

Book Review

Political Pluralism, Disagreement and Justice: The Case for Polycentric Democracy,

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One strand of political philosophy has traditionally involved debates about whether utilitarianism, egalitarianism, liberalism, libertarianism, or communitarianism are the correct first-order theories that express what justice requires our fundamental political institutions to be. On another strand of political philosophy, the fact of deep moral and political disagreement in modern societies is taken seriously and so involves debates about the second-order theories that attempt to show the best way to resolve or manage disagreement between first-order theories (e.g. public reason liberalism or political realism, or procedural democracy). It is to this debate between second-order theories that Julian Müller's book provides an original and insightful contribution on behalf of polycentric democracy.

As Müller (p. 2) sees it, modern democracies are 'modus vivendi arrangements' because they are constituted by institutions that are beneficial for resolving conflicts in the face of deep moral and political disagreement, and yet the subject of mutual dissatisfaction, because people would rather move to what they view as the ideal political order if they could persuade those who disagree with them. What causes modus vivendi arrangements is that modern societies contain reasonable people who disagree both about the empirical matters and about the fundamental moral and political matters that would settle what institutions under which they ought to live. According to Müller, the problem facing people in democracies is then how best to escape such arrangements?

Müller's answer in the book is to adopt a polycentric democracy. Chapters 1–5 detail the problem of a modus vivendi, what will count as a solution, and how extant approaches fail. Chapters 6–8 introduce the idea of 'polycentrism' and argue for its epistemic merits over collective deliberation. Chapters 9–10 then apply 'polycentrism' to democracy and make the case for it on the basis of two arguments.

To motivate his case for polycentric democracy, Müller canvases three representative second-order theories and argues all fail to show how reasonable people can escape a modus vivendi. This involves subjecting John Rawls's theory of Justice as Fairness in *A Theory of Justice*, Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson's theory of deliberative democracy, and James Buchanan's theory of constitutional economics, to what Müller (p. 20) calls the 'representatives of comprehensive doctrines test' (RoCD test). This is a test of whether a realistic jury representing the major philosophical and political factions in a democracy (eg. utilitarians, egalitarians, deliberative democrats, realists, classical liberals, and natural rights libertarians) would find the theory conclusively justified or a Pareto improvement over the current modus vivendi arrangements.

Müller argues all three of the theories fail this test because at their core they all either idealise away disagreement or attempt to mitigate and isolate it through particular deliberative procedures. As a result, Müller argues at least one member of the RoCD will have sufficient reason to veto each of the theories. Although Müller's evaluation of the representative theories is brisk, it is on the whole fair and not prejudiced towards any of the theories beforehand. Nevertheless, one is left wondering how more sophisticated theories from contemporary public-reason theorists (e.g. Gerald Gaus, Kevin Vallier, or Ryan Muldoon), or political realists (e.g. Matt Sleat) might fare.

Müller's diagnosis for the failure of all three representative theories is that they all share the view that disagreement is a nuisance to be erased or reduced by deliberation with one's peers. But Müller asks what if we tried to actually make use of the diversity that leads to moral and political disagreement? Müller divides this shift in approach into two possible paradigms: the deliberative and the polycentric. On the deliberative paradigm, collective deliberation allows experts to share knowledge, allows people to share perspectives to see the entirety of a problem, and creates new perspectives by aggregating knowledge. However, Müller argues, by marshaling psychological research on deliberation, the idea of transaction costs, and the idea of bounded rationality, that deliberation has inherent epistemic limits that hinder the escape from a *modus vivendi*.

But, luckily there is another way to make use of diversity. On the polycentric paradigm, people search for solutions to problems in an institutional framework that regulates multiple simultaneous experiments and investigations that engage in evolutionary competition. This process is driven by the disagreement between the people in the system about what the best solutions are. Müller argues that such a system is epistemically superior to collective deliberation because it allows for dissenting voices to operate independently and generate evidence for their views, it has no limits on the number of experiments so it removes the transactions costs of deliberation in a large group, and allows for experiments to slowly diffuse their results without having to convince the majority all at once. Müller's explanation of polycentrism here is clear, detailed, and a much needed contribution to political philosophy.

The explication of polycentrism and its epistemic merits paves the way for Müller's application of it to democracy and what many will likely find as the most interesting and innovative parts of the book. Müller (pp. 137–38) envisions a 'polycentric democracy' as a democratically legitimated overarching framework which facilitates a multitude of highly autonomous 'polities' to compete against each other to implement the best social institutions. The case for this centres on two arguments. The Amelioration Argument holds that a polycentric democracy, given it allows reasonable people who disagree deeply to live autonomously under the social institutions they view as morally right or just, uses diversity itself to ameliorate its effects. It does not compel people to live under the social institutions they view as oppressive and therefore avoids potential social conflict. The Unblocking Utopia Argument holds that a polycentric democracy, given the multitude of simultaneous autonomous political units it allows, enables people to generate potentially decisive evidence for or against their moral and political ideals. This allows for competition between political units because people can 'vote with their feet' so to speak. The evolutionary competition between political units will then unblock the path for a certain comprehensive doctrine to persuade others and realise its utopia. This aim of channelling of diversity for the benefit of all shows the

epistemic merits of Müller's idea of polycentric democracy over two theoretically close rivals: Kukathas's 'liberal archipelago' and Nozick's 'minimal state' (pp. 149–52, 188).

Müller's explication of the two arguments leaves the reader with a sense of polycentric democracy as a genuinely distinct second-order theory with serious reasons in favour of it. Müller admirably also considers some objections, at least as far as is possible given the scope and ambition of the book. Nevertheless, readers might be left pondering two underemphasised tensions. Firstly, the value of social unity seems at odds with a polycentric democracy. It is intrinsic to some comprehensive doctrines (e.g. integralist Catholicism or Utilitarianism) that they apply universally to all the social units within a legitimate state, and yet evolutionary competition would seem to incentivise increasing levels of autonomy for individual political units. Given that the book merely argues that a polycentric democracy is better than a *modus vivendi* democracy, followers of such universalist comprehensive doctrines may find it better to settle for the *modus vivendi* arrangement and risk a nonevolutionary and nonautonomy incentivising mechanism to convert the whole of their society. To be clear, this is no knock-down objection but merely a possible choice point for those considering a polycentric democracy that requires further research.

Secondly, as Müller acknowledges, evolutionary competition seems most decisive and fruitful when it involves competing for people's allegiances. However, this effect is undermined because ordinary citizens are inevitably attached in complex ways to the social surroundings of their birth and in which they live for long periods of time. For instance, they might value the natural environment, their community traditions, and simply their family and friends over the particular social institutions being imposed on them. Polycentric democracy would seem to require a sort of internalised detachment, or willingness to detach, from these things in favour of finding ever more just or effective institutions, which seems to be waning with many democratic citizens in the twenty-first century.

Overall, Müller's book is an example of a rigorous and clear case for polycentric democracy that opens up new avenues of research in political philosophy. Although it may be challenging for undergraduates, it will be more than suitable for graduate students wishing to engage with the resurgence of a tradition, albeit older and richer than many philosophers care to admit, of taking deep moral and political disagreement between reasonable people seriously and orienting political philosophy towards it. The book is thoroughly worth reading for its ambition and effort to push that tradition forward.

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