

Editorial Introduction: A Hurray for Liberal Democracy?

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Liberal democracy is in crisis. Or so its detractors would have us believe. Discussions about international politics over the last few years have repeatedly raised the scepter of the retreat of liberal democracy in countries such as Turkey, India, and Hungary. Brexit and the election of Donald Trump in the United States are only the most prominent examples of a worldwide surge in populism. The refusal of Trump and his most vocal supporters to accept defeat in the 2020 US presidential elections and the subsequent insurrection at the US Capitol, as well as the deepening of polarization in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, have given rise to serious concerns about the continued capacity of liberal institutions to command widespread public legitimacy. There is little doubt that the present situation is very different from the triumphant “end of history” in favor of liberal democracy that the winding down of the cold war was supposed to have ushered in. In contrast, today there is talk of “postliberal” politics and calls to weaken or abandon core liberal principles such as free speech and religious pluralism (Deenen 2019).

In contrast to this trend, Kevin Vallier, in *Trust in a Polarized Age* (Oxford University Press, 2020), the follow-up to his *Must Politics be War?* (2019), forcefully argues that liberal institutions, grounded in the tradition of public reason, remain our best bet to restore political trust and depolarize our politics. Notably, Vallier resists temptations toward radical change or innovation, choosing instead to carefully explore the possibilities offered by existing liberal institutions and rights practices to restore trust. Vallier’s chief claim, drawing upon a rich variety of empirical sources in the tradition of Philosophy, Politics, and Economics (PPE), is that liberal rights practices generate and sustain trust, and furthermore, that such practices can be justified to all in a diverse society. Even as Vallier draws upon empirical sources, his argument is distinctively philosophical, concerned as it is with normative and not merely descriptive matters. He dissects alternative forms of political order and finds them wanting in generating trust for the right reasons. Like Jerry Gaus (2011), Vallier finds that public reason has a *tilt* toward classical liberalism, especially in diverse societies with a high degree of disagreement on social and political matters.

As Vallier notes in his response to this symposium, most commentators disagree with his conclusions, for a variety of reasons. Christie Hartley and Lori Watson argue that Vallier’s defense of a strong right to association may conflict with his commitment to individual rights. This is reminiscent of heated disputes over multiculturalism, as the rights of groups sometimes come into conflict with the core liberal commitment to strong individual rights, since many

groups (or associations) do not always do a good job of respecting individual agency and intra group disagreement. Hartley and Watson also raise pressing concerns about the status of women and children in Vallier's preferred political schema.

Otto Lehto presses Vallier on his argument against an unconditional basic income (UBI). Vallier prefers limited (conditional) social insurance, arguing that it is implausible that a UBI can be publicly justified in most situations. Lehto skillfully marshals philosophical argumentation as well as empirical data to argue for universal and unconditional social insurance as a key policy measure to generate and maintain trust. His contribution also touches upon Hayek's views in favor of what we today understand as UBI.

Ryan Hanley emphasizes a key lesson from Adam Smith, that social trust is necessary to any well-functioning commercial society. He commends Vallier for returning our attention to this dynamic in his defense of liberal institutions. Hanley goes on to remind us that, very often, generating and maintaining trust is a matter of how rights are actually exercised. As an example, Hanley penetratingly points out that the freedom of association enjoyed by universities and colleges could be used far more effectively than it is at present. For example, members of these communities could learn much from greater exposure to genuine difference, for which freedom of association is necessary but far from being sufficient. So, a high trust society is at least as much a matter of culture, social norms, and attitudes, as it is about the guarantee of rights.

Alex Motchoulski grants that Vallier's proposals for restoring trust can work in many situations but worries about cases where distrust and polarization have run so deep that some members of a community doubt the very moral competence of other members. Motchoulski argues that Vallier's liberal institutionalist proposals are unlikely to be effective at restoring trust in such situations. This, of course, sparks worries whether distrust in our times has run as deep as Motchoulski fears.

Bill Edmundson argues that Vallier's dismissal of socialism is hasty. While he acknowledges that prominent socialist experiments may have failed historically, he contends that liberal socialism, which provides for considerable space to markets, is a viable contender for a trust generating and sustaining social and political order. To buttress Edmundson's claim, Scandinavian countries, as well as postcolonial "mixed economies" as advocated by leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru, can be seen as reasonably successful examples of a liberal socialist order.

Eric Rowse takes a big picture view, charging Vallier of being located within the tradition of neoliberalism. He argues against Vallier's emphasis on efficiency and economic growth, contending that growth is just one among a variety of desiderata in a reasonably just social and political order. He accuses Vallier of effectively prioritizing negative rights over positive rights, a charge that Vallier vehemently denies.

In his reply, Vallier restates, contextualizes, and clarifies his arguments as presented in *Trust in a Polarized Age* (and in *Must Politics Be War?*), and responds to specific lines of criticism raised by the symposiasts.

Social trust remains a fascinating area of inquiry. One of the issues that this symposium doesn't touch upon, but which cries out for philosophical analysis, is the potential trade-off between social and political trust and other values, such as truth-seeking. One can easily conceive of situations where discovery and discussion of uncomfortable truths (e.g., patterns of severe oppression) can erode social trust in the short to medium term, but nevertheless may be valuable in and of itself and may even have positive long-term effects on social cohesion, perhaps by enabling a process of reconciliation. There are questions about whether high levels of trust are desirable in all circumstances, trade-offs between trust and other values, the difference in attitudes toward trust of adherents of different political persuasions (e.g., a conservative might highly value trust in most or all situations), and so on.

A word on the selection of participants in this symposium. From the beginning of this project, my effort was to put together a group of exciting and provocative scholars who would, as a collective, be diverse along many different parameters. Due to exigencies caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and personal factors, some scholars had to drop out. Among them, they represented perspectives from the global south and training in disciplines such as economics and labor history. Nonetheless, I am happy that the remaining

symposiasts bring different perspectives embedded in varying social locations, academic seniority, disciplinary background, and gender.

I thank Kevin Vallier and Leslie Marsh, managing editor of *Cosmos + Taxic* for their invitation to put together this symposium. I thank all the contributors for agreeing to participate and for their patience and equanimity through the process of peer review and resulting revisions. My gratitude to all reviewers for helping to improve the quality of discussion in this symposium.

REFERENCES

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