

Lea Ypi

Global Justice & Avant-Garde Political Agency.

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The book at hand is the first book by one of the most interesting, promising and challenging political theorists of the new generation working on global justice. The book's argument is structured around the defense of what she calls 'activist political theory', which is exercised by 'avant-garde political agents', as the title itself reveals. The definition of the two terms above is not an easy task and Ypi is fully aware of that. Roughly speaking, 'activist political theory' guides practice by putting, as she argues, familiar intuitions to new uses (62), whereas 'avant-garde political agents' have a *creative* role, like scientists or artists, who put existing knowledge and techniques at the service of fresh experiments, forming new questions and developing alternative paradigms (65). The book is divided into three parts, which together comprise of seven chapters. The first part deals with the history of the concepts of statism and cosmopolitanism, and the question of the method employed in the book. Part II develops a partial critique and a partial defense of both statist and cosmopolitan theories, whereas in part III Ypi presents her version of statist cosmopolitanism and avant-garde political theory.

Chapter 1 offers a historical account of the cosmopolitan idea mainly focusing on Rousseau and Kant. Ypi's discussion of Rousseau is brief and somewhat sketchy in my view. This is so, because Rousseau criticizes *negative* cosmopolitanism, which ignores the role of civil bond. (21). Nevertheless, Rousseau still thinks that the existence of states can trigger something more tremendous, that is, war. In fact, as he says in the *Social Contract* war is a contest between states not men, therefore Ypi is not fully justified in saying that 'the Social Contract...leaves essentially unanswered the further question of conflict in international sphere' (ibid.) . Moreover, Rousseau is actually critical of Abbe de Saint-Pierre's project of establishing a European federation based on prudential reasons, because this is *not* a project about perpetual peace, but only, as Kant would later say, a temporary pact. The critical point, even for Rousseau, is that perpetual peace cannot be established among states however internally constituted. The problem is how this can be achieved. The discussion on Kant is, I think, more to the point. Ypi rightly thinks that for Kant as for Rousseau 'political agency is the means through which the sources of conflicts can be publicly articulated' (25). This is how loyalty to states, as political agents of this kind, is justified.

Chapter 2 is of great importance as Ypi presents her methodology, which defines what she calls 'activist political theory'. The methodology aims to reflect on the link between principles and agency, and, perhaps unsurprisingly, is called dialectical (35). This dialectical method is accordingly defined in Popperian terms, as a method of trial, failure and success. Yet, it does more than provide a genealogy of emergence and evolution of reasons that agents offer to each other, thus it isn't only descriptive, and doesn't always seek to reproduce the development of the inevitable (43). The dialectical method has specific features. One of them is that it does not start with consent, as many rival theories do, but with moment of crisis and focuses on contestation as

the ‘circumstances of politics’. Although I agree with this kind of focus, I am a little uneasy with the empirical basis of contestation (57), as if contestation and conflict were not always pervasive in politics but just a contemporary characteristic of it. Ypi wants to illustrate how dialectics works in her case by engaging with one, perhaps fundamental, debate in global justice discussions nowadays: the debate among global justice theorists that tend to argue for an ideal theory and those who think we should start and focus on non-ideal theory. Ypi offers an insightful discussion of the debate, criticizing both theoretical camps and opts for the dialectical view that the two reciprocally interact. Neither of the two can orient reflection if pursued separately (56).

Chapter 3 applies the ideal/non-ideal debate to the contemporary statism/cosmopolitanism debate. In her view, both statist and cosmopolitans confuse or misplace ideal and non-ideal considerations, whereas she proposes a reconciliation. For example, she says that endorsing the statist account of agency when principles are articulated is sometimes like promoting an unduly limited and exclusionary interpretation of the circumstances of injustice (75-76). On the other hand, cosmopolitans are guilty of failing to distinguish at what level of the theory political membership becomes relevant, and tend to idealize it. As to the charge against statist I agree, as to that against cosmopolitans, I think it involves mainly moral, not political cosmopolitanism. Chapter 4 moves the by now familiar debate of statism/cosmopolitanism over the issue of (global) poverty. Statists tend to focus on the nature of associative duties (various formulations), which provide the normative basis for restricting equality within state boundaries and therefore offer no possibility of global distributive justice, but only of duties of assistance. Cosmopolitans, on the other hand, condemn the existing facts on global poverty, but also focus on the relief from absolute deprivation reaching almost the same policy recommendation as statist do (this is a critique of Pogge’s version of cosmopolitanism).

Part III is the constructive part of the book. Ypi aims to illustrate the combination of principles of global justice with an account of political agency that can trigger transformation. Thus, chapter 5 deals with principles. I think this is her best chapter. Ypi offers an interesting take on global inequality by avoiding arguments about birth lottery or arguments about the arbitrariness of boundaries (120). Instead, she moves to analyzing the concept of ‘positional goods’ in order to defend the central thesis that the relief of absolute deprivation globally is causally linked to the relief of relative deprivation (109). Such a thesis also supports the argument that in the case of ‘positional goods’ sufficiency and equality cannot be kept apart (111). This a clear and fierce attack on many contemporary approaches, especially those of Rawls and Nagel, which defend equality at the domestic level and sufficiency at the global level. Ypi argues instead that if sufficiency is justified globally, equality cannot be domestically restricted, and uses several examples to show that there is a causal link between absolute and relative deprivation. So, for example, one of the reasons why food prices increase is ethanol consumption, which is a demand by affluent countries. But such a demand can modify agricultural production and create shortage of certain food supplies. The interesting conclusion is that the ‘modification of relative life standards in one part of the world has significant consequences for the poor in other countries’ (118). The global ‘positional good’ Ypi prefers to refer here to (state) *power*, because it represents a means through which other end goods are obtained, it is relational and refers to a comparative ability. The important

conclusion from all this is that inequalities in the distribution of (state) power condemn citizens to a position of subordination – in fact, a pure sufficientarianism approach creates dependence and hierarchy (127).

Chapter 6 is equally important, I think. It goes from principles to agency. Political agency now has to be both feasible and sustainable in time. Ypi returns to her preferred dialectical model and rejects on the one hand the civil society model of political community and on the other hand the family model. Instead she argues for a dialectics of both. Her political community must combine popular sovereignty and civic education in a dynamic development that uses both. In this sense, she accepts the political sphere of the state in its historical uniqueness of creating certain relations of reciprocity, but argues for the possibility of a constant renegotiation of its purpose, yet for such a renegotiation to occur a shared background is indispensable (144-5). Finally, the last chapter draws on the analogy between artistic and political innovation, arguing for the features of a cosmopolitan avant-garde. She refers to the nature and consequences of the past and contemporary cosmopolitan agents, such as global social movements, advocacy networks, human rights activists etc.

Ypi's book is like a stream of fresh air in the current ongoing debates on global justice. Her argument is both coherent and persuasive, but most of all, manages to make sense of the debates between ideal and non-ideal theory, statism and cosmopolitanism, sufficientarianism and global egalitarianism, without oversimplifying the arguments offered by different camps. It is highly recommended for both students and academics in the fields of political philosophy, and social theory, and gives an image of the world where the *theorist* and the *activist* can only work together.

Kostas Koukouzelis

University of Crete