

PHD THESIS SUMMARY:
Polycentric democracy: using and defusing disagreements

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One of the main debates in political philosophy throughout the past four decades has been whether modern societies, despite their profound and ubiquitous disagreements, can find forms of association or institutional settings that are superior to our current *modus vivendi* arrangements. It is this question, I argue, that has motivated some of the most important recent contributions to political philosophy, such as John Rawls's *A theory of justice* (1971) and *Political liberalism* (1993), James Buchanan's work on constitutional economics (cf. 1975), and Gutmann and Thompson's approach to deliberative democracy (cf. 2004). We might think of these contributions as constituting the philosophical canon with respect to the question of how we should deal with deep and pervasive disagreements in society. While the philosophical approaches of the above-mentioned authors are construed around a diverse set of moral and methodological priors, they also have something important in common: these authors view disagreements about facts and norms not only as a problem of pure theory but also as a predicament that fundamentally endangers the stability of society. Not surprisingly, they regard pervasive political disagreements in modern liberal societies mainly as a threat that needs to be contained.

As I show in the first chapter of the dissertation, the canonical approaches fail to produce institutional recommendations that can be viewed as an advancement beyond the current *modus vivendi* from a wide variety of comprehensive views. This motivates the thesis to propose a philosophical U-turn in the spirit of Adam Smith. This U-turn consists of three guiding ideas. The first is that a diversity of perspectives is not merely a nuisance, but an asset when solving hard problems. The second idea builds on the founding insight of institutional economics. Institutional economists have long held that whether self-interest works to the disadvantage or advantage of society depends on the rules of the game. By the same token, the dissertation

argues that whether diversity—the cause of political disagreements—works to the advantage or disadvantage of society is a function of the rules of the game. The third idea is that an institutional structure that is construed around the idea of using diversity might have a better chance at generating an overlapping consensus than the canonical approaches that are based on a taming approach towards diversity.

The second part of the dissertation aims at getting a better conceptual understanding of the gains of diversity by comparing the two main approaches for reaping the benefits from diversity: expert deliberation and polycentric systems. The core insight of this analysis is that polycentric systems outperform expert deliberation with respect to hard problems because they are able to ameliorate the psychological and epistemic inhibitors of collective deliberation. In other words, the core insight of the second part is that competition—allowing diverse people to act on their idiosyncratic hunches—is crucial to unlocking the gains from diversity.

In the third part of the dissertation, I apply these insights to the political realm and advance the concept of a polycentric democracy. I argue that by creating more space for diverse political experiments, a polycentric democracy can leverage diversity's full potential for the benefit of society. The concept of polycentric democracy is defined as an institutional arrangement involving a multiplicity of polities acting independently but under the constraints of a democratically supervised framework designed for institutional competition. A well-regulated competition between polities can be expected to achieve three outcomes that are especially interesting from a normative perspective.

Discovering new heights: Since institutional competition is a discovery process, a political polycentric system should constantly find new and better ‘ways of living’ or simply better modus vivendi arrangements.

Reducing shallow disagreement: Much disagreement in political philosophy is, as many commentators note, most likely due to our disagreement on non-normative facts. In political polycentric systems, a larger number of socio-economic theories can be tested than in monocentric ones. This should reduce disagreement.

Defusing deep disagreement: It is highly likely that not all of our disagreements are ultimately based on non-normative facts. In a polycentric system, people who disagree are allowed to enter into

polities with more like-minded people. Thus, tensions in society could be reduced.

Informed by the epistemic advantages of polycentric systems, the dissertation develops a contractarian argument in favor of polycentric democracy. The dissertation defends the normatively modest claim that for a very diverse set of reasonable political factions, choosing polycentric democracy over our current democratic *modus vivendi* arrangements would be rational.

The approach developed in the thesis is inspired by the work of several political economists on the advantages of federalism. At the same time, polycentric democracy has different explanatory and normative ambitions than the accounts of federalism developed by political economists such as Paul D. Aligica, Viktor Vanberg, Elinor Ostrom, James Buchanan, and Roland Vaubel.

In principle, there are a number of options available for implementing the ideal of polycentric democracy. The most prominent institutional proposals for implementation are the ones set forward by Chandran Kukathas (2007) and Robert Nozick (1999). Since none of their proposals could provide the basis for an overlapping consensus the dissertation offers a new approach for implementing polycentric democracy that should generate less resistance: the free city approach. The main idea of this approach consists in adding special administrative zones or free cities to the structure of existing national states rather than changing the basic structure of society in its entirety.

A polycentric democracy constructed along those lines, the thesis conjectures, should be much more capable of using and defusing political disagreements than our current democratic orders.

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