

Research Project:

The Polyarchal Republic: Freedom, Cooperation and Governance after the Nation-State

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All politics is premised on a blend of unity and plurality: no polity is a purely monolithic unit, whether viewed from a cultural or institutional standpoint. However, since the age of monarchical absolutism political theorists and actors have expended a disproportionate amount of energy spelling out and vindicating the need for a central national government to establish a unified public order capable of securing the robust allegiance of all citizens. Whether that unifying impulse is expressed in terms of monarchical absolutism (“l’État c’est nous”), or in terms of parliamentary sovereignty, the trend over the past four centuries has been toward the formation of a political order which, even if its formal structure accommodated some level of local, municipal, and regional governance, tended over the long run to increase the powers and functions of the national government and to weaken the power and authority of local and regional governance.

These centralizing impulses have arguably reached their apex in the mid to late 20th century with the growth of the modern welfare State and the development of ever more sophisticated and omnipresent institutions of national bureaucracy. But the dynamics of social life do not always cooperate with official governing ideologies. The globalization of economic, political, and social relations and activities, the geographic mobility of persons and capital, the unprecedented speed of changes in technologies and social and economic structures, and the advent of the internet, have generated vast tracts of social and economic life whose geographic reach and complexity defy the efforts of national governments to regulate them. These regulatory challenges are only exacerbated by the internationalization of the labour market, which is creating a citizenry with very complex and varied loyalties that are not easily tamed by a nationalist narrative that we are all children of one nation.

Thus, the model of the geographically bounded community whose political and economic affairs alike are managed by a national government, even if it seems reassuring or comforting to some, is by now an outdated ideology so far out of touch with the actual structure of society that we could even consider it utopic. While this utopic model remains the official state ideology (and it is hardly surprising that the state would embrace and nurture such an ideology) in most parts of the world, countless practical problems of governance and coordination are being confronted and addressed by institutions and mechanisms that do not fit within the

paradigm of the sovereign national community. Social governance and coordination, de facto, is quite dispersed, across myriad communities and businesses, but our official political ideologies and theories seem to have a hard time catching up.

The dramatic lag between official statist ideologies and an increasingly decentered society can be explained in part by the dynamics of political power, which tends to dig in and defend itself, especially at moments when its legitimacy and relevance are on the decline, and in part by a strong historical bias in favour of the unitary state-centered society. This bias, reinforced by the ominous images of more chaotic eras of feudal oppression and anarchy and the wars of religion, is preventing us from acknowledging the emergence of a new form of politics, in which the body politic, insofar as it exists, is less a sovereign, self-governing unit, and more like a broad cultural context – a broad civic culture, if you will – permitting the cooperation not of mere individuals, but of a plethora of associations, each with its own internal norms and governance procedures.

Interestingly, the common life of the participants in this civic culture is governed by multiple centres of coordination, each with its own proper function and jurisdiction, but none of which has absolute authority over anyone. Thus, we behold multiple sources of authority working alongside each other, and making order possible in a complex and plural social landscape. Our social order diverges as much from Cicero's republic as from Hobbes's sovereign omniscient state. Indeed, no traditional conception of a political regime, whether ancient or modern, fits the type of civic order that we see unfolding today.

While there have been numerous efforts to develop a cosmopolitan vision of civic order, in which public power and authority is shared between regional, national, and transnational institutions, these accounts do not convincingly explain how cosmopolitan institutions are anchored in local political cultures, and they generally build on a broadly statist picture of political order, in which sovereign nations surrender parts of their sovereignty to transnational institutions. They thus fail to grasp the ways in which economic and civil society organizations directly constitute the political order and exercise a range of functions traditionally attributed to the state, wielding reasonable forms of authority that do not depend on the blessing or legitimation of either state or cosmopolitan institutions.

What I propose in this book is that both from an empirical and normative standpoint, the most adequate account of political life for contemporary conditions must be *pluralistic* not merely in the familiar sense of tolerating a wide range of conceptions of the good, but in terms of contemplating the *coexistence within a shared social and political space* of diverse and potentially conflicting principles of authority and social organization. I call this shared civic space the “polyarchal republic,” to indicate its unitary and plural character. It is *unitary*, a “republic,” insofar as there is indeed a common good, a shared civic culture, and some level of institutionalization of that shared culture (*res publica*, the public thing). Yet

it is simultaneously *plural* in a far-reaching sense, insofar as the actors occupying the “republic” are not merely individual citizens, but a range of organizations each with its own internal logic of governance and authority, and each, at least potentially, exercising some share in the governance of the republic.

This new plural political space is all too often feared, denied or resisted by political thinkers and practitioners, whether in the name of nationalism, public order, or justice, but ignoring or suppressing it, as I shall argue in this book, is neither viable nor desirable in the long run. Although we must cultivate and protect certain fundamental values in the public square, both through a shared civic and moral culture and through a framework of common laws and institutions, we must also recognize that legitimate public authority can be exercised responsibly by organizations that are not sovereign states, without the prior legitimation of states or state-like bodies.

This reimagined republicanism, while it need not involve the abolition of the state, does involve a radical reconceptualization of the scope and justification of the state’s coordinating functions, giving much greater latitude to local coordinating entities to govern their respective domains, whether in the economy or in other sectors of civil society. Building on and refining arguments advanced by social pluralists such as Otto von Guericke, Harold Laski, G.D.H. Cole, and more recently Paul Hirst, I defend a “polyarchal” or decentered form of republicanism that abandons traditional assumptions about the unitary republic inherited from classical antiquity (and transmuted into the modern doctrine of popular sovereignty), arguing that polyarchal republicanism is both better adapted to the empirical situation we find ourselves in, and more conducive to the emergence and preservation of healthy and just human communities, compared with more unitary and centralized conceptions of political order.

As the state comes under pressure from internal fragmentation by political and religious conflict and external usurpation by global economic markets, this project is a timely attempt to develop a fresh model of political community suitable for the social and economic conditions of 21st century societies. It seeks to imagine a new form of civic order capable of accommodating a high level of social and cultural diversity, rooted less in politics narrowly construed and more in the creative and coordinating power of organizations embedded within economic, social, and professional life. Affirming the legitimacy of this form of politics implies a radical reappraisal of a whole range of political concepts such as citizenship, political community, representation, sovereignty, self-determination, democracy, patriotism, and common good. And this reappraisal is likely to involve a paradigm shift, insofar as the prevailing conception of political order as a gift of the state and state-like institutions, is put in question.