two chapters of *DH*, Ferrara enriches his account by addressing other “surrounding” issues. First, he focuses on the prospect for democracy beyond the boundaries of nation states. His argument is that the empirical conditions of supranational political structures force us to redefine the same concept of democratic participation, so as to include the recourse to soft law, to best practices or to moral suasion as methods for coordinating political action. Then, he discusses the possibility of adopting a deliberative approach to reconcile global governance structures and democratic legitimacy. Finally, in the last chapter of the book, Ferrara turns to considering the role of truth within the realm of political discourse. He maintains that the distinction between truth and justification cannot be abandoned. However, it has to be redefined in dualistic terms by distinguishing between the truth *within* a given paradigm or frame – to be



conceived in a correspondentist manner – and the truth of a given paradigm or frame – and in this case truth will behave as an ideal justification.

David Owen in the opening essay – *A Politics of Exemplarity* – addresses the issues of exemplarity and imagination. He suggests that Ferrara’s account of “politics at its best” is based on Thomas Kuhn’s dichotomy between normal and revolutionary science and argues that even “normal” politics may host an exemplary dimension. In fact, exemplars do not exist *per se*, as they possess some special quality, but emerge from concrete episodes of struggle and involve the response from an audience, which proves to be sensitive to the contested values.

Matthew Festenstein – *The Normative and the Transformative in Ferrara’s Exemplary Politics* – highlights two distinctive features of Ferrara’s theory, namely, his commitment to the normativity of a Rawlsian form of political liberalism and to a judgment-centered epistemology. His main thesis is that the former is in tension with the latter because, if judgment were to function as the source of normativity, it should be characterized in a way that is incompatible with the premises of political liberalism.

With Luca Baccelli’s essay – *Inside the Rawlsian Horizon?* – the Rawlsian inspiration of *DH* comes under fire. Baccelli acknowledges that *DH* offers a detailed and original portrayal of the pathologies of current democracies. However, he contends that the normative framework developed by Rawls in *Political Liberalism* prevents Ferrara from effectively addressing such issues and from working out a satisfactory answer to those challenges, since it fails to take into due consideration the roots of pluralism.

David Álvarez García focuses his contribution – *Democracy as Horizon. Conjectural Argumentation and Public Reason Beyond the State* – on Ferrara’s notion of hyperpluralism. His main qualm is that Ferrara assumes hyperpluralism as a given, without addressing the global political context that leads to the emergence of this phenomenon. Following this train of thought, Álvarez explores the role that conjectural argumentation can play at a supranational level, arguing that the resort to conjecture cannot result in a kind of transnational fusion of horizons.

Marco Solinas – *Democratic Ethos, Imagination and Emotion* – holds that *DH* tries to overcome the limits of a merely procedural understanding of democracy by



stressing the importance of the mobilizing forces of ethos and political imagination. Solinas, however, maintains that a deeper engagement with the emotional, imaginative and affective dimensions of the democratic practices might allow Ferrara to pursue the methodological goal of substituting the procedural interpretation of democracy with a normative reading in a more successful way.

Leonardo Marchettoni's essay – *Conjecture and Recognition* – tries to shed some light on the role that conjectural reasoning plays within Ferrara's strategy to deal with pluralism. After a detailed reconstruction of the structure of conjectural reasoning, Marchettoni considers the function of conjectural reasoning within *DH*. He concludes that the recourse to conjecture may properly work only in those cases in which individuals already exhibit some relevant common traits that make them capable of recognizing each other as members of the same community.

Finally, Italo Testa – *Is Hyperpluralism Compatible with Dualist Constitutionalism? On Alessandro Ferrara's Conception of Multivariate Democratic Polity* – contrasts Ferrara's "multivariate democratic polity" framework with consensus-based notions of democratic legitimacy. The upshot of his argument is that the multivariate frame is scarcely compatible with the "dualist conception of democratic constitutionalism" adopted by Ferrara, urging a more accurate consideration of the role the emergent transnational demos might play in deliberative processes.

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