

Individualism, Systematic Domination, and Democratic Representation: Replies to Alexandratos, Icardi, and Bistagnino

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I am extremely grateful to Sofia Alexandratos, Giulia Bistagnino, and Elena Icardi for their excellent commentary. One could scarcely ask for better critics. I am particularly grateful to them for, among other things, bringing the book into conversation, in highly illuminating ways, with literatures that I overlooked. I regret that limitations of space prevent me from engaging with their critiques to the extent that they deserve. But I will try to touch on the main points.

1

Sofia Alexandratos argues that I subscribe to a mistakenly “individualistic conception of human subjects as singular individuals, which does not account for the constitutive relationality of human development and self-realization.”

On the one hand, [this conception] clings to the myth of subjective identity as something given, naturally endowed, and to be protected from external influences. In doing so, it overlooks how individuals necessarily develop within a social context that is structured by supra-subjective and pre-existing languages, customs, and values, which constitutively influence their identity. Thus, individual identity is always ‘constituted’ by the social world. On the other hand, it does not consider how individual freedom and self-realization are possible thanks to and through other subjects, who recognize and actively participate in the social realization of the individual’s identity contents

Texto Since Alexandratos does not cite passages in which I commit myself to such a constellation of views, I am unsure what led her to conclude that I am so committed. In any event, I certainly I didn't mean to deny that people are shaped by their cultural environment, which in turn consists in the attitudes and actions of other people. Nor did I mean to deny that many of the goods in our lives constitutively depend on the existence of other people, as well as their attitudes and actions. Surely, love and friendship are among the greatest goods of human life, and they are not so much as possible without other people. Nor did I mean to deny that things that benefit others can also benefit ourselves, so that others are not always competitive threats to one's well-being. Love and friendship are again examples.

So in what sense is my view individualistic? It is true that I put forward conceptions of freedom that do not depend on others. Freedom as having no master is purely negatively defined, as the absence of certain interpersonal relationships. If one is a solitary hermit, then one has no master. Likewise, freedom as being insulated from invasion does not depend on others. If one is a solitary hermit, then one is free from invasion. However, freedom understood as being resourced to live a fulfilling life is positively defined, and it does require the contributions of others, again because many of the goods of a fulfilling life constitutively depend on other people, as well as their attitudes and actions. Insofar as self-realization is living a fulfilling life, therefore, I agree that one needs others for one's self-realization. That said, I do believe that I part ways from Hegel in thinking that there is a kind of freedom that constitutively depends on the recognition, or other reciprocal attitudes, of others, a thought which I find elusive.

Another way in which my view is individualistic is that I maintain that claims are claims of natural individuals, rather than the claims of collectives or artificial persons. If there is an objection to a social structure, then ultimately there must be some individual who has an objection to it on their own behalf. Moreover, it seems that individuals have claims to improvement, claims against invasion, and claims against inferiority from birth, regardless of their social context. This is compatible with holding that they do not have an "identity," understood as a personality or self-conception, at birth, that such an identity will take shape only within a social context, and that what, more specifically, people have a claim to, especially what counts as the constituents of a fulfilling life, will depend on social context. Finally, even

if we grant that collectives or artificial persons can have claims on their own behalf, it seems that claims against inferiority, specifically, must be the claims of natural individuals, since only natural individuals can stand in relations of inferiority and superiority to each other. This seems plausible in itself, and nothing that Alexandratos writes suggests that she disagrees.

Alexandratos suggests that my “tempering factors” may not be sufficient to avoid complaints against inferiority, since they neglect the “supra-subjective material and symbolic frameworks in which relationships among subjects occur.” Since “supra-subjective material and symbolic frameworks” is a technical phrase, which is nowhere unpacked, I am not entirely sure what Alexandratos has in mind. But let us grant that those frameworks, whatever they are, have profound effects on people’s lives and that they depend on human attitudes and actions, such that any change in those frameworks results from a change in human attitudes and actions. One possibility is that some people have greater opportunity to influence those frameworks than others. In that case, there would be an asymmetry in power over others, power exercised by influencing the frameworks. Another possibility is that, even if each individual is as powerless as any other individual to influence those frameworks, nevertheless those frameworks give some people greater power, authority, or (unmerited) regard in comparison with others. Either way, my account concludes that some people have a complaint against inferiority.

The natural remedy, on the former possibility, is to give people equal influence over the material and symbolic frameworks. This is what Alexandratos seems to have in mind when she describes “social equality” as the “equal possibility to participate in the transformation of the social world.” The natural remedy, on the latter possibility, is to transform the material and symbolic frameworks so that they give people no greater power, authority, or (unmerited) regard in comparison with others. So I find her approach to the problem posed by “supra-subjective material and symbolic frameworks” highly congenial.

2

Elena Icardi argues that my criticisms of republicanism don’t apply to Dorothea Gädeke’s version of republicanism and, moreover,

that Gädeke's account of "systemic domination" has the resources to identify and criticize a kind of objectionable power asymmetry that my account lacks, a kind of power asymmetry that does not involve "an identifiable superior individual."

If my criticisms of republicanism don't apply to Gädeke's account, this is, I would venture, because her account is not an account of domination, but instead an account of inferiority: of social hierarchy or asymmetry of status. Her work thus tends to confirm my view that concerns with domination are an unstable amalgam of concerns with insulation from invasion and social hierarchy. If one disambiguates these concerns, as Gädeke so helpfully does, then one is simply left with social hierarchy as one of the disambiguations. Why is it that "opportunistic power based on purely agent-relative resources does not constitute domination"? Because, Gädeke answers, "it does not express an asymmetry in status" (2024). As she elsewhere puts it:

Domination, I argue, is constituted by positions of power and disempowerment that define the roles of dominator and dominated. It is these very social positions—and the asymmetric relation between them—that establish a social hierarchy which denies some the equal status as free persons (Gädeke, 2024).

Is there anything in my account that corresponds to what Gädeke calls "systemic domination"? I am somewhat unsure, since it is somewhat unclear what she means by "systemic domination." I take it that she does not mean simply that people are constrained by norms and practices that they have no control over. If that were the case, then everyone would be systemically dominated, which she denies. ("However, male visitors to the park are not dominated, not even in a systemic sense. The reason is that the sexist norms do not systematically disempower, but rather empower them (even if they do not make use of their power)" (Gädeke, 2020, p. 212).) My best guess is that systemic domination consists in social structures leaving some more empowered than others, in robust rather than opportunistic ways. That is, some have power over others that others lack, in ways that are enduring rather than episodic.

Moreover, one's relative empowerment or disempowerment need not take the form of one's greater or lesser freedom from some other agent's interference in one's choice.

Think of micro-aggressions, such as when a cab driver passes a person of colour and picks up a White person standing behind in line. What makes this an expression of domination cannot be explained in terms of the choices at stake. The interest in taking a cab is neither part of some set of basic interests nor is it necessarily something the person of colour really wants very badly. Rather, the example expresses an entrenched social hierarchy (Gädeke, 2024).

It is not as though the cab driver has the power to interfere with the person of colour's choice. To bring this out, imagine a society without cabs, but where private people sometimes give lifts to hitchhikers. Now, as it happens, because of prejudices, no one gives lifts to Blacks, whereas many give lifts to Whites. It does not seem that refusing to give someone a lift is interfering with their choice. And yet there is a way in which Whites are empowered relative to Blacks.

If this is the correct characterization of systemic domination, then systemic domination is simply captured by what I call "greater power in comparison with" someone, as opposed to greater power over someone.

Loman's standing in a relation of inferiority to Hyman can consist in Hyman's enjoying an untempered "asymmetry of power in comparison with" Loman: in Hyman's having greater power over others, in some group to which Hyman and Loman both belong, than Loman has over those same others (2023, p. 93).

As I go on to say, "what caste carries to extremity... is Hyman's enjoying greater power, authority, or regard in comparison with Loman" (2023, p. 95). In the case of caste, as opposed to bondage, there is no single individual who counts as one's superior. But there is a group of individuals—namely, the members of a higher caste—who individually count as one's superiors.

Gädeke thus counts one as dominated either when one is subject to a robust, structural capacity to interfere or when social structures leave one less empowered than someone else in robust ways. Both of these count, in my accounting, as cases of social hierarchy. So all of the cases of social hierarchy that Gädeke recognizes are cases that my account recognizes.

The converse, however, is not true. There are other forms of social hierarchy that my account recognizes that Gädeke's account fails to recognize. Suppose, for example, that the announced punishment for assaults against Whites are more severe and condemnatory than the punishment for assaults against Blacks. However, the deterrent effects of the two kinds of punishments are the same. There is no way in which Whites are empowered relative to Blacks. But still there would be an objectionable distinction in status. It takes the form, as I would put it, of an unmerited disparity of regard. (Something similar might be said of my "Car Wash" example, which I fear Icardi misrepresents.)

I have said that Gädeke's account is not an account of domination so much as an account of social hierarchy. Part of what I mean by this is that her account does not seem to be animated or unified by the core republican idea of being exposed to someone's power to interfere with one's choice. For one thing, she does not count exposure to someone's power to interfere with one's choice—her "interpersonal domination"—as objectionable unless it expresses a distinction in status. For another thing, her account covers cases of relative disempowerment—her "systemic domination"—that do not involve exposure to someone's power to interfere with one's choice.

Now Gädeke does suggest that systemic domination should still count as a case of domination, despite its not involving exposure to someone's power to interfere with one's choice. First, she suggests that the "social norms and practices that constitute the disempowerment of the dominated are the same as those that render them vulnerable to interpersonal domination" (Gädeke, 2020, p. 212). But this need not be true of the cab drivers' microaggressions. Second, she suggests that "both are forms of domination in that they refer to the experience of being placed in a position of disempowerment that denies the equal status of a normative authority, or, as Pettit puts it, the ability to command respect as 'a voice worth hearing and an ear worth addressing'" (Gädeke, 2020, pp. 210–11). Yet it does not seem to me that there is interpersonal domination if and only if one is denied equal status as a normative authority, or that there is systemic domination if and only if one is denied equal status as a normative authority. For one thing, a learned slave might be a voice worth hearing and an ear worth addressing, while clearly made socially inferior in other respects.

Moreover, talk of domination is strained in the case of systemic domination. It is hard to make sense of domination without being able

to identify some person, group, or thing that dominates. And Gädeke appears to agree. Recall that she writes, “Domination, I argue, is constituted by positions of power and disempowerment that define the roles of dominator and dominated.” But who or what occupies the role of dominator in a case of systemic domination? It is not those who contribute to the social structures that leave the dominated relatively disempowered, as the following passage makes clear.

Thus, a woman may try to avoid being dependent on the will of a particular man, yet she remains dependent on the impersonal, accumulated will of all those who reproduce these norms and practices in their everyday lives and thus circumscribe her sexuality in a way that she cannot control. They do not dominate her per se; their role is that of peripheral agents. And yet she suffers systematic disempowerment—not vis-à-vis an identifiable dominator, but rather vis-à-vis the very system of norms and practices that circumscribe her status and that she cannot shape or interpret (Gädeke, 2020, p. 210).

Should we say instead that who or what dominates in a case of systemic domination are those people who are left relatively empowered by social structures? But it is odd to say that the relatively empowered dominate those who are left relatively disempowered when the former may not have any power to affect the latter at all. Perhaps we might speak of a “dominant” group, but not a dominating group.

3

In the book, I claimed, roughly, that democracy requires that representatives, once in office, strive to realize their party platforms and priorities at the time of election: or, more precisely, to pursue those aims that one could have predicted they would pursue at the time of election. Those platforms and priorities can be understood as directives that the People give their elected representatives in electing them to office.

Giulia Bistagnino argues that this “appears overly idealized and ill-suited to capture what is normatively at stake in democratic representation.” There are two objections here. First, that it is unrealistic; representatives don’t in fact strive to realize party platforms and priorities. Second, that it is normatively undesirable; we have reason

to want that representatives do not strive to realize party platforms and priorities. On the second point, I concede straightaway that it may be normatively undesirable for representatives to strive to realize party platforms and priorities. The platforms and priorities can be substantively mistaken. The question is whether, simply as far as the values underlying democracy are concerned, and abstracting away from the substantive correctness of the resulting decisions, it is normatively undesirable for representatives to strive to realize party platforms and priorities.

In response to the first charge, it simply doesn't strike me as unrealistic to suppose that parties, once in power, will try to enact their party's platform or priorities, or pursue the aims that one could have predicted that they would pursue, at the time of election. This has been my experience, at least in the United States. It was predictable at the time of the 2024 election that Republicans, if they controlled the levers of power, would prioritize tax cuts for the wealthy, and indeed this is precisely what they went on to do.

What does seem to me unrealistic is democracy as Bistagnino understands it, in which "both citizens and their representatives actively listen to one another, engage in meaningful dialogue, and refine their views through their interactions," and in which "individuals [come] together, on the basis of equal status and mutual respect, to discuss the political issues they face and, through those discussions, determine the policies that will shape their lives." At very least, the idea that, in a democracy of any appreciable size, decisions are made on the basis of something resembling a "discussion" or "meaningful dialogue," of the kind that one might enjoy in a faculty meeting, in which all of the franchised individuals participate, is unrealistic, in a very strong sense. Given the numbers involved, it couldn't possibly happen. By contrast, it is entirely possible for a party to try to implement its platform and priorities once in office. As far as I can tell, that's by and large what parties actually do.

The second charge, recall, is that simply as far as the values underlying democracy are concerned, and abstracting away from the substantive correctness of the resulting decisions, it is normatively undesirable for representatives to strive to realize party platforms and priorities.

The first point to make in reply is that I don't think that my ultimate view is as wedded to a "mandate conception" as my book led Bistagnino to believe. I can, I believe, make room for "anticipatory rep-

resentation,” in which representatives “act based on how they expect voters will judge them in future elections.” What is important is that representatives are striving to do something that counts as the People’s will. There is no reason why that must be exclusively the will constituted by the prior election; it might instead be the will that will be constituted at the next election, if such a thing can be predicted.

It also seems that I can make “room for interactive processes that could reshape and enrich individuals’ ideas and preferences.” There is nothing in the idea of striving to do the People’s will that rules out representatives trying to influence by rational argument, as opposed to deception or manipulation, the autonomous judgments of members of the People in favor of a particular decision. What is ruled out is pursuing that decision even when one has demonstrably failed, by rational argument, to make it something that might count as the People’s will.

Finally, I can even make room for something like “gyroscopic representation,” where representatives “act based on their internal values, trusting that citizens elect them precisely because of their perceived integrity and ability to make independent decisions.” Suppose that in place of a party platform, there was simply the commitment to do whatever representative X might independently judge to be correct. If—and it’s a big “if”—it really was clear that voters were electing X precisely because of this, regardless of any particular policies or ideological outlook X might favor, then X’s following their independent judgment might count as doing the People’s will. This is, of course, highly unrealistic. Voters would presumably have some view about what X favors, and would vote for X, at least in part, for that reason.

What I do rule out, to make it plain, is counting it as democratic when representatives pursue policies that cannot plausibly be interpreted as doing the will of the People, as that is constituted by a process that gives each member of the People equal opportunity for influence. It might well be the substantively correct decision, and even the decision on balance that representatives should pursue. But it would not be democratic.

If Bistagnino disagrees, it is presumably on the grounds that the, or at least a, paramount democratic value is that of “deliberation,” and it would be somehow “more deliberative” for representatives to pursue policies in defiance of the will of the People.

This sort of reply raises a number of questions. First, what is deliberation, and why is it important? My best guess is that deliberation consists in something like articulate reflection on and discussion of the reasons for various decisions, where the reasons are grounded in considerations of the public interest, as opposed to brute preferences for certain policies.

Second, what is important about deliberation, so understood? One answer is that deliberation tends to lead to better results. Whether or not this is true, we are again abstracting from the substantive correctness of the resulting decisions. Another answer is that deliberation results in people having a better understanding of the rationale behind policies, as well as an understanding of their fellows' views, which is important in its own right. I agree that it is important in its own right. However, note that people could attain such an understanding even if their deliberations had no influence over policy. Yet another answer is that it is valuable to be part of a self-governing polity, and a polity is self-governing only if its decisions are reached via deliberation. I have my doubts that it is valuable, but let it stand.

Third, why would defying the will of the People be more deliberative than furthering it? Suppose that representatives try to persuade the People to get behind a particular policy. The People hear the representatives out, but remain unconvinced. Is it somehow more deliberative for the representatives to pursue the policy than not to? It is not clear how pursuing the policy would lead to improved understanding. And it is not clear why the polity would be any less self-governing if the representatives refrained.

Finally, even if defiance would somehow be more deliberative, isn't something like equal opportunity for influence also an important democratic value that should be reflected in how representatives are to conduct themselves, which might mean that defiance, considering all the relevant democratic values, would not be democratic? After all, deliberation can hardly be the only democratic value. We could have a highly deliberative autocracy, which articulated the reasons for and against decisions, with a vibrant public discussion of these reasons, but ultimately decided simply as the autocrat thought best, regardless of the differing conclusions reached by other members of the population. Surely, to have a recognizably democratic system, deliberation needs to be paired with something like everyone's having equal opportunity

to influence the actual decisions implemented, by trying to convince others from an equal footing, and where disagreement remains (as it always will), casting an equally weighted vote to settle the issue. But if political equality, so understood, is a democratic value, then shouldn't it play some role in our answer to the question of how representatives should conduct themselves? What alternative role does Bistagnino propose it plays, if not the role that I have described?

4

Bistagnino worries that "if Impersonal Justification is sufficient to legitimize political authority," then we would have no need for Equal Influence; "a benevolent but non-democratic regime, perhaps a form of epistocracy, could be justified on similar grounds." She is absolutely right that the book is unclear on this point. Let me conclude by clarifying how I now view the different "tempering factors" as interacting.

Although the full story would be more complex, I will simplify, for this response, the discussion of the tempering factors a bit. Let me begin with what I will now call "quantitative" tempering factors. The quantitative tempering factors make the asymmetries and disparities less severe, in scalar terms, so that there is, as it were, less asymmetry or disparity to complain of. These factors are:

- episodic character: that the asymmetries or disparities arise only in chance, one-off encounters instead of being entrenched in an established, ongoing social structure.
- context limitation: the asymmetries or disparities are limited to certain contexts, including certain times, places, and social roles.
- content limitation: the asymmetric power or authority is limited in content: that is, in what can be done or commanded.
- escapability: that the asymmetries or disparities may be escapable, at will, with little cost or difficulty.

There are also the "depersonalizing" tempering factors of Impersonal Justification and Least Discretion. Suppose that you are subject to the superior power and de facto authority of another natural person, who makes decisions that affect you by certain processes. Nothing can make it the case that you are not subject to the superior power and de facto authority of another natural person; that is built into the description of the situation. But your situation can approximate what it would be like

not to be subject to another natural person insofar as two conditions hold.

The first is the tempering factor of Impersonal Justification. This is that the superior power and authority of that natural person, who makes decisions by those processes, serves impersonal reasons, against the relevant background, at least as well as any alternative and better than any alternative not marked by a similar asymmetry. Impersonal reasons, simplifying a bit, are not personal: not grounded in the interests, projects, relationships of the natural person wielding the superior power and authority. The impersonal reasons that remain are reasons that any agent would have, such as reasons to serve the public interest—by which I mean improving the choice situation of each person, subject only to the constraint that it trades off among their choice situations fairly—and to respect deontological constraints.

The second condition is the tempering factor of Least Discretion. This is that the natural person exercises only so much discretion in decisions about how to use the superior power and authority as serves those impersonal reasons. If the subjection to the power and de facto authority approximates not being subject to another natural person in this way, if Impersonal Justification and Least Discretion are realized, then the power and de facto authority are “depersonalized.” Depersonalization is scalar. Subjection to power and de facto authority is more depersonalized, and so the pro tanto objection to it is weaker, the closer the subjection approximates not being subject to another natural person.

Suppose that, taking into account the quantitative factors, the superior power or authority reaches a first quantitative threshold. There is then a complaint against it unless at least Impersonal Justification and Least Discretion are satisfied. If the asymmetry of power or authority further reaches a second, higher quantitative threshold, then it is no longer sufficient that Impersonal Justification and Least Discretion are satisfied. The superior power or authority must also be sufficiently higher-order equalized.

My suggestion, then, is that, say, flight attendants and professors meet the first threshold, but not the second. In their case, the depersonalizing factors of Impersonal Justification and Least Discretion suffice. While there is no valid complaint to being under the power and authority of flight attendants and professors when that power and authority is depersonalized, there does seem to be a complaint against

being under the power and authority of flight attendants and professors when that power and authority is not depersonalized, such as when they decide in corrupt ways. And my suggestion is that at least the higher reaches of the state meet the second threshold. Not only must their power and authority be depersonalized. It must also be governed by Equal Influence.

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