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REALISTIC NORMATIVE DEMOCRATIC THEORY

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Abstract:
The paper analyses the possibility of formulating a normative theory of democracy that would respond to the criticisms raised by the political realism tradition against concepts based on the ideal theory. The author presents two approaches that may be considered as meeting the criteria of political realism: plebeian democracy and prefigurative politics. To assess the extent to which these proposals address realist critiques, the author focuses on political legitimacy, the distribution of power, and the challenges posed by participatory and deliberative practices.

Keywords: theory of democracy, political realism, plebeian democracy, prefigurative politics

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to explore recent propositions of realistic normative democratic theory, which result from critical assessments of ideal conceptions in normative political theory. By engaging with realist perspectives within democratic theory, this study explores non-ideal proposals aimed at improving political institutions in ways that respond to realist critiques. While the primary focus remains on theoretical discourse, the paper also incorporates recent empirical findings from political science, placing them in dialogue with the core tenets of realistic political theory.

In recent years, Anglo-American political theory and political philosophy have been engaged in disputes over translating academic research into the "real world". Academics increasingly disagree not only about the widely recognised normative perspective, but also over the means by which they tend to rearrange the democratic order. The methodological debate was full of divisions and disagreements, but essentially we can recognise two major approaches.

The first approach is connected with the rebirth of political philosophy caused by the publication of John Rawls' seminal book *Theory of Justice*. The book itself and its many references developed a paradigmatic belief in which moral principles ought to construct basic structures for each society. This order would work if all participants complied with the demands of justice and social and economic arrangements were allowed to realise principles of justice (Rawls, 1999a; 1999b; Valentini, 2012). In effect, social disparities and inequalities in access to power, knowledge, and social security will be significantly reduced. What is more, ideal theory has resonance in democratic theory through deliberative procedures. Habermasian "ideal speech situation" or Ackerman's powerful idea of "neutral dialogue" have to be seen as concepts which deliver an account of political arrangements and a framework for the ideal of deliberation (Ackerman, 1980; Habermas, 1996).

The second approach is based on a criticism of the consequences of ideal theory. Political realists challenged ideal theory on the grounds of the process of idealisation, which deprived political philosophy of its connection to real-world problems and made it unable to serve as guidance for practical use. Among many objections to ideal theory, the most frequent argument is that it reduces politics to moral philosophy. For many critics, ideal perspectives weaken the meaning of politics primarily because politics is about action, not people's preferences (Geuss, 2008; Hall, 2015; Newey, 2001; Sleat,

2011; Williams, 2005). Moreover, there have been some other disagreements in which realists questioned the role of optimistic moral psychology in ideal theory, its rejection of political conflict as an ineradicable social attribution, ahistorical argumentation with "empirical abstemiousness", and the overextended meaning of the unity of value (Farrelly, 2007; Galston, 2010; Geuss, 2008; Mills, 2005; Philp, 2010, 2012; Rossi, 2012; Rossi, Sleat, 2014; Runciman, 2012; Sen, 2006).

Methodological Remarks

As the subject of this study is a tension between two methodological approaches and their reflection in empirical research, the questions over methods may cause theoretical ambiguity. However, research should ideally be problem-driven, so the proposed paper is essentially interpretive. Therefore, the principal method used in the study is conceptual analysis. This endeavour is based on a deductive process of defining political terms and then contrasting them with rival definitions to critically evaluate those concepts. The descriptive aspect of this study will focus on realistic political propositions which enable political concepts to be shaped and arranged in an applicable position. From various perspectives in political theory (e.g., genealogy, critical theory, or ideological analysis), the conceptual analysis recognises fundamental political viewpoints. Providing a clear definition of political concepts will result in a detailed description of the political process. Conceptual analysis helps avoid confusion between concepts, principles, and theories, which are central to political theory and political philosophy (List & Valentini, 2016).

The normative role of the study is to compare the framework of political concepts between realistic propositions and their idealistic counterpart. This process will be provided by an additional method available in normative political theory: contextualism. Contextualism has dominated (especially in the English-speaking world) methodological debates about textual interpretation for more than half a century. By adding contextual analysis, which means to place political concepts in the intertextual and linguistic context, look at the studied text widely, and to embrace intellectual contexts. Contextualism is not only a historical attempt to describe political arguments. Here, contextualism is necessary to evaluate realistic propositions and understand their relevance in relation to political practice (Pietrzyk-Reeves, 2017).

In order to investigate the problem of political realism within democratic theory, the research will have to answer the following questions:

1. Are we able to recognise and give an account of the positive contributions of political realism, demonstrating how its criticism is employed in normatively oriented political theory?
2. How does the realistic normative democratic theory respond to the problems of political legitimacy, unequal distribution of power related to the crisis of representative democracy, and to the challenges of deliberative and participatory democracy?

The main subject of the article is realistic normative political theory, understood here as a prescriptive approach to the analysis of political institutions that simultaneously acknowledges the limits of political ideals and abstract principles. Advocates of political realism seek to take the distinctive nature of politics seriously, emphasising the need to engage with its inherent complexity and contextual constraints (Geuss, 2008; Rossi & Sleat, 2014). The study will look into two main propositions for realistic normative political theory: plebeian democracy and related to that contemporary revival of republican tradition (Bagg, 2021; Breaugh, 2013; 2019; Gourevitch, 2013; Green, 2013; 2016; McCormick, 2011; Mulvad & Stahl, 2019; O'Shea, 2019; Urbinati, 2011; Vergara, 2020a; 2020b; White, 2011) and prefigurative politics (Boggs, 1977; Breines, 1980; Gordon, 2017; Raekstad, 2018a; Raekstad & Gradin, 2019; Silver, 2018; Törnberg, 2021; Yates, 2015).

These normative concepts, grounded in a critique of ideal theory, are seen as offering political remedies to two interconnected challenges: the excessive abstraction and idealisation inherent in ideal approaches and the deepening crisis of democratic institutions. Therefore, the aim of this article is not only to highlight a methodological dilemma, but also to explore the political responses and solutions proposed by democratic theory within the broader field of political science. Accordingly, this article seeks to address the following research questions: What are the core mechanisms of realistic normative democratic theory? How do they function in practice? And what are the observable effects of their application?

Introducing the idea of realistic normative democratic theory raises initial doubts. First, preliminary inquiry can raise the question of idealisation in a realistic political agenda. Since realists call for taking existing political entities more seriously, the question is how realistic approaches to democratic theory follow their own argument. Second, looking at practical political propositions,

we have to ask how dependent realistic normative theories of democracy are on deliberative solutions, and, if so, what the difference is between deliberative democracy in its ideal version and political realism. Thirdly, many attempts have been made to present empirical studies indicating that ideal democratic theories are distracted by wrongful assumptions over: rationality of voters (Brennan, 2016; Caplan, 2007; Somin, 2013) political decisions of voters against their own social interest (Bartels, 2008; Gilens, 2012; Gilens & Page, 2014) and optimistic assumption that the democratic process would fix itself (Achen & Bartels, 2016). Various studies show that citizens are mostly uninterested in politics, poorly informed, and unable to convey their political stance through voting systems (Achen & Bartels, 2016; Lenz, 2012; Reybrouck, 2016). Clearly, what concerns most here is how the strength of collective power, proposed by the realist agenda, will diminish contemporary democracy's failures (Arlen & Rossi, 2020; Bagg, 2021; Rossi, 2019).

The first step to recognise realistic propositions will be to evaluate the concept of plebeian democracy, which has a long tradition as a part of anti-oligarchic language in republican thought. Several studies have shown that we can reconsider plebeian tradition in two different ways. Both treat representative democracies as insufficiently democratic, but they differ in their strategy toward liberal democracy. Here, the author will focus on the version of plebeian democracy that recognises social inequalities as an ontological phenomenon. This political proposition involves sortition as a cure for systematic corruption as well as a "materialist mixed constitution" working in favour of many, not a few (Bagg, 2021; McCormick, 2011; Vergara, 2020a).

Secondly, the idea of prefigurative politics is established in the practice of radical democratic movements. This political vision challenges the state-centric approach in favour of active social movements at the micro level and aspires to engage with radical change for an emancipatory vision of human existence. However, while scholars tend to disagree on the clear political embeddedness (prefigurative politics might be presented in the language of Mahatma Gandhi, Karl Marx or even Old Testament), the most interesting element of this perspective is the vision of direct action, reintegration of democratic values, and strong practice-oriented attachment (Raekstad, 2018b; Raekstad & Gradin, 2019; Törnberg, 2021; Yates, 2015).

This article explores two realistic normative concepts within democratic theory to better understand how democratic ideals are shaped and constrained by real-world political conditions. The selection is guided by a realist

methodological orientation, which seeks to develop normative arguments attentive to power, context, and feasibility (Geuss, 2008; Sleat, 2013).

To sum up, we have to acknowledge that recent developments in this field of research investigate the whole spectrum of methodological debate in political theory. At first, political philosophers developed the language and argumentation in favour of ideal principles. Meanwhile, political theorists identified many limitations that oversimplify the practical feasibility of political problems. Contemporary debate questioned the willingness to provide solutions to political activity. In answer, researchers who recognised idealisation as an embedded normative process accused realists of being utopophobic. The dispute between ideal and non-ideal theorists over practical ramifications in democratic theory contributes to an important and timely debate about how we should approach the study of politics and how we should improve democracy. If political realism can really "move beyond *Methodenstreit*", then the urgent topic is to recognise and understand what it has to offer (Rossi, 2015).

Plebeian Democracy

The idea of plebeian democracy is not a novel contribution to political theory. Its contemporary resurgence stems from scholars who trace the plebeian roots of democratic practices and reinterpret republican Roman notions to critique the deficiencies of modern liberal democracies. The term *plebeian* originates from *plebs*, meaning the "common people" in ancient Rome. However, the plebeians did not constitute a monolithic social group; rather, they were distinguished from the patrician elite who "monopolised" religious and political authority. While historians have increasingly questioned the traditional narrative of an ongoing class conflict between plebeians and patricians, the present analysis emphasises the persistent asymmetries and structural inequalities in political representation that remain salient in democratic systems today (Mitchell, 2005). This notion allows political theorists to name "plebeian experience": as a " refusal to submit to political domination (…) and opens onto the expression of a desire for liberty" (Breaugh, 2013, p. XVI).

In *The Shadow of Unfairness*, Jeffrey E. Green provides a critique of liberal democracy from a plebeian perspective. By looking at the argumentative efforts of main architects of contemporary Anglo-American political philosophy, we are affirmed that in liberal democracy citizens "either do already, or in the future could be made to, experience themselves as fully free and equal members

of their polities, irrespective of inequalities stemming from socio-economic status and the possession of formal political office" (Green, 2016, p. 2). We are told that liberal democracy is the last system which can direct us to unpolitical times and provide a definitive response to public problems. It is also said that contemporary democracies are run by their citizens, and that the people are indispensable for the proper functioning of democracy. From a plebeian perspective, that is not the case at all. Plebeianism takes values of liberal democracy like freedom or equality very seriously and stresses that in real liberal democracy "ordinary citizenship is second-class citizenship" (Green, 2016, p. 9). That is why plebeianism aims to develop what is critically abandoned by liberal democracy, not to get rid of its achievements.

According to Green ordinary citizens, the salt of the earth of democracy, are experiencing completely different meaning of democratic participation. The real power in a democratic regime comes with the authority of the office held by the individual. Ordinary citizens are rarely, if ever, selected for positions of influence, and only a small number will have genuine access to decision-making processes, which constitute the core of actual political power. In Green's view, citizens are removed from the realm of authoritative power, but this does not imply that they should be denied recognition as equal participants in political life. Secondly, ordinary citizens can impact politics, but their influence is profoundly greater when they participate in collective organisations, such as protest movements or special-interest groups, which have far more political power than individuals acting alone. In liberal democracy, citizens need to limit their individual agency and align their political ambitions with the necessary trade-offs which are required by the aspect of *manyness* itself. This creates the broader empowerment of the few (instead of ordinary citizens), who gain political power due to the legitimacy they obtain. These two constraints, however, could be overcome if only the distribution of power was not the effect of social and economic inequalities, which are responsible for the third feature of the contemporary liberal democratic system: *plutocracy*. Green claims that the meaning of plutocracy should be restructured, leaving behind the strict link between money and power in governance and instead framing it as "unfair intrusion of economic inequality into realms, such as politics and education" (Green, 2017, p. 322). Wealth inequality has created a political system that infiltrates every area of civic engagement, fundamentally undermining any prospect of equality of opportunity.

From a plebeian perspective, Green argues, we have at least three responses that claim to bridge the gap between liberal democratic citizenship and its real outcomes: *reasonable envy* against the most privileged in society, *principled vulgarity* mitigating the moral vagueness, and *solace* provided by political arrangements that resonate in the private sphere. The idea of reasonable envy is a strict response to the plutocratic embeddedness of the liberal democratic order. The concept of envy, as employed by Green, is not rooted in the Christian tradition of cardinal sins, nor is it understood as a purely destructive impulse, such as the desire to harm the powerful even at one's own expense (Green, 2016, p. 68). Instead, it is grounded in the observation that ordinary citizens are often the targets of disproportionate regulatory policies that reflect and reinforce their structural weaknesses (Rawls's difference principle). In contrast, Green shifts the focus toward the most privileged class, arguing that they should be subject to a distinct regulatory framework. The function of reasonable envy, in this context, is to reframe the liberal democratic narrative: rather than intensifying scrutiny on the disadvantaged, special attention should be directed toward those who exploit the mechanisms of representation to entrench their advantages. The second normative proposal for democratic realism is principled vulgarity, which holds that citizens should discard liberal correctness, understood by Green as a violation of certain unspoken norms characteristic of contemporary liberal democracy (Green, 2016, p. 110). Contemporary norms of civility often function as a protective mechanism for the existing plutocratic structure of the political system. In response, a plebeian strategy should require the disruption or rejection of certain established obligations and expectations, like acceptance of rational norms of deliberative speech or duty to search and promote harmonious existence. Lastly, Green proposes fulfilling people's lives with "critical indifference towards politics" (Green, 2016, p. 131). In order to move beyond reductive labels like *antipoliticism* or *apoliticism*, Green introduces the concept of *extrapoliticism*. This term suggests that individuals should reclaim and repurpose political expression through non-political channels, operating outside the boundaries of conventional political institutions and practices.

Another response that engages with the realist critique of non-ideal proposals, while drawing from a plebeian perspective, is offered by Camila Vergara, author of the thought-provoking book *Systemic Corruption: Constitutional Ideas for an Anti-Oligarchic Republic*. Her work acknowledges the ongoing struggle against the vices of liberal democracy, particularly the oligarchic

structures that undermine equality and freedom. These structural distortions, Vergara argues, cannot be remedied within the confines of the existing liberal-democratic system. As she describes it: the "trend of oligarchizing of power within a general respect for the rule of law, regardless of who controls the government, is what I conceive as systemic corruption in representative democracy" (Vergara, 2020a, p. 3). In contemporary democracies, political power increasingly takes on oligarchic forms, largely because the prevailing structural order focuses on individual instances of corruption, while systematically overlooking the possibility of systemic corruption.

Neglecting an indispensable feature of politics might be seen as a crucial force in rearranging democratic politics. However, liberal democratic systems, by their definition, are oriented to mitigate any sort of disagreement, providing proceduralist approaches. Vergara's normative proposal is based on the premise that only plebeian institutions can provide a certain solution for avoiding the oligarchy trap. First and foremost constitutional power should be directed in to hands of those who are left alone from political influence: "there is a possibility to move away from ridicule and dismissal, and toward a renewed, serious engagement with the idea of giving institutional form to the power to the people, the plebeian constituent power that Machiavelli identified as crucial for keeping a republic free from oligarchic domination" (Vergara, 2020a, p. 241). In consequence, people, here *many*, will be constituted to possess the power and will be treated as the guardians of liberty. This will create the situation in which the *many* will no longer be dominated by the *few*. Although the project of reviving plebeian democracy requires certain refinements, it clearly offers a normative alternative to liberal democracy, which is increasingly undermined by oligarchic domination (Bagg, 2021).

Vergara, by drawing on the works of Machiavelli, Condorcet, Luxembourg and Arendt, as well as many contemporary thinkers: Jacques Rancière, John McCormick and Lawrence Hamilton, provides crucial arguments that work with the challenges provided by realistic normative democratic theory. Plebeian institutions that challenge oligarchic attempts to monopolise the public sphere through systemic corruption emerge as responses to a lack of democratic legitimacy and aim to address the structural imbalance of political power. At the same time, by offering a range of solutions rooted in grassroots engagement, plebeian approaches advance participatory models that underscore the value of active involvement over the formalism of empty electoral rituals.

Prefigurative Politics

The search for a normative democratic theory that responds to the criticisms of political realism's limitations leads us toward a vision of politics as a process of ongoing social transformation. Although it remains unclear whether prefiguration is conceptualised primarily as a certain mode of political tactic or a distinct strategy of political action, many scholars interpret prefigurative politics as a meaningful alternative to hierarchical political structures in which power is concentrated among the wealthiest and representation functions merely as a *façade*, masking the absence of genuine systemic change. The term was coined in 1977 by social researcher Carl Boggs as an attack on "statist Marxism". However, we can find Christian roots in the context of that phrase's usage (Yates, 2015, p. 1). Prefiguration emerges as a key means for understanding why existing political constellations are inherently incapable of achieving their stated goals. Although liberal democracy is founded on the promise of advancing equality and freedom, it is necessary to curb that enthusiasm and, at least for the moment, rely on more minimal or procedural interpretations of these values. It appears that the concepts of minimalist democracy and polyarchy tend to sidestep the profound and pressing challenges that define the reality of democratic life. Prefigurative politics understood as the "deliberate experimental implementation of desired future social relations and practices in the here and now" offers a compelling alternative that challenges both the prevailing assumptions and the internal logic of gradual, progressive development within contemporary democracies (Raekstad & Gradin, 2019, p. 10). Liberal democracy as we know it runs out of propositions for exploring its own values. Within the logic of prefigurative politics, the desired social arrangement is actualised in the present, rather than pursued through sequential stages or future-oriented tactics. Although a clear-cut definition remains elusive, prefigurative politics can be broadly characterised by three key elements: horizontal forms of cooperation within the community, anti-instrumentality, which emphasises political practice as a form of expression rather than a means of a certain agenda, and an anti-authoritarian foundation that recognises inclusive participation as the primary means of community-building and collective service.

The concept of prefigurative politics has been deployed to describe different social movements like the Zapatista movement in Mexico, the Occupy movement in the United States or the people of the Rojava region. However,

researchers remain deeply divided over whether prefiguration necessarily entails a specific political agenda, or whether it can also be applied to describe more conservative social arrangements, such as ethno-religious groups, for example, Islamist movements that implement Sharia law as a form of prefigurative practice. (Bonfert, 2024, pp. 257–259; Törnberg, 2021, p. 3). While the origins of prefiguration are historically associated with progressive movements, a closer examination of its contemporary forms of cooperation and tactical approaches reveals that conservatively oriented groups have also employed prefigurative strategies to advance their own agendas (e.g., a social group of women with a traditional background called "tradwives"). If prefiguration were oriented toward a specific policy agenda, it could not be recognised as a normative democratic theory, particularly if elements of that agenda involve direct actions that undermine democratic inclusiveness (du Plessis, Husted, 2022).

To examine how prefigurative politics engages with questions of political legitimacy and the unequal distribution of power, it is first necessary to clarify how it differs from conventional political structures and practices. This becomes particularly significant when we recognise that the distinctiveness of prefigurative politics lies in its rejection of a foundational assumption of traditional political order, namely the instrumental pursuit of action "to conquer and maintain political power" (Boggs, 1977, p. 359). The anti-instrumentalist notion is a crucial aspect of prefiguration, where expressive "imply self-expression and individualistic motivation" (Smucker, 2014, p. 79). In the classical approach to constructing a political agenda, the process typically follows a linear model of goal-oriented phases, aiming to produce specific outcomes through mechanisms of institutionalisation and rationalisation, as found in rational choice theory. The aim of prefiguration is to break the "iron law of oligarchy" by building the community through direct action (Breines, 1980). Rather than securing political order through the implementation of a political agenda via authority, institutions, and regulations, prefigurative politics derives its legitimacy from constructing alternative practices and social arrangements at the local level (Yates, 2015). It is the direct democratic action that provides the egalitarian decision-making process.

Another significant challenge is how prefigurative politics fixes participatory and deliberative democracy in times of participatory crisis (Frega, 2020, pp. 6–12). Here the main problem might be that prefiguration is limited in space and sometimes refers to single-issue policy, where, after a successful political campaign, there is no need to engage in something that is no longer

a premise for social interest. There is also an argument that stresses that prefiguration is nothing but contestation of mainstream policy and disagreement with the whole structure of politics (e.g. anti-plural political parties and labour unions). Lastly, one might raise the question of whether the prefigurative articulation of political ideas represents an overly abstract approach to political commitment, especially given that political realists have expressed strong scepticism toward the feasibility of highly abstract or idealised concepts in political philosophy.

Conclusions

The aim of this paper has been to present approaches that can be understood as practical expressions of normative responses to democratic theory grounded in non-ideal assumptions. I have sought to illustrate how such responses might take shape within the framework of political realism. Naturally, there are limitations to these findings, most notably the recognition that normative claims can take various forms and may not be easily reduced to a single model. Nevertheless, based on the literature reviewed, the two approaches discussed in the paper – plebeian democracy and prefigurative politics – offer viable alternatives to proposals embedded in ideal theory. Importantly, they also address the central challenge of feasibility, suggesting that normative democratic theory can remain grounded in real political conditions without losing its transformative potential.

In the paper, I tried to defend two main claims. Firstly, that it is possible to recognise realistic normative democratic theory and that both plebeian democracy and prefigurative politics can meet the expectations of that claim. Second, I argued that two distinctive propositions of normative democratic theory can provide tangible responses to the problems of legitimacy, unequal distribution of power, and the challenges of deliberative and participatory democracy. Both plebeian democracy and prefigurative politics articulate concepts that directly respond to the need for bottom-up sources of political legitimacy. Central to both approaches is the aim of challenging and reducing the unequal distribution of power, though they employ distinct mechanisms to achieve this goal. Importantly, they share a commitment to participatory methods, including practices such as mini-publics and lottocratic institutions (plebeian democracy), as means of realising democratic engagement from below.

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REALISTYCZNA NORMATYWNA TEORIA DEMOKRACJI

Streszczenie
Publikowany tekst analizuje możliwości sformułowania normatywnej teorii demokracji, która stanowiłaby odpowiedź na krytykę formułowaną przez nurt realizmu politycznego wobec koncepcji idealistycznych. Autor przedstawia dwie propozycje, które mogą być uznane za spełniające wymogi realizmu politycznego: demokrację plebejską oraz polityki prefiguratywne. W celu oceny, na ile propozycje te odpowiadają na realistyczne zarzuty, autor koncentruje się na zagadnieniach związanych z legitymizacją polityczną, podziałem władzy oraz wyzwaniami wynikającymi z praktyk partycypacyjnych i deliberacyjnych.

Słowa kluczowe: teoria demokracji, realizm polityczny, demokracja plebejska, polityki prefiguratywne

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