

Can a Liberal State Promote Social Cohesion?¹

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores Nils Holtug's attempt in his recent book to show that shared liberal egalitarian values contribute significantly to achieving or maintaining the social cohesion that is necessary for egalitarian distributive policies to be politically sustainable. If successful, this attempt would constitute a powerful answer to the so-called Progressive's Dilemma, which in effect holds that egalitarians must sacrifice one of two normative positions that they hold dear: egalitarian welfare state policies and permissive immigration regimes. If Holtug is right, no such sacrifice is necessary. This paper accepts Holtug's empirical premises as true, and investigates instead the normative recommendation that appears to follow from them: that the liberal state ought to promote liberal egalitarian values. The paper argues that there is an apparent tension between Rawlsian political liberalism's commitment to take reasonable normative pluralism seriously, on the one hand, and state promotion of liberal values, on the other hand. The public reason constraint on the uses of state power appears to rule out state promotion of such views that, even if correct, some reasonable citizens have reason to reject. This paper finds, however, that the challenge is ultimately unsuccessful. When certain constraints are honored, there is no incompatibility between taking evaluative diversity seriously and state attempts to persuade citizens of the correctness of a particular normative outlook.

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1. INTRODUCTION

One of the main themes of Nils Holtug's important and stimulating book *The Politics of Social Cohesion* is what has come to be known as the Progressive's Dilemma. Progressives are generally in favor of both egalitarian distributive measures and permissive immigration policies. However, while these commitments could be perfectly consistent at the level of moral principle, they may be in tension when it comes to the sociopolitical conditions that are necessary to implement and sustain them. More specifically, according to a large body of empirical evidence, a necessary or at least strongly facilitating condition of egalitarian welfare state policies is a high level of *social cohesion*—understood as a significant level of generalized trust and solidarity—in society. And at least according to some (though by no means all) empirical findings, such social cohesion in turn is conditional on some degree of cultural homogeneity, shared national identity, and/or shared political values. The dilemma appears if some (though not all) versions of the second empirical claim are correct. If it is true that the sustainability of egalitarian policies depends on high levels of social cohesion, which in turn depend on a high degree of cultural homogeneity, then progressives can have either egalitarian distributive policies or permissive immigration policies, but not both (at least in the political context of Western liberal democracies, where a large share of immigration is from culturally distinct non-Western countries). Although this way of formulating the issue leaves it open which horn of the dilemma progressives should embrace, the implications are usually spelled out in terms of the need for restrictive immigration measures. If understood in this way, the dilemma can be formalized in the following manner:

- P1 (Normative Premise 1): Justice requires both egalitarian distributive policies and permissive immigration policies.
- P2 (Normative Premise 2): When these two desiderata cannot be satisfied at the same time, egalitarian distributive policies have priority from the point of view of justice.
- P3 (Empirical Premise 1): Cultural diversity undermines the social and political bases of egalitarian distributive policies.

P4: (Empirical Premise 2): Cultural diversity can be contained by restrictive immigration policies.

Conclusion: Justice requires restrictive immigration policies.

Holtug endorses P1, and he is silent on P2 (without which we only have the dilemma, but not the conclusion to the effect that restrictive immigration measures are required by justice, at least under current social conditions). Much of the book is dedicated to an impressively comprehensive survey of the available evidence for Premise 3, which is at the heart of the dilemma. The book argues, persuasively to my mind, that the evidence is at best incomplete and therefore inconclusive. While it is true that egalitarian policies are supported by high levels of social cohesion, it is doubtful that social cohesion, in turn, is made possible only by cultural (national, ethnic, religious, etc.) homogeneity. But that is not to say that *some* kind of commonality is not a supporting condition of social cohesion (and in turn, of the sustainability of egalitarian welfare policies).

Chapter 8, which is the main focus of my paper, investigates the Rawls-inspired idea that liberal institutions (those approximating the principles of justice as fairness) and liberal values in society are in a mutually reinforcing relationship: institutions of this kind tend to generate the corresponding normative commitments in society, which in turn enhance the long-term stability of these institutions. Holtug develops this suggestion further, to investigate the role (if any) of shared liberal values in generating the required level of social cohesion. Social cohesion becomes the mediating factor between liberal attitudes and the stability of liberal egalitarian policies. This chapter addresses what it calls a liberal “community conception” as the possible basis for integrating immigrants into the host society. A community conception is defined earlier, in Chapter 3, as the idea that the sharing of certain values is a necessary or at least facilitating condition of social cohesion, i.e. the relevant forms of trust and solidarity at the societal level. A *liberal* community conception is one that proposes that the sharing of *liberal* values, in particular, is a prerequisite or at least a strongly supporting condition of social cohesion that is necessary for the successful implementation of egalitarian policies.

Such a liberal community conception is of special interest for at least two reasons. The first reason is that, at least at a first approximation, a liberal community conception seems to have a better chance of being morally justifiable from the broadly liberal egalitarian perspective that the book defends (and which I share). Whereas national or other “culturalist”

community conceptions look morally suspect if they require minority social groups to sacrifice valued cultural attachments, the liberal community conception requires no such thing. It is predicated on the promotion and sharing of the very values that social cohesion is intended to support, i.e. liberal egalitarian policies. In other words, there is a very close linkage, if not identity, between the values whose sharing generates social cohesion, and the ideals whose implementation social cohesion is meant to facilitate.

Second, the liberal community conception resolves or at least significantly softens the Progressive's Dilemma. Permissive immigration regimes are consistent with egalitarian welfare policies as long as liberal values are shared to a sufficient degree, and there is no reason to rule out the possibility that many immigrants endorse or are open to these values.² If the liberal community conception is borne out by empirical evidence—i.e. if we find that liberal institutions, egalitarian distributions, and the sharing of liberal values generate social cohesion—then we have good reasons to be more optimistic about the prospects of egalitarian policies, even in the context of large-scale non-Western immigration. This would suggest that liberal egalitarian institutions and policies are self-stabilizing, at least in the long term, and are capable of generating their own social support. In particular, they may be capable of gaining the support of new immigrants as well, who can see them as fair. By the same token, this would give us reasons for optimism in the more distinctive sense that egalitarian policies can be implemented at little or no obvious moral costs: they do not require a moral compromise in terms of requiring minority groups to give up valued cultural attachments, at least as long as these are compatible with certain liberal values. In what follows, I will accept Holtug's conclusions regarding the other "community conceptions" and set them aside to focus on the normative implications of the liberal one.

Most of Chapter 8 is dedicated to an examination of the empirical data related to the liberal community conception. In particular, it examines the available data as to whether the functioning of liberal institutions, the existence of egalitarian distributions, and the sharing (or simply having) of liberal values in sufficiently large numbers contribute to social cohesion. The presented findings support each of what Holtug refers to as "institution effects", "distribution effects", and "value effects".

Institution effects: Liberal egalitarian institutions, and especially

² This may, of course, depend on how thinly or thickly liberal commitments are understood. It has been suggested, for instance, that the highest-level commitments of Islam are compatible with political liberalism but not with comprehensive liberalism (Fadel 2008). I thank a reviewer for raising this issue and for directing me to this reference.

universal social democratic (Scandinavian) welfare regimes correlate with higher levels of trust and solidarity (aka social cohesion), including trust and solidarity towards people belonging to the “out-group”. Specifically, when institutions are perceived as functioning in an impartial, high-quality manner, they contribute to trust and solidarity.

Distribution effects: More egalitarian distributions (i.e. lower levels of income and wealth inequality) also correlate with higher levels of social cohesion.

Value effects: The prevalence of liberal values correlates with higher levels of trust and solidarity. Furthermore, the *sharing* of liberal values, i.e. the knowledge that others also hold them, also correlates with higher levels of trust and solidarity, including with people belonging to the “out-group”.

In other words, the empirical findings are promising: at least in the absence of powerful countercurrents, liberal institutions, egalitarian policies, and the broad presence of liberal values in society support social cohesion, even if there are some questions about the direction of causation. This also suggests that one way to increase social cohesion is to strengthen liberal institutions, pursue further egalitarian policies, and, in particular, promote liberal attitudes, provided they are not already present in society to a sufficient degree. The upshot is that progressives need not be forced to choose between egalitarian policies and permissive immigration regimes. Even if at the outset social cohesion is not present at sufficient levels, measures that promote liberal values can close the gap. The Progressive’s Dilemma can be resolved.

In what follows, I treat the empirical findings as fixed: I find Holtug’s analysis highly convincing, and in any case, I lack the knowledge and skills to engage in any critical discussion of them. Instead, I will focus on some of the possible normative implications of these findings. As mentioned above, the implications are that the liberal state has strong reasons to promote liberal values. My goal in this paper is to explore whether there are any reasons within the liberal theoretical perspective to be worried about these recommendations. I will focus on the promotion of liberal values, i.e. the promotion of what the book refers to as “direct value effects”, as distinct from “institutional effects” and “distribution effects”. It appears that there is an open question as to whether the liberal state may legitimately promote liberal values, at least in certain ways. I take it as a given that the liberal state can work on strengthening and improving its institutions, and that it can pursue egalitarian policies. For this reason, the indirect institutional and distribution effects are of no moral concern in this respect. However, the promotion of direct value effects may be different. I will identify a

worry about the promotion of liberal values by means of state speech that is motivated by one important strand in liberal theory. Then, I will attempt to identify ways to address or at least mitigate this worry.

2. THE PUBLIC REASON WORRY

The worry, which I will call the Public Reason Worry, may seem paradoxical: how could it be problematic for the liberal state to publicly promote the very values and ideas by appeal to which it is justified? Either it is the case, it may be suggested, that the liberal state is morally justified, in which case it is permissible to promote the values on the basis of which it is justified. Or it is the case that the liberal state itself is not justified, in which case it is impermissible for it to promote liberal values, because it is impermissible for it to promote anything. But to claim that the liberal state as a whole is justifiable, and yet it is somehow problematic for it to promote liberal values, appears paradoxical. Indeed, Holtug foresees this possible worry and suggests an answer:

Nevertheless, it may be suggested that it is basically illiberal to promote shared values of any kind. In a liberal society, people are free to form their political opinions as they wish and should not be interfered with by the state in so doing. This, however, is a caricature of liberalism. (224)

However, this dismissal may be too quick. It may be important to distinguish between the following two questions:

- (1) Is it morally justified for the state to implement certain egalitarian policies?
- (2) Is it morally justified for the state to implement certain policies that aim at a shared *commitment* to principles that are the normative basis of its egalitarian policies?

The policies mentioned in (1) are not the same as those referenced in (2). Whereas type (1) policies aim at bringing about or approximating distributive arrangements that are required by egalitarian justice, type (2) policies aim to shape people's attitudes and evaluative orientation. They may attempt to do this in a number of different ways. For instance, they may try to shape attitudes and evaluative stances directly through public campaigns, school textbooks, historical monuments and commemorations emphasizing liberal themes. Or they may try to achieve this indirectly, through measures that put people in situations that tend to activate liberal

sentiments even without directly invoking them. For the sake of simplicity, I will focus only on state speech that directly invokes or appeals to liberal values.

Are there any considerations within liberal political morality that suggests that one may consistently answer question (1) in the affirmative while answering question (2) in the negative? One place to begin is to note that the policies mentioned in (1) govern citizens' actions and choices, typically those that affect others. The policies mentioned in (2) affect their commitments and convictions. Therefore there is a separate question as to what (if anything) is morally permissible for the state to do to shape its citizens' normative outlooks. A perhaps natural suggestion is that state actions aiming to shape citizens' normative outlook are morally problematic on grounds of freedom of conscience. However, this suggestion is misleading. There need not be any direct conflict between freedom of conscience and attempting to change someone's mind about political values through persuasion and advocacy. Much of public life in liberal democracies is about just that. As long as persuasion and advocacy are not coercive, and do not put the unpersuaded at any obvious disadvantage, or expose them to some form of worrisome pressure, they are not in tension with people's freedom to make up their own minds. If this is the objection that Holtug considers in the quote above, then he is right to dismiss it.

But even so, worries about the permissibility of the state in particular to engage in persuasion and advocacy regarding values may persist, especially for so-called political liberals or public reason liberals, who subscribe to a particularly stringent view of legitimacy regarding the coercive impositions of the state: one that grants an effective veto over coercive measures to each of a plurality of (reasonable) normative outlooks. (Reasonable outlooks exclude those with racist or similar views that deny the full social and political status of each. Therefore, as will be clear later on, the problem in the focus of this paper does not concern hate speech.) In one formulation of what Rawls refers to as the liberal principle of legitimacy, "the exercise of political power is fully proper only when it is exercised in accordance with a constitution the essentials of which all citizens as free and equal may reasonably be expected to endorse in the light of principles and ideals acceptable to their common human reason" (Rawls 1993: 137). For the purposes of this paper, the key difference between political and comprehensive liberalism is that comprehensive liberalism allows, in justifying the use of state power, appeals to such moral views that are held to be true even if they can be reasonably disputed, while political liberalism holds that in political justification, only such reasons can be appealed to that are acceptable to all reasonable viewpoints. Even though state persuasion

and advocacy may not involve coercion, it is a distinct possibility that the considerations that public reason liberals enlist in favor of their highly restrictive notion of legitimacy regarding coercion also apply to persuasion and advocacy when carried out by and on behalf of officials of the state. And while Holtug does not appear to be explicitly committed to the public reason framework, this idea is influential enough among liberals to make it worthwhile to explore the framework's implications for the issue at hand.³

Public reason liberalism's central motivation may be identified as a concern with accommodating (reasonable) evaluative or normative pluralism in a fair manner. Empirically, this is premised on the assumption that under liberal institutions, a range of reasonable normative outlooks will emerge over time, such that appeal to normative reasons and evidence alone is highly unlikely to lead to full consensus on questions of political morality, no matter how open to evidence and argument (i.e. how reasonable in the procedural sense) each citizen is. Evidence and appeal to reason will not settle at least some normative disagreements. According to public reason liberals, such reasonable pluralism has profound normative significance: reasonable citizens are wronged if policies they have reason to reject are imposed on them, even if those policies are grounded in objectively correct considerations of justice.

For the problem at hand, this has a number of immediate consequences. First, given reasonable pluralism about justice, there will be, by assumption, at least some reasonable citizens who reject egalitarian distributive policies that are said to depend, empirically, on the existence of a high level of social cohesion. This implies that there is no reason to expect that societies will spontaneously exhibit the high levels of commitment to liberal egalitarian ideals that constitute the social bases of egalitarian policies according to the liberal community conception.⁴ Of course, some public reason liberals may be tempted to argue that citizens who reject egalitarian distributive policies are not in fact reasonable.

³ For the purposes of this paper, I remain agnostic on the debate between public reason and comprehensive liberalism. That said, I think the issue discussed here raises difficult questions for comprehensive liberals as well.

⁴ Note, however, that disagreement about egalitarian policies need not imply that for public reason liberals, it would be illegitimate to adopt and enforce such policies. On one construal, as the quote from Rawls above suggests, the public reason constraint applies only to "constitutional essentials", and egalitarian welfare state policies, even if controversial, can be adopted "in accordance with" a constitution that is acceptable to all reasonable citizens. However, not all public reason liberals agree. See e.g. Gaus (2010), and especially Vallier (2019). I will not explore this issue further, other than to note that if Gaus and Vallier are right about the radical implications of public reason, then the Progressive's Dilemma is moot to begin with, since in that case egalitarian policies cannot be legitimately adopted.

However, such a narrow conception of reasonableness would arguably conflict with the main rationale for public reason liberalism itself, i.e. the claim that it treats a range of (reasonable) normative outlooks in a respectful way. If respect for evaluative diversity is restricted to those who endorse some version of liberal egalitarianism as their substantive conception of justice, then it is not in fact respectful of anything resembling real-life evaluative diversity, not even in some rather idealized rendering. (Some public reason liberals may be on board with that. See, for instance, Jonathan Quong's (2011: 144) contention that, on his favored understanding of public reason, "the justification of liberal principles at no point depends on the beliefs of real people". But it seems to me that such an understanding collapses the distinction between public reason liberalism and comprehensive liberalism, and renders the former project moot.)

Second, if reasonable pluralism is characterized by the fact that appeal to evidence and reason alone is unlikely to fully overcome any side's objections on the issue that is the object of reasonable disagreement, then it is not clear whether state persuasion or state advocacy (later on I will elaborate the difference between the two) can be effective, as long as it appeals only to proper evidence and good reasons. Therefore, even if such advocacy is permissible within the bounds of public reason liberalism, there are questions about its potential effectiveness. Of course, it is conceivable that where the appeals of *citizens* to evidence and reason in their discussions among themselves is ineffective in inducing a movement beyond the evaluative impasse, similar appeals by the *state* and its representatives can be effective, due to their heightened position in public life.

But, third, this very possibility itself suggests that it may be problematic for the state to engage in such advocacy. If the constellation of reasonable viewpoints that emerges under free institutions enjoys some normatively privileged status, as suggested by public reason liberalism, then it may be morally problematic to attempt to shift the balance of opinions towards one particular viewpoint through the (communicative) activities of the state. In this section, I will put aside questions of efficacy regarding state persuasion and advocacy, and focus on the third challenge: given the normative commitments of public reason liberalism, is it permissible for the liberal state to engage in state persuasion or state advocacy to promote commitment to liberal egalitarian principles among its citizens?

The main idea motivating the Public Reason Worry in the context of state advocacy for liberal values comes from the rationale for the public reason framework itself. For public reason liberals, the legitimacy of instances of the exercise of political power (of which state persuasion and

advocacy may be a case, given the privileged position and resources available to state institutions and their officials) depends on their acceptability to a diverse range of reasonable evaluative viewpoints *as they are*, that is, as they have evolved under free institutions. What state persuasion and state advocacy attempt to do, at least in the context under consideration, is to shift these viewpoints in a *particular direction*, with the goal of creating favorable social conditions for the implementation and operation of certain controversial policies. Or, to put it in the language of public reason liberalism itself, state advocacy and state persuasion constitute attempts by the state, through the exercise of political power, to modify existing (reasonable) viewpoints in such a way that certain policies that were hitherto unacceptable to some reasonable citizens become acceptable to all or most of them. Once put this way, it becomes clearer why this may seem problematic for public reason liberals.⁵ State advocacy, even in the service of objectively correct liberal and egalitarian ideals, may be seen as “cheating”: the state itself attempts to manipulate the very evaluative stances on which the legitimacy of its exercises of power depends. If the state is permitted to do this, and if it has a reasonable chance of succeeding, then it may seem that the public reason constraint does not amount to much of a constraint, at least when it comes to liberal egalitarian policies.⁶ For some, the main appeal of public reason liberalism is that it avoids the alleged “sectarianism” (Gaus 2012) of comprehensive liberalism by making the legitimacy of exercises of state power conditional on acceptability to reasonable nonliberal citizens. But if the state may use its power to persuade such citizens (with good prospects of success) to become liberals, then public reason liberalism is not much of an improvement, as compared to comprehensive liberalism, from the point of

5 It should be noted that public reason liberalism displays significant internal diversity. Some public reason liberals, e.g. Rawlsians, typically state the acceptability condition with reference to the *reasons* that support a proposed law or policy, while others, e.g. Gaus, specify it with reference to the laws and policies themselves, which different reasonable people may find acceptable for different reasons (see Gaus 2010). It seems to me that the worry regarding state promotion of liberal values has some bite with respect to both versions, regardless of whether the promotion focuses on abstract values or on specific policies. If there are some values that some reasonable people reject, and acceptance of which is a precondition of the legitimate adoption of some law or policy, then state promotion of those values may be problematic. But it does seem to me that the scope of the worry may depend on which formulation of the public reason condition one adopts. I will not explore this issue further, although throughout I focus on state persuasion in the service of abstract values, not particular policies. (I am indebted to a reviewer of this journal for bringing this complication to my attention.)

6 True, political liberalism would still reject appeals to controversial views about the good life in the justification of the uses of state power. However, this would only distinguish it from liberal perfectionism, and not from those versions of comprehensive liberalism that also incorporate a requirement of state neutrality. I thank an editor of this journal for pressing me to clarify this point.

view of those who find its rationale appealing. It would seem, then, that reasonable nonliberal citizens have sound reasons to object to the use of state power to promote liberal values through state advocacy and state persuasion. Or to put it differently, for public reason liberals, the Progressive's Dilemma is replaced by the Public Reason Paradox:

The Public Reason Paradox:

- P1: The state is required to treat its citizens with equal concern and respect.
- P2: Well-functioning liberal institutions are not sufficient, by themselves, to generate favorable social conditions for policies that treat citizens with equal concern and respect.⁷
- P3: State speech in favor of liberal values, together with liberal institutions, would be sufficient to generate stable support.
- P4: Some reasonable citizens believe, reasonably, that they have adequate reasons to reject state speech in support of liberal egalitarian values.
- C1: State speech in support of liberal egalitarian values is impermissible because it violates the public reason constraint. (This is entailed by P4.)
- C2: The liberal state is not morally permitted to do that which is a necessary condition of what it is morally required to do. (From P1-P3 and C1.)

At this point, I should note an equivocation in the formulation of the liberal "community conception", an ambiguity that may have some bearing on the paradox just stated. The liberal community conception holds (and empirical findings bear this out to some extent) that the prevalence and sharing of liberal values tends to increase social cohesion. However, it is not immediately clear whether "liberal values" are to be understood in a thinner or a thicker sense, to adopt a familiar distinction. To simplify somewhat, a thinner conception may include regarding people as free and equal in a very abstract manner only, which is consistent with very different views about social and economic equality, for instance. Conversely, a thick conception may involve commitment to robust egalitarian demands. The way this ambiguity is resolved for the purposes of the liberal community

⁷ Note that this premise may be consistent with Rawls' hope that liberal institutions tend to foster attitudes that are favorable for them. It may only be the case that while they do tend to foster such attitudes, they do so only to a degree that does not, by itself, guarantee their long-term stability.

conception is highly relevant, since the paradox arguably does not arise on the thin conception: plausibly, all reasonable worldviews in the public reason framework are liberal in the thin sense. The paradox arises only if the liberal values that form part of the liberal community conception, and which are necessary to generate social cohesion, are of the thicker kind. The thick conception generates the paradox because obviously, not all reasonable viewpoints are liberal in the thick sense. We can take some guidance from the text to disambiguate this issue. When reviewing the empirical evidence regarding liberal values and their effects on social cohesion, Holtug (231) cites Uslaner's influential work on trust and reports that "trust is positively related to a set of liberal values that includes equal standing, equality of opportunity, opposition to hierarchy, and a belief and desire that things will get better for those who have less" (see also Uslaner 2002: 2). While some of these notions allow for stronger or weaker interpretations, when taken together they suggest a robustly egalitarian distributive ideal, especially with the inclusion of the idea that associates liberalism with the desire that the situation of the least well-off ought to be improved. Therefore I take it that when Holtug speaks of the promotion of liberal values, he means values linked to a thick conception of liberal egalitarianism. Therefore the paradox kicks in.

If this were the last word on the matter, then the conclusion would be fatal for public reason liberalism. It is not exactly that it would require the liberal state to stand by as the political basis of the policies required by justice is eroded. If, due to some especially fortuitous luck and contrary to the expectations of reasonable pluralism, all reasonable citizens were to support egalitarian policies, then the latter may still thrive. Alternatively, if, contrary to P2, liberal institutions and policies are sufficient by themselves to generate their own social support to a sufficient degree, without the helping hand of state advocacy or persuasion, then again egalitarian policies may become entrenched and stable. Finally, the liberal state can (and should) work strenuously towards improving the functioning of its egalitarian policies, and these efforts, if successful, are likely to lead to increased support in light of the empirical findings presented. But perhaps these are too precarious foundations on which to rest liberalism's egalitarian hopes. Even mildly unfavorable developments would seem to spell doom for them unless the liberal state is allowed the communicative tools to fortify itself. So the conclusion, if vindicated, may represent a powerful strike against public reason liberalism, and suggest that some version of comprehensive liberalism is superior from the point of view of

those who are committed to substantive liberal egalitarian policies.⁸

3. ADDRESSING THE WORRY

First, let me address an objection to the way I set up the Public Reason Paradox above. It might be suggested that state persuasion in the service of liberal values may be permissible if the persuasive activity itself is justifiable by public reason. The idea could be that even reasonable nonliberal citizens may lack decisive objections to liberal state persuasion, at least if it respects certain constraints: they may not find it objectionable if the state makes good-faith, respectful attempts to change their minds. This could be because they recognize the liberal view as reasonable even though they do not share it, or because they recognize the state's need to (respectfully) persuade its citizens of the merits of the (reasonable) policies it seeks to implement, or both. As long as they are free *not* to change their minds and will not face disadvantages if they do not, so the suggestion might go, they may find state attempts at persuasion justifiable by public reasons.

Indeed, it is plausible that state persuasion as such is compatible with public reason and, when some stringent constraints are observed, it may even find theoretical support in that framework, at least in some instances.⁹ It may be suggested that it is not disrespectful to reasonable people, and it takes reasonable pluralism seriously, to engage with their evaluative viewpoints, at least if this is done in a certain manner. It may be that for the purposes of the legitimacy of the use of political power, the state need not take all reasonable viewpoints as they are (i.e. prior to any effort at state persuasion or advocacy) as fixed. Rather, to continue the thought, it may be that the state may make attempts at rational persuasion, and must refrain from certain uses of political power only if some reasonable citizens find such uses unacceptable even after rational persuasion by the state has exhausted its (permissible) options. I think there is some merit to this response. If certain constraints are respected, it is not immediately obvious that appeals to reason and evidence by the state should be seen as inherently more problematic for the public reason liberal than similar appeals by one's fellow citizens. As long as certain constraints (to be

⁸ Of course, it is quite plausible that comprehensive liberalism, too, imposes constraints on the promotion of liberal values by means of state speech. But I am assuming here that these constraints are likely to be weaker. However, this point is controversial. There is live disagreement on whether the demands of public reason liberalism and comprehensive liberalism converge or diverge in the domain of civic education: a topic that is highly relevant for the present problem. For a helpful overview of this debate, see Neufeld (2013).

⁹ I am grateful to a reviewer of this journal for pressing me on this point.

elaborated below) are observed, such appeals by the state may in fact improve the normative status of the resulting constellation of reasonable viewpoints. Some reasonable citizens, through no fault of their own, may lack sufficient exposure to a range of other reasonable viewpoints, and thus lack adequate opportunities to form well-considered views on some matters. State persuasion may render some viewpoints more salient in a way that makes it less likely that reasonable citizens fail to consider them, and as a result, their considered judgments on related matters will be more robust, as it were, whether or not they are brought in alignment with the position that the state attempts to persuade its citizens about. Indeed, from within the public reason framework, the state has more reason to take its citizens' objections seriously if its attempts at rational persuasion have failed to bring them on board.¹⁰ Therefore I take it to be plausible that the public reason constraint may be applied *after* appropriate forms of state persuasion have taken place.

What could be the constraints on the state's promotion of liberal values¹¹ through its communicative activities? Before elaborating a bit on the restrictions that I think apply, I will mention one type of communicative activity by the state that in my view is uncontroversially within its legitimate use of powers: the liberal state is permitted, in fact required, to state publicly the reasons that support the laws and policies that it adopts, including reasons that are grounded in liberal-egalitarian moral considerations. It should do so both in the relevant parts of the legislation itself (preambles, etc.), and in its communications to citizens at large. If the state adopts a law that aims to increase the effectiveness of school integration policies, for instance, then it is appropriate to state this goal as well as the general moral considerations that support it, in a public manner. Likewise, if the state's constitution refers to liberal principles (as most constitutions of liberal democracies do), then it is entirely appropriate to invoke these principles when officials of the state justify their actions or aspirations. However, the promotion of liberal values that is at stake in the

10 A complication here is that according to this line of thought, the liberal state has reason to expose its citizens to *all* reasonable viewpoints that they may have been insulated from, and not just the one that it intends to promote. For instance, it is sometimes suggested that in some societies, academic and some professional environments have become such insular "bubbles" of progressive thought that people inhabiting these environments rarely if ever meet and mingle with anyone of a different outlook. Then, by the logic of the present paragraph, the state has reasons, grounded in the public reason framework itself, to expose such people to rational persuasion promoting alternative yet reasonable outlooks. I will not explore this complication further.

11 It is important to note that what is at issue here is the promotion of liberal values themselves, rather than that of specific policies. Urging citizens through publicly funded campaigns to get vaccinated, for instance, is obviously different from campaigns that aim to inculcate general liberal values.

present discussion arguably goes significantly beyond such activities. It may include, for instance, civics textbooks, public broadcast programming, or even campaigns. It is these further communicative activities of the state that I focus on below. It is beyond the scope of this paper to develop anything approaching a complete account of the appropriate constraints, but I think some broad-brush distinctions could be informative.

4. STATE PERSUASION VS. STATE ADVOCACY

I think it may be useful to distinguish between state persuasion and state advocacy. By advocacy, I refer to the kinds of appeals that are typically associated with political campaigns supporting political parties and candidates in an election, or a specific outcome in a referendum. These appeals often invoke emotionally loaded images and language intended to create positive associations with the preferred party (candidate, outcome) or negative associations with the rival ones. They also often make factually incorrect or questionable claims, which of course would be out of bounds for the liberal state when promoting values. But the latter cases are less directly relevant for the problem at hand, since what the state is attempting to do in promoting liberal values is not belief in some set of empirical facts, but the normative superiority of a certain outlook. It seems to me that state advocacy that focuses on such appeals would be problematic, for at least two reasons. First, it would be objectionable as a matter of political fairness if the state used its funds, collected from taxpayers of all different political persuasions, to advocate in favor of one particular viewpoint, while other reasonable viewpoints did not have access to similar public funds. Second, while such appeals may be acceptable coming from candidates, they seem dubious when made by state officials whose pronouncements may be construed as being made in the name of all citizens.¹² Third, questions of fairness aside, emotional appeals and associations strike me as problematic when made by the state, insofar as they work in a less “transparent” manner than rational arguments, which makes them more difficult to justify. When we are moved by emotionally charged language or imagery put in the service of some value, we are not necessarily clear on whether what moves us is the substantive content of the message or the emotions invoked by the language and imagery, whose relationship to the substantive content of the message may be murky, and therefore the structure of reasons and inference is less clear. To be sure, these are merely generalizations, and public moral argument often has an inevitable emotional tone that may

¹² For discussion of similar issues in the context of U.S. constitutional jurisprudence, see Greene (2018).

help us to better appreciate the pertinent reasons.

State advocacy of this kind may be distinguished from state persuasion, which I understand to involve mostly rational arguments showing (in the present context) why some outlook is superior (has more appealing implications, can better explain judgments about particular cases that most of us endorse, is more coherent, etc.) than its alternatives. I also think that state persuasion may involve discussion of historical examples that has the potential to illuminate relevant normative questions, provided that the cases are fairly uncontroversial in their bearing on the issue. (For instance, the discussion of destructive wars of religion to illuminate the importance of religious freedom seems appropriate.) State persuasion of this sort need not appear problematic in the same way that state advocacy is, at least as long as representatives of alternative viewpoints (or alternative, good-faith interpretations of the relevant historical events) are given adequate opportunities and platforms to make their case.

5. POSITIVE VS. NEGATIVE PERSUASION

A further constraint on state persuasion seems appropriate to me. State persuasion may be positive, presenting reasons and evidence in support of the favored position (in this case, the liberal outlook), or it may be negative, attempting to undermine the appeal of competing viewpoints. With a few exceptions, negative persuasion, when attempted by officials of the state, seems objectionable in a way that positive persuasion need not. The few exceptions arguably include genuinely marginal viewpoints that hold members of salient social groups as inferior and engage in hate speech. While the matter is controversial, some liberals argue that the state in its official capacity may, and perhaps should, engage in “democratic persuasion” against these groups (Brettschneider 2012; but cf. Billingham 2019). However, at issue here are not such extremist viewpoints, but many that are reasonable in the Rawlsian sense and certainly well within the political mainstream of all existing liberal democracies. For instance, proponents of a more limited welfare state are reasonable in this sense, or else the criterion of reasonableness becomes so narrow as to defeat the original rationale of the public reason framework. If this viewpoint becomes sufficiently widespread, then the prospects of implementing and sustaining egalitarian distributive policies become remote. And yet it would clearly be problematic for state officials (as distinct from candidates and elected politicians) to engage in counterspeech against this viewpoint. At the same time, it does not appear similarly problematic for state officials to present considerations that support egalitarian policies.

What may explain the normative significance (if any) of the difference between positive and negative persuasion? While the thought is hardly self-evident, it seems to me that for citizens who hold the view criticized by negative state persuasion, it is not unreasonable to construe such criticism as targeting *them* personally, which would clearly be problematic. This reaction may be unjustified, but it can often be held in good faith. Positive persuasion does not have the same connotations and is harder to construe this way. That said, in practice it may be hard if not impossible to fully separate positive and negative persuasion. Since the arguments are often comparative, an argument in favor of a given policy must often invoke comparisons to other policies that are thus cast in an unfavorable light. This point brings me to the third and final distinction that may be helpful in elucidating the permissible scope of state persuasion.

6. INVOKING IDEAS VS. TARGETING AGENTS

When it is unavoidable in the course of persuasion to make appeals *against* rival viewpoints or policies, then it seems crucially important for the state not to address its criticisms to citizens or organizations that hold those views or support the policies, but to engage critically with the ideas themselves. Barring perhaps some of the extreme cases mentioned previously, the state should make no reference to particular individuals or groups or to supporters of a viewpoint in general when making the case against it, if it must. Even when making the case against a reasonable outlook in general, the state can and should avoid casting its adherents in a negative light. While it is possible, as suggested in the previous section, for even such general criticism to be construed in good faith as singling someone out personally, the state has the communicative means to make this less likely by strenuously insisting on distinguishing the viewpoint from its adherents.

The central case for the acceptability of state persuasion in the sense developed here¹³ is that persuasion in general takes seriously the rationality of its audience and embodies a proper and fitting response to it. Therefore it is an eminently respectful stance to take towards rational agents. What makes *state* persuasion, specifically, still potentially problematic, even if political fairness is achieved by providing adequate opportunities to rival

13 Brett Schneider (2012) argues in favor of “democratic persuasion” by the state in a much stronger sense, including, e.g., withholding favorable tax status from organizations whose views and internal practices are incompatible with the ideal of free and equal citizenship. I will not discuss this possibility here, other than to note that it falls outside the scope of state persuasion as I use the term.

viewpoints, is that in practice it may be hard for citizens to disentangle state persuasion from all the other activities of the state in which it relates to citizens from a position of authority, such as imposing binding rules, using force, issuing threats, and allocating advantages and disadvantages. In principle, when the liberal state attempts to persuade its citizens while observing all the constraints mentioned here, its persuading activity is not an exercise of authority; its arguments and appeals to reasons are not, nor are they meant to be, authoritative in the sense of settling for citizens the question of what they ought to believe or not believe on a given matter. They are simply meant as providing further input into a societal deliberation about worldviews that has been ongoing in the broader public culture. And yet, even state persuasion that scrupulously observes the above constraints comes from a body whose primary role *is* to make authoritative decisions that settle, as a practical matter, what those subject to them ought to do or not do on a given issue. Therefore it is understandably difficult to keep its authoritative and nonauthoritative functions clearly separate. This practical difficulty constitutes reasons for caution, it seems to me, regarding even the more benign forms of state persuasion.

Before concluding, I would like to make a final clarification. As already noted, some of the more recent philosophical literature on state speech focuses not so much on its permissibility in the service of liberal ideals, but rather on whether the state has an *obligation* to speak out in support of its justifying principles. Most prominently, Corey Brettschneider (2012: 119) has argued that the liberal state not only may but must confront, through state speech, such opinions that are antithetical to its foundational principles, or what he collectively refers to as hateful speech. This is an important issue, full engagement with which is beyond the scope of this paper. I will note, however, that the cases in which Brettschneider thinks it is appropriate (and in fact, obligatory) for the state to engage in persuasion are different from the ones discussed in this paper. My focus is on how the state may persuade reasonable citizens, who by definition endorse everyone's status as free and equal citizens, but who are not liberal in the thick sense, so that egalitarian distributive policies become acceptable to them. The targets of potential persuasion here are reasonable people who are committed to the status of all as free and equal persons. The targets of Brettschneider's morally required state speech, by contrast, are the paradigmatically unreasonable, i.e. those who regard some as lacking equal status. It seems clear to me that this issue raises different questions for state persuasion than the one I am concerned with here. However, perhaps an argument analogous to Brettschneider's can be developed along the following lines: just as the state has an obligation to protect the social and political status of each person who is subject to its authority as

an equal, it has an obligation to implement policies in the service of egalitarian socioeconomic justice. If promoting liberal egalitarian values is a necessary or at least strongly supporting condition of the long-term sustainability of egalitarian policies, then the state has a *pro tanto* obligation to promote liberal values. And once the Public Reason Worry in its strong form is dispelled, the obligation may be an all-things-considered one. Perhaps one can extend Brettschneider's (2012: 43-5) argument—to the effect that a state that fails to engage in democratic persuasion is *complicit* in the vulnerability of the equal status of those who are the targets of hateful speech—to the case of socioeconomic injustice. Then the complicity argument would suggest that a state that fails to engage in liberal persuasion is complicit in the potentially resulting socioeconomic injustice.

I have some doubts about the complicity argument (see Billingham 2019: 641-3), but I will put them aside. It seems to me correct that if egalitarian policies are understood as requirements of justice, then there is rational pressure to hold that there are strong reasons of justice to create favorable social conditions for their implementation, as long as this can be done via permissible means. However, the commitment of political liberalism to respecting evaluative diversity advises caution. One difficulty is that state persuasion necessarily takes place against the backdrop of ongoing political and cultural controversy about the issues involved, and in these controversies thick, egalitarian liberalism is just one of the “partisan” viewpoints, even if (as I believe) it is the correct one. Persuasion will therefore inevitably focus not on the most abstract questions of liberal theory, but on the more practical issues that feed the broader political and cultural controversy. But then, the implications of liberal egalitarian theory on such issues are often controversial, even among those who endorse this theory, and the state may very well be mistaken about some of these implications. Getting the implications right involves answering highly complex questions, which the state and its representatives may not be well equipped to do (Billingham 2019: 647-8). Therefore it seems to me that in pursuing egalitarian justice, the state ought to give preference to strategies that avoid state persuasion in the service of controversial values that some reasonable citizens may reject, although such persuasion may sometimes become necessary.¹⁴

¹⁴ I thank a reviewer for this journal for pressing this issue.

7. THE PROGRESSIVE'S DILEMMA, AGAIN

Where does this highly qualified defense of state persuasion leave us? To recall, my starting point was the difficulty that sustainable egalitarian policies depend on high levels of social cohesion, which in turn is facilitated by the high prevalence of (thick) liberal values in society. Assuming that egalitarian policies do not automatically and reliably generate the requisite level of commitment to liberal ideals, it seems that promotion of these ideals through state persuasion could provide the necessary support. While I attempted to dispel the strongest form of the Public Reason Worry that would rule out any such state persuasion as illegitimate, the view that emerged from this exercise severely constrains the permissible avenues available for the state to promote liberal values. They are unlikely to make a huge difference in the context of robust evaluative pluralism. It would seem that the best use of the power of the state in this regard is still to focus on improving the impartial and fair operation of its egalitarian policies, and to attempt to implement a critical mass of such policies that, in light of the available evidence, provide the best hope of building and maintaining social support for them.

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