Commentary on Sadeck's Disagreement, Public Reasoning, and (Non-)Authoritarian Argumentation

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1. BRIEF SUMMARY AND CONTEXTUALIZATION

The paper by Karim Sadek is valuable for many reasons. It takes a point of departure in a long-standing debate in political theories of democracy, namely, the debate between deliberative (Rawls, 1997, 2005; Habermas, 1996, 2006) and agonistic theories (Mouffe, 1993, 2000).

According to deliberative theories of democracy, it is the agreement of all the members of a political community what gives to their agreed arrangements its legitimacy. Moreover, the citizenship's agreement must be of a kind that is apt to be understood as a reasoned and fair one, as based on a free and equalitarian deliberation.

According to the agonistic theory by Mouffe, one key challenge of contemporary pluralist societies is the need to construct a form of political association that does not postulate a substantive notion of the good, and yet is able to create a civic bond between citizens of diverse backgrounds and beliefs.

Karim Sadek aligns himself with the second line of thought. He takes into account in particular the case of minority groups whose religious beliefs would make them unable, so it seems, to participate in a public political deliberation in which certain previous restrictions have been imposed on the type of reasons that qualify as acceptable and deserving consideration. He contends that excluding certain claims and reasons from the public space because, allegedly, they belong to the realm of particular beliefs, will have the result of unjustly excluding those citizens.

He thus denounces the way in which, in his understanding, deliberative theories of democracy "by setting the rules of the debate such that religious reasons are considered non-public", exclude the kind of reasons "that speak most to religious persons as embodied and socio-culturally situated selves".

In order to address the kind of political theories that, in his light, bring about this unjust exclusion, he elaborates on Maeve Cooke (2007)'s notion of non-authoritarian reasoning, which he suggests to

see as an element of what he terms "a model of non-authoritarian argumentation for the analysis and evaluation of public reasoning". He proposes that non-authoritarian reasoning is inclusive about the content of arguments (thus it does not exclude in a principled form e.g. religious claims from the public domain of reasons), but is exclusive about ways of arguing. The point of this exclusion of certain ways of arguing is to exclude authoritarian behaviour and authoritarian attitudes by citizens from public debates.

He sees this form of non-authoritarian reasoning as open-ended, but emphasises that in such type of reasoning "no reason will be deemed ineligible for trading in public reasoning". In this sense, Karim Sadek contends that non-authoritarian reasoning always is open to different specifications of the content of ethical autonomy and situated rationality. This idea entails that the requirement of non-authoritarian reasoning only acquires a concrete form within actual social practices. He terms this the "ineliminable practical moment in the theoretical understanding" of this requirement.

He is aware that, given this practical aspect of non-authoritarian reasoning, it can result in a dominant group imposing their views to non-dominant groups or minoritarian positions. To answer to this difficulty, he appeals to a notion of democratic civility (elaborating on Bohman and Richardson (2009)'s original concept). The lack of democratic civility by the dominant group leads them to not listen to the arguments of others and to an inability to reconsider their own positions. The lack of this virtue can affect both the non-religious person (that has recourse to either 'ad hominem hypocrisy' or 'cognitive apartheid), and also the religious person that, feeling their identity threatened, adopt a fundamentalist attitude and are closed to revising their own positions on a particular political issue. I would like to say that Karim Sadek's reflections on the fundamentalist attitude transpire a personal engagement with this issue and offer illuminating explanations of why a person, or a group can be in such a fundamentalist attitude).

In the last part of his paper, and in order to offer a practical model of argumentation that may suit his model of non-authoritarian public argumentation, Karim Sadek draws from Michael Gilbert's construal of argumentation and this author's concept of 'ways of arguing' (1997). Karim Sadek makes explicit how Gilbert's model contributes to giving support to his own views.

2. DISCUSSION

Karim Sadek's paper is illuminating in many respects. It offers a theoretical approach that seems informed both by contemporary political theories and debates and by a personal experience and first-

hand knowledge that make of his reflections a most valuable contribution.

Notwithstanding this, I must confess that I am not completely convinced by his arguments. I see some problems in his approach that maybe he could be willing to take into account. I will focus on just two possible objections.

Firstly, Karim Sadek declares that, in his understanding, exclusivist positions such as Ralws's set the rules of the debate in such a way "that religious reasons are considered non-public"; as a result, "the reasons that speak most to religious persons as embodied and socio-culturally situated selves" are excluded. Yet the question would be what is the debate about. In many political debates, religious feelings and beliefs play an important part. Suppose, e.g., that a political community is deciding on a law that should guarantee freedom of conscience. Here, the participants' religious beliefs and practices should be taken into account. However, this is different from the case in which the debate is concerned, e.g., with a gender equality act. Here, arguments appealing to religious beliefs relative to the different natures and roles of women and men hardly would qualify as reasons apt to be acceptable to all the men and women in the community, including those who do not share the mentioned religious beliefs. This is the sense of Rawls's (and others) appeal to generalizable reasons. It seems to me that Sadeck should elaborate on the sense in which an appeal to generalizable reasons threatens to be exclusive.

My second objection is related to the following. Karim Sadek, when elaborating on Maeve Cooke (2007)'s notion of non-authoritarian reasoning, observes that non-authoritarian reasoners "accept and have internalized (…) a conception of justification that respects the autonomous agency of those towards which it is offered". This appeal to a notion of justifications that respects autonomy seems to amount also to a substantive criterium which would be on a pair with the deliberative theorist's appeal to certain procedural conditions (autonomy and freedom from coercion, symmetry, mutual respect, equal opportunities to participate of all the affected, etc.) It is not clear to me why non-authoritarian argumentation is free from the risk to result in authoritarian laws, notwithstanding the process leading to their enforcement.

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