

The Polycentric Republic: A Theory of Civil Order for Free and Diverse Societies

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Supporting Document

BRIEF SUMMARY

There is a palpable dissatisfaction across much of the world with liberal democratic governments, which seem unable to deliver on their promises of welfare and security, and are out of touch with the values and aspirations of many citizens. This book addresses this unfolding crisis by developing a fresh theory of civil order rooted in a classical, neo-Aristotelian conception of human flourishing. The overall aim of the work is to forge a conception of civil order more hospitable than the modern State to social structures supportive of the human quest for flourishing.

The deficiencies of the modern bureaucratic-administrative State as a potential context for the pursuit of a flourishing and virtuous life have already been ably exposed by moral and social philosophers such as Alasdair MacIntyre and Michael Sandel, who lament the individualistic, socially deracinated conception of community promoted by modern States. However, these critics have not gone very far in developing a positive alternative to the modern State-based order.

This work builds on the MacIntyrean and Sandelian critique of the modern State and its individualistic ethos in two ways: first, by deepening the diagnosis of the corrosive effects of modern politics on community life, through an in-depth analysis of modern conceptions of political authority and their deleterious impact on associational life; and second, by developing the principles of an alternative conception of civil order, more consistent with the requirements of human flourishing.

The book opens with a presentation of a neo-Aristotelian conception of a free, flourishing and meaningful life, as well as an account of the complex social ecology that it presupposes. This ecology involves a wide plurality of self-regulating associations, from churches and schools to businesses and towns, whose normative orders or internal rules, customs and narratives are oriented toward distinctive dimensions of human flourishing.

With these principles established, it is then argued that modern social contract theory, as we have inherited it from thinkers like Hobbes, Locke and Rawls, rests on a reductively

individualistic picture of social order, blind to the special interests and prerogatives of non-State associations, and thus unfriendly to the social ecology of flourishing.

The modern sovereign State is traditionally legitimated by a social contract, real or imagined, in which “the people” freely confers its authority on the organs of the State. But this narrative of order inherits deeply problematic features of monarchical absolutism, most notably the neglect of corporate actors as mediators of individual interests, and the attribution of supreme and general-purpose authority to a single organ (or cluster of organs) of governance, whose standardised policies undermine the complex social ecology of flourishing.

To address these problems, this book proposes to replace the individualist-Statist social contract with a federalist, polycentric and bottom-up republic constituted by a plurality of diverse citizens and groups acting in loose coordination without any overarching sovereign authority. Drawing on neo-Aristotelian moral philosophy, modern political science, and political history, the author invites us to reimagine civil order in a way that is more hospitable to the social ecology of flourishing.

JUSTIFICATORY DOCUMENT

I. Overview and aims of the work

There is a palpable dissatisfaction across much of the world with liberal democratic governments, which seem unable to deliver on their promises of welfare and security, and while reflecting the values, ideologies and political commitments of some citizens, are out of touch with the values and aspirations of many others. This dissatisfaction has exploded in a wave of anti-Establishment sentiment, manifested in the rise of disruptive political leaders like Javier Milei and Donald Trump, and the rise of alternative right parties across Europe.

This book addresses this unfolding crisis by developing a fresh theory of civil order rooted in a classical, neo-Aristotelian conception of human flourishing. The overall aim of the work is to offer a penetrating diagnosis of the failure of the sovereign State to support a vibrant, pro-flourishing social ecology, and in light of this diagnosis, to forge a conception of civil order more hospitable to the personal and communal pursuit of a free and flourishing way of life.

The crisis of the modern State

This re-evaluation of Statist political theory comes at an opportune time, given that the old State-centric paradigm of social order is evidently in crisis. The failures of Statist and monocentric approaches to social coordination and public order are becoming abundantly clear

with the implosion of the welfare State, the increasing breakdown of nationalist narratives of identity, and the polarization of national political institutions, which are no longer fit instruments for mediating complex political, cultural, and religious differences.

The crisis of efficacy and legitimacy afflicting the modern State cannot be properly addressed until we recognize its roots in the pretension of States to act as the supreme and general source of order for complex and fragmented societies. The attempt to rule complex modern societies from a single centre of power and authority, in accordance with the ideology of order of the sovereign State (King 2013), lays the seeds of dysfunctional societies, dominated and contorted by rigid, top-down bureaucracies.

Two fundamental intuitions are fleshed out in this book: first, that familiar pathologies of modern State-based orders, including failing systems of governance and dysfunctional, fragmented communities, are traceable, in no small part, to the damaging effects of an exaggerated confidence in the ordering power of monocentric, “sovereign” States. The second intuition to be unpacked is that an alternative, “polycentric” paradigm of order, involving loose coordination among autonomous units under a federal constitution without a sovereign centre, can help to address the crisis of efficacy and legitimacy rocking the modern State.

Ethical critiques of statism and their limits

One important aspect of this crisis is the tendency of the modern State to usurp and disrupt the sorts of social structures that could foster virtue and human excellence. For example, the deficiencies of the modern State as a potential context for flourishing and virtuous communities have been ably exposed by moral and social philosophers such as Alasdair MacIntyre (1981), Michael Sandel (1982), and Amitai Etzioni (1993). They lament the individualistic, socially deracinated and ethically emaciated conception of community that the State tends to foster with its depersonalising and bureaucratising methods of governance. But these sorts of critiques of the State are unsatisfactory, for three reasons:

First, their focus on the negative impact of Statism on “thick” ethical communities, where virtues, traditions and ways of life can be passed on, while illuminating, does not quite capture the full breadth of the impact of Statist political regimes on associational life. For centralised and overbearing States exerting homogenising effects over social life, while they certainly threaten the integrity of “thick” ethical communities oriented to rounded virtue and human flourishing, also threaten the integrity of a wide range of *other* types of human association, including ethically “thin” or more or less specialised associations with their own distinctive economic, cultural, or educational ends.

Second, ethical critics of the State like MacIntyre, Sandel and Etzioni have been insufficiently attentive to one of the root causes of the pathologies of modern governance, namely what Preston King (2013) has called its “ideology of order”: the principle of sovereign authority inherited and adapted from monarchical absolutism (Morgan 1988), and disingenuously presented by its proponents as the only viable foundation of public order. The theory of political sovereignty, whether in its absolutist or democratic guise, provides ideological legitimation for the overarching, centralised State and its unwarranted monopoly over social governance.

Third, critics of the State’s corrosive impact on community life have not presented a compelling alternative to State-based rule. For example, while MacIntyre praises certain fishing villages as potential seedbeds of human flourishing (MacIntyre 1981, chap. 15), it is quite evident that this does not constitute a satisfactory account of a pro-flourishing social order in a globalised and interconnected world. The ethical critique of the administrative-bureaucratic State and its corrosive influence on local communities is quite compelling, but its practical-institutional implications remain rather unclear.

Toward a deeper diagnosis and more constructive response to the crisis of Statism

This work reaffirms but also goes well beyond the MacIntyrean and Sandelian critique of the State and its individualistic, socially deracinated ethos in two ways: first, by deepening the diagnosis of the corrosive effects of modern politics on community life, through an in-depth analysis of modern conceptions of political authority and their deleterious impact on associational life; and second, by developing the principles of an alternative conception of civil order, more consistent with the freedom to live a flourishing human life.

After some introductory remarks in chapter 1, chapter 2 presents, in broad brush-strokes, a neo-Aristotelian conception of a free, flourishing and meaningful life, which will be presupposed for the rest of the book. One important aspect of this account is the inseparability of flourishing from freedom. I argue that human flourishing is incomplete or truncated unless the agent enjoys some significant degree of rational control over his actions, requiring both rational self-mastery or virtue, and a substantial level of immunity from the domination of other actors (what Pettit (1997) calls “non-domination”).

I then go on in chapter 3 to sketch out an account of the complex social ecology that supports the freedom to flourish. This ecology involves a wide plurality of self-regulating associations, from churches and schools to businesses and towns, whose normative orders or

internal rules, customs and narratives are oriented toward distinctive dimensions of human flourishing, tailored to local needs and aspirations.

With these principles established, I argue in chapter 4 that standard Statist conceptions of civil order, as the product of an agreement or contract among equal individuals authorising a sovereign to oversee social order and mediate public disputes (e.g. Hobbes 1994/1651, Locke 1988/1689, Kant 1997/1797, and Rawls 1971), overlook the complex web of associations that gives meaning and purpose to people's lives. Indeed, standard contractarian theories of political authority vastly oversimplify the sources of authority and order in a large and complex society, and the variety of corporate stakeholders implicated in the social contract.

Furthermore, the scope of "sovereign" authority afforded to the State by the modern social contract, in spite of its democratic veneer, actually conserves many problematic features of the sovereignty claimed earlier by absolutist monarchs in the name of a divinely legitimated regal order (Beloff 1954, Kantorowicz 2016/1957), in particular the positing of a general-purpose and supreme organ (or cluster of organs) of social governance within a territory, and the arbitrary suppression of the reasonable authority claims of associations beyond the State.

The attribution of sovereignty to a human institution, whether in its absolutist or democratic manifestations, is not a universal feature of politics, but the idiosyncratic outgrowth of certain historical developments, in particular the consolidation of monarchical power in seventeenth and eighteenth-century Europe and the inheritance of that power by modern democratic parliaments. Furthermore, as I argue in chapter 5, the ideology and practice of sovereign authority tend to promote forms of civil authority that are expansive and overreaching with respect to rival social powers, something vividly illustrated by the dramatic consolidation of the modern bureaucratic-regulatory State over the course of the 20th century.

The paradigm of the sovereign State is inadequate because it puts non-State associations on an unequal playing field with the State, arming the State with a presumptive claim to sovereignty that tends to legitimate financial and regulatory monopolies with a homogenising effect on the social order: State agencies exert significant pressure over social groups and communities to conform to their regulatory and fiscal demands, even when those demands require them to significantly hollow out or weaken their own internal missions, norms, customs, and ways of life. The case of State regulation of schools and universities, discussed at some length in chapter 5, is especially instructive.

Politics beyond the sovereign State: the polycentric approach to civil order

Pace social contractarians like Hobbes and Locke, I argue in chapters 6 and 7 that the alternative to the sovereign State is not public disorder or a “war of all against all,” but a very different form of social coordination, one that is *horizontal and polycentric* rather than vertical and monocentric. Whereas Statists often expect the worst from horizontal cooperation, or equate it with its worst excesses, polycentrists, including renowned institutional economists like Elinor and Vincent Ostrom (E. Ostrom 2005, V. Ostrom, Tiebout, and Warren 1961), recognize that if given a chance, human beings have strong incentives to cooperate constructively with each other, even in the absence of an overarching sovereign power or “Leviathan” to keep them in check.

The particular polycentric arrangement I defend in this book is what I call the “polycentric republic.” The polycentric republic, whose general principles are elaborated in chapter 7 and 8, is less a fixed institutional framework than an emergent and evolving horizon of shared interests, values, customs, and rules which citizens and groups develop by cooperating with each other in good faith and negotiating a shared constitution and a mutually acceptable civil order.

Individuals, families, non-territorial associations (e.g. universities), and territorial associations (e.g. municipal communities) have good reason to cooperate and forge shared allegiances, since acting alone, they do not have access to a range of attractive and necessary goods, such as education, economic development, and learning. This necessary coordination can occur, to a large degree, through multi-lateral and spontaneous exchanges and contracts (what Hayek (1967) refers to as “spontaneous order”). But it also requires some degree of central management by territorial political authorities. This work develops a set of guiding principles or rules of thumb for constituting and coordinating such territorial authorities polycentrically or horizontally, in the absence of any sovereign State.

I call this approach “bottom-up federalism.” The core notion of federalism is the *foedus*: a voluntary pact or agreement between persons and groups to endorse a shared scheme of governance that preserves the identity, integrity, and dignity of the pacting groups and their members (Elazar 1987). Building on this core federalist ideal, I propose a method of negotiating civil order that is respectful towards the social ecology of human flourishing, voluntaristic, tolerant of the reasonable governmental prerogatives of a wide range of human associations, and favourable to the dispersion rather than concentration of power and authority. This “bottom-up” conception of civil order is consistent with the principle of subsidiarity (e.g., as interpreted by Cahill (2017)), provided it is conceived as a principle of responsible

governance under conditions of social complexity, and not merely as a guiding principle for State action.

The principles of the polycentric republic are intended to provide a basis for a free, vibrant and capacious social order, open to a much larger degree of social and institutional pluralism, and a wider range of pro-flourishing associations and communities, than hierarchical, top-down political orders. A polycentric order greatly reduces the potential for domination by a centralized power because it limits the potential for power to be concentrated in the hands of a few. Equally importantly, its flexible and plural institutional structures can provide the basis for a more humane, free and pro-flourishing civil order than what is permitted in societies ruled by centralized bureaucratic-administrative states.

II. A Work of “Open Reason”

This is a work of “open reason” in the sense that it substantially widens the scope of rational inquiry beyond the restrictions typically imposed by modern disciplinary conventions, opening a conversation about the good society and the good polity that is enriched by insights of political science and its close cousins (e.g. public choice theory, institutional economics, sociology), while also guided by the higher humanist aspirations of moral and political philosophy, most notably the ambition to understand what makes for a free, flourishing and meaningful human life, both personally and socially.

Unlike many other modern accounts of politics, *The Polycentric Republic* views political institutions not only as *sui generis* phenomena, oriented exclusively to certain narrow ends like non-aggression, non-domination, security and material prosperity, but as a crucial support for the broader social infrastructure in and through which people meet their basic needs and discover the meaning and value of their life. The litmus test of a good political regime, on this humanist approach, is not merely whether it maintains law and order, or maximises income or some other proxy for utility, but whether it facilitates or supports citizens’ efforts to live a meaningful, flourishing and worthy life in community with others.

While there is a rich tradition of philosophizing about the good society and the good polity in an Aristotelian or Thomistic vein (e.g. MacIntyre 1981, Finnis 1980, Maritain 1973, Knight 2007), this tradition rarely engages *in a sympathetic, sustained and constructive way*, as this work does, with the rationality of the social sciences. For example, neo-Aristotelian theories of social and political order rarely make systematic use of the logic of countervailing

powers and institutional incentives, or offer an account of institutionally mediated cooperation in highly complex societies governed by impersonal norms (Hayek 2013/1960).

Conversely, the social sciences often pay close attention to issues like the role of power, competition, and institutional incentives in the configuration of social and political order, but do not frame such discussions in the context of an investigation of the social conditions most conducive to a free and flourishing human life, as I do in this book. Instead, human preferences are frequently more or less taken as a given, and institutions are viewed as mechanisms for sorting and mediating such preferences (e.g. Downs 1957, Buchanan and Tullock 1999/1962, Rawls 1971), while the preferences themselves, though subject to certain limits such as public order and non-domination (e.g. Pettit), are relatively insulated from the claims of ethics and practical rationality more broadly construed.

While this is understandable and is often motivated by a commendable anti-paternalist spirit, it leaves the knowledge of the social sciences at an odd stopping-point: they seem to simply rest on the facilitation of human purposes and projects and perhaps the enhancement of “primary goods” like income and self-esteem (Rawls 1971), disconnected from any determinate conception of a worthwhile or rounded human life. Yet human purposes and projects (what Rawls called “conceptions of the good”) are not pursued in an ethical vacuum, and are not fully intelligible viewed in purely subjective or relativist terms, divorced from any *objective* conception of a good or worthy human life.

With these general remarks in mind, we can identify four dimensions of this work that set it firmly in the category of an “open reason” project: (i) its rehabilitation of fundamental normative questions excluded by “value-free” inquiry in the study of social order; (ii) its ethical integration of formerly fragmented sciences or domains of inquiry; (iii) its recovery of the ethical rationale of political science; and (iv) its integration within a single body of knowledge, important and complementary insights from philosophy and political science.

(i) From “value-free” to value-inspired

To begin with, this work engages the subject-matter and questions of disciplines traditionally conceived as either ethically “neutral” or “thin” in their underlying assumptions, most notably political science, both on their own terms and from a broader ethical and philosophical perspective that does not pretend to be “neutral” or merely descriptive-explanatory. For example, it takes seriously the ways in which institutions modify incentives in its consideration of the need to balance competing social powers in a federated polity, but it situates this problem within a broader quest for an institutional arrangement supportive of free

and flourishing communities. Thus, the institutional principles of federalism, which are often interpreted by scholars of federalism as principles of effective political organisation and representation (e.g. Bednar 2008) only tangentially related to the good life, are re-interpreted in this work as principles protecting the integrity of associational life as a conduit for human excellence and flourishing. As I explain on p. 148, “The challenge the polycentric republic seeks to rise to is that of constituting and maintaining a workable civil order that respects and supports the intricate social ecology of free and flourishing communities while also addressing the sorts of social problems that demand the services of a territorial government.”

In a similar way, the concept of democracy or popular self-government, typically treated by political scientists as an ethically “thin,” formal characteristic of regimes and associations, is treated in this work as finding its fullest perfection in the freedom to flourish, which involves both the rational self-mastery of citizens and their participation in associations with rational, pro-flourishing governance structures (see, for example, chap. 7, pp. 120-121). Thus, self-government is not just a characteristic of political regimes, but a free-spirited and pro-flourishing way of life embedded within the fabric of society.

The embrace of a value-inspired yet also social scientific approach to reality is captured quite succinctly in my concept of the social ecology of flourishing, discussed in chapter 3 (p. 36):

The analysis of social ecology developed below is not just an exercise in “value-free” social science. On the contrary, I seek to describe the leading features of a *well-functioning* social ecology, that is, one that is conducive to the freedom and flourishing of the persons, organizations, and communities that make it up. More specifically, this chapter aims to describe the sort of social ecology that can successfully support a reasonable range of free and flourishing communities, oriented towards a reasonable gamut of diverse human goods.

(ii) From disciplinary fragmentation to ethical integration

Second, this is a work of “open reason” in the sense that it rejects the modern project of rigidly compartmentalising knowledge of social reality into separate disciplines, such as sociology, political science, and economics. Instead, it offers an integrating vision of social life, as a channel for the realisation of human flourishing, both personally and communally. While certain dimensions of social life may be distinguished for certain philosophical or analytic purposes, e.g. coercive versus voluntary forms of cooperation, political versus religious authority, or territorial versus non-territorial associations, social life only becomes fully intelligible when all of these distinct dimensions are understood integrally as part of the

personal and societal quest for a meaningful and flourishing form of life. This means that the problem of the good polity only becomes fully intelligible if viewed as part of the larger problem of the *good society*: it makes no sense to discuss the good polity as an analytic construct independent from the good society. Rather, “the norms, customs and narratives that make up a civil order, if functional, should facilitate the sorts of collaborative and trusting relationships that are conducive to the pursuit of free and flourishing lives” (chapter 7, p. 118). That is why the theory of civil order developed in this work is, at bottom, not just a theory of political order narrowly construed, but a theory of the good society as well.

(iii) Recovering the ethical rationale for political science

Third, this is a work of “open reason” in the sense that it draws out the internal logic of the science of politics and finds that this logic leads beyond the traditional domain of political science, as limited to things like the demarcation and uses of public power, or the structure and official functions of political institutions, to encompass larger and higher goals like human and societal flourishing. In particular, if political science seeks to understand under which conditions a political community and its institutional order can be stable and functional, then this naturally raises the question, *what precisely is a stable and well-functioning political community?*

A political community may have a variety of distinct functions, e.g., collective defence, security, and rule of law, but these functions or ends only make sense to political practitioners insofar as they enable them to realise a valuable or worthwhile form of life. If a political community does not provide a social context favourable to human flourishing, it fails, not just from some external, god’s-eye vantage-point, but *internally*, from the perspective of its *own* participants: “To the extent that social (including political) structures are either hostile or indifferent to the pursuit of human flourishing, they are pathological from an ethical perspective” (chapter 7, pp. 118-119). By framing the analysis of institutional design and development in the wider context of the quest for human flourishing, this project returns political science to its primordial mission – a mission recognised by classical thinkers like Plato and Aristotle - of uncovering the type of social order most supportive of human flourishing.

(iv) Mutual enrichment of philosophy and political science

Fourthly, this is a work of “open reason” in the sense that it involves a fruitful interpenetration of political and moral philosophy on the one hand, and modern political science on the other. This interpenetration is not exactly a dialogue of equals, since the spirit of philosophy sets the tone of the inquiry by placing the good life at the heart of the conversation. However, it is a dialogue that benefits both sides: on the one hand, political science, already committed to investigating the conditions under which political institutions can achieve their goals and function adequately, is invited by philosophy to consider ways in which the rationale for political institutions might include the more encompassing and lofty goal of human flourishing.

On the other hand, moral and political philosophy, already committed to investigating the conditions under which persons and communities can successfully realise the ends of a free and flourishing life, is invited by political science to consider how the structure and design of institutions can greatly affect the incentives and social constraints under which individuals and communities act, for better or for worse. In short, political science, in its contact with philosophy, can develop a fuller vision of the purpose of politics; while philosophy, in its contact with political science, can make its normative conception of the good society more institutionally grounded and operational, and thus of greater relevance to *praxis*.

One of the fruits of this engagement between philosophy and political science is the uncovering, in chapter 7, of the ways in which federalism, often understood narrowly as a set of organising principles for territorial governance, can be reinterpreted as principles of social organisation conducive to the freedom to flourish, both of individual persons and of self-regulating communities and associations that have an interest or need in participating in a larger meta-association/federation.

III. Major Philosophical Questions Engaged by this Work

The principal object of this work is to illuminate the institutional and cultural conditions under which a political community can support a healthy, pro-flourishing social order. As such, it necessarily engages with a broad range of fundamental philosophical questions, whether matters of ethics, anthropology, epistemology, psychology, or the interrogation of meaning. The nature of the good society and the type of political regime it requires can only be adequately addressed if we understand the nature of the good life (ethics), the human condition and predicament (anthropology), the power and limits of human motivation (psychology), the power and limits of human knowledge (epistemology), as well as the recurrent, transversal

question of *meaning*, be it the meaning of a scientific discipline, the meaning of an institutional order, or the meaning of a human life. A fully mature political science, which takes seriously the human value of political institutions, will have to grapple with each of these issues, just as I do in this book.

Ethics

This work is suffused with ethical concerns, inasmuch as it aims to uncover a social and political arrangement conducive to the freedom to flourish. However, ethical concerns are especially salient in Chapter 2, “The Freedom to Flourish: The Cornerstone of the Good Society,” where I drill down into the concept of a flourishing life, drawing on classical Aristotelian concepts like rational dominion over the passions, rounded development of human excellence, rational deliberation and choice as constitutive of a good life, and the socially embedded character of the quest for the good. I argue that the human good is heterogeneous and multi-faceted, involving a wide range of diverse dimensions, from physical nutrition and health to friendship and knowledge, and may be pursued in many different ways according to the unique circumstances, preferences, and choices of different individuals and groups. Finally, I suggest that the freedom to flourish – the ability to pursue and enjoy a flourishing life, guided by one’s own rationally informed and uncoerced choices and sense of meaning and purpose – is the cornerstone of a good society. Much of the book is spent working out the implications of this conception of the good life for social and political structures. One implication of the freedom to flourish is that such structures must be sufficiently pluralistic and flexible to service diverse dimensions and interpretations of the human good.

Anthropology

The argument of this book rests on a particular conception of human nature, as (a) both free and conditioned, (b) both creators of social order and inheritors of a given social order, and (c) as holding potential for both good and evil.

(a) Human beings are conceived as simultaneously reflexive, rational, free beings responsible for their choices, *and* as profoundly dependent creatures, partially conditioned by external incentives and social networks that shape and contextualise their choices while not completely determining them.

(b) In addition, human beings are conceived as both creators of social order, with the capacity to make their mark on society and give it shape, yet simultaneously inheritors of a given social order, over which they have limited control.

(c) Finally, human beings are conceived as being full of potential for virtue, creativity, and friendship, yet simultaneously vulnerable to the seductive appeal of power, wealth, greed, selfishness and vanity.

It follows from these anthropological observations that people's realisation of the best version of themselves depends, at least to a significant degree, not only on their own ethical qualities (e.g. virtue and personal commitment to the good), but on the quality of their social environment and political institutions. It also means that any serious study of politics must pay very close attention to the dualities of the human condition: free and responsible, yet socially and institutionally dependent; social entrepreneurs, yet inheritors of a given social order; capable of moral greatness, yet also vulnerable to the allure of "false gods" like vanity, narcissism, and an immoderate attachment to pleasure.

Social and political order must somehow accommodate these anthropological tensions. It must provide some measure of social continuity to allow social knowledge and values to be shared and passed on to future generations, yet also some measure of flexibility and choice, to allow people to adapt to new conditions and act in creative and entrepreneurial ways. Territorially delimited federalism, often marked by enduring geographic boundaries, as well as a shared civic culture, can provide social continuity and stability by creating useful social structures for integrating diverse social groups and housing a shared civic culture over time.

In a polycentric republic ruled by a firm but flexible framework of rights and responsibilities, political and social relationships can be renegotiated without the need for society-wide strife or revolutionary action, and citizens can enjoy significant freedom and mobility, preventing social structures from becoming too reified, rigid, stagnant, or monopolistic. In addition, territorial political structures like municipal and regional communities can be complemented in the polycentric republic by respected and enduring non-territorial associations within civil society, such as universities and churches, which provide institutional channels for conserving and passing on their own distinctive forms of knowledge and well-being that cannot be replicated by the structures of territorial communities.

Last but not least, a sound political order must both protect against man's worst excesses, and provide him with an opportunity to realise greatness. A polycentric order promotes human freedom, creativity, and development by enabling far-reaching forms of social and political experimentation, mobility and self-government, yet also protects against the worst abuses of power by (i) guaranteeing the right to exit associations and (ii) allowing disparate social powers to check each other; and (iii) including a shared constitution guaranteeing basic rights such as property, bodily integrity, and freedom of contract. In this way, the polycentric republic includes

defensive measures in response to our fallen or sinful nature, yet also permits a high degree of innovation, mobility and initiative in recognition of our capacity for creativity, self-perfection and social improvement.

Psychology

One of the basic insights of modern social science, in particular institutional economics (e.g., E. Ostrom 2005, E. Ostrom 2015/1990, McGinnis 1999) and public choice theory (e.g. Buchanan 1975) is the fact that people, for better or for worse, are profoundly influenced in their behaviour, choices and worldviews by the social structures they inhabit. For example, they will frequently adapt their choices to the opportunities latent in existing institutional structure to enhance their economic position, social prestige, and power. Institutional arrangements reward some forms of behaviour with prestige or economic gain, and punish other forms of behaviour with social disapproval, career stagnation, or reduced economic opportunities. The way these incentive are structured can be quite decisive for social outcomes. We may hope for at least some people to act on the highest and most virtuous of motives, but we cannot expect institutional incentives to be ignored or to be inconsequential for social outcomes. For example, as I suggest on p. 81, “Given the intense psychological pull of power and prestige, many politicians would be willing to go a long way to protect or expand them, including doing what they know to be ethically dubious, acting against the public interest, accepting dubious deals with political allies, breaking election promises, and exceeding reasonable limits of public spending and public debt.”

Consequently, political institutions must be designed not only to empower virtuous behaviour, but to structure incentives in a constructive, socially beneficial direction. A highly centralised political system, as I argue in this book, does not structure incentives in ways that promote the public interest. For people attracted to power and prestige have major incentives to gain access to the levers of the central government of a sovereign State, and to expand that power base once they have conquered it, resulting in a steady expansion of the central government and its priorities at the cost of those who lose the contest for power. Under this arrangement, those who fail to gain access to the power of the State reasonably perceive themselves as losers in a “zero sum” game of power, and thus have less reason to support the system in a proactive way. This results in a divided society and a large contingent of discontented people, detracting from the overall stability and legitimacy of the system.

The way to get beyond the zero-sum game, as I argue in this book, is to weaken the potential for governments to monopolise social power, by multiplying independent centres of

power and governance, and putting as much social governance as possible on a voluntary footing, e.g., in the context of civil society or market actors, so that different governmental arrangements can be voluntarily negotiated and opted into by citizens according to their particular needs and interests. This way, more citizens can feel that their needs are genuinely served by the governmental system, and thus view it as acceptable and legitimate.

Another important psychological insight harnessed by my account of civil order is the power of close attachments to motivate people to care about the impact of their actions and avoid inflicting undue harm on society. As Tocqueville (2000/1840, vol. 2, part 2, chap. 4) pointed out, the problem of political apathy and indifference, or a languishing civic spirit, can be cured by providing citizens with deliberative forums through which they can decide local issues that affect their own families, neighbourhoods, and properties. When people are drawn by natural attachments and self-interest into these sorts of forums – be they municipal commissions and assemblies, or the board of a local charity or business - they can become accustomed to deliberating with their peers and develop a sense of loyalty to local institutions. For the benefits of local institutions can appear more real and palpable to them than those of the more remote institutions of the State. In short, people's local loyalties should not be viewed with suspicion, but harnessed to motivate civic engagement within a truly decentralised political and social system.

Epistemology

A book about systems of governance and social organisation cannot avoid engaging with the problem of knowledge, in particular as it bears on the governance of human activities. In a complex and diverse social order, as thinkers like Hayek (1996/1948) have observed, the knowledge upon which successful human action depends, whether at the personal or collective level, is dispersed across many individuals and groups, and cannot be effectively concentrated in a single mind, or in the hands of a single government ruling over a large and complex society.

In part, this has to do with the logistical limitations of governments, which cannot possibly have their “ear to the ground” in all places at once. In part, it is due to the fact that the social value of goods and services can only be properly uncovered by competitive, market-like mechanisms of exchange and cannot be discerned independently from the “price signals” of a market. In part, it is also due to the fact that there are forms of knowledge that are implicit and only intelligible in the context of local practices and histories, as political historian James Scott (1999) has famously shown in his discussion of the tone-deaf nature of Statist social engineering projects, even with respect to something as mundane as the meaning of local maps.

As Scott has shown persuasively, these heterogeneous, tacit, practice-based forms of knowledge cannot be translated into the sort of uniform system of knowledge that central governments rely on, without leaving a lot of their meaning behind.

The limits of centralised knowledge emphasised by thinkers like Hayek and Scott play a pivotal role in my justification of polycentric governance. Only a system of widely dispersed power and authority can permit governmental offices and projects to learn from the fruits of social experimentation, which can reveal, on a trial-and-error and comparative basis, which sorts of policies are most successful in practice (see, for example, chapter 3, p. 50). Similarly, only a polycentric system involving dispersed power and authority can adapt the priorities and methods of governance on a piecemeal basis to knowledge embedded in local communities and ways of life. This responds to what I call the principle of “epistemic and cultural proximity”: “either rulers themselves or their trusted advisors and administrators should be sufficiently familiar with the language, priorities, culture, and needs of relevant stakeholders, that they can make well-informed decisions” (chapter 7, p. 137).

In these ways, a polycentric political system can self-correct over time, adapt governance to local needs, and limit the harms of hubristic forms of social engineering projects, such as the American city planning movement of the 1950s, which forcibly moved entire communities out of their city neighbourhoods, into more spacious and “healthy” suburban spaces, with the stated intention of making their lives better, but with the real effect of creating ghettos of crime and delinquency in the peripheries of cities like Chicago, Detroit, New York and Philadelphia (Jacobs 1992/1961).

Meaning

The question of meaning is not a distinct field of inquiry, but something that permeates rational inquiry as such. The quest to understand the deeper meaning and purpose of life in society is pervasive in this work, which does not settle for partial or superficial answers. This quest for meaning manifests itself in a number of ways: first, the fundamental driving question of *The Polycentric Republic* is, what makes for a good and meaningful human life, and how can it best be accommodated by the cultural and institutional order of society? Second, this work probes the deeper rationale for the social sciences, in particular political science, revealing that the rationale for political institutions must include support for the social ecology of human flourishing. For the partial goods sometimes promised by political institutions, e.g., security or economic welfare, are ultimately dissatisfying and incomplete from the perspective of a citizen who wishes to live a full and worthwhile human life. Political life is only fully

intelligible and choiceworthy insofar as it provides support, even if indirectly, for a way of life that realises people's full human potential.

* * *

The Polycentric Republic presents a profound and timely re-evaluation of political theory, challenging the conventional centralization of power within the modern State by proposing an alternative framework based on polycentric order and bottom-up federalism. The book's core value lies in its integration of neo-Aristotelian ethics with insights from modern social science to craft an ethically rich vision of civil order oriented towards the cultivation of human flourishing in a free and diverse society. Through its painstaking critique of the individualising and homogenizing tendencies of the modern State, this book makes a compelling case that we should pivot toward a more pluralistic, voluntary, and locally responsive system of governance, capable of supporting a free, vibrant, and pro-flourishing society.

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(see full manuscript for complete bibliography)

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