**Critical Comments**

**Activist political theory and the question of power**

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Global Justice and Avant-Garde Political Agency is, first and foremost, a manifesto for an approach to political philosophy—what Ypi calls ‘activist political theory’—and can, I think, be best understood as an attempt to disturb analytic political philosophy from its ‘dogmatic slumber’ and motivate its movement towards the tradition of critical theory. In the first section of this commentary, I will lay out the grounds for this view. Having thus sketched an account of the point and purpose of this text, I will then focus on the relationship of both the methodological and the (illustrative) substantive arguments on global justice to the question of power. At a methodological level, I will argue that Ypi does not take the significance of power sufficiently seriously as an issue for political theory with emancipatory intent. With regard to her substantive arguments concerning global justice and state power, I will argue that she does not adequately address the character of power as a positional good because the analysis does not operate at the fundamentally appropriate institutional level of analysis.

**CONTEXTUALISING ACTIVIST POLITICAL THEORY**

In laying out her conception of activist political theory, Ypi starts from the view that some forms of political agency (which she will call ‘avant-garde’) contribute to the emergence, articulation and revision of normative political theories that seek to change

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I am grateful to Chris Armstrong for organizing the symposium at which an earlier version of this article was presented, to Catherine Lu for taking up the task of organizing this larger print symposium, to Chris Armstrong, Andy Mason and Adam Swift for discussions of the final section and to the anonymous reviewers for helpful feedback and suggestions on improving the clarity of this article. I am particularly grateful to Lea Ypi, both for providing the occasion and for clarifying an element of her argument.

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*Citation: Ethics & Global Politics, Vol. 6, No. 2, 2013, pp. 85–91. http://dx.doi.org/10.3402/egp.v6i2.21316*
the world, rather than merely interpret it, and that they do so by laying out prescriptions about how political societies should be arranged, how agents ought to act and what steps could be taken to transform existent structures in the appropriate direction (37). Hanging together in this initial sketch are three elements that are central to any activist political theory. The first is a distinction between theories that merely seek to interpret (perhaps better: contemplate) the world and the theories that seek to change it. Modern political theory is almost wholly of the latter kind; a shift that reflects a wider background cultural shift in the perception of the significance and centrality of human agency to the nature of the world inhabited by such agents. The second element is an account of how political theory plays its role in acting to bring about change. In Ypi’s argument, this is developed in terms of an understanding of political theory as a circumstance-sensitive generator of perspicuous interpretations and prescriptive principles. The third feature is an account of the division of labour between—the political theorist and the political activist. For Ypi, this is pictured in terms of activists through their activity, its circumstances, effects and obstacles, providing material for political theorists to reflect on and the theorist then providing normative and practical direction to the activist whose activity then provides further material for the theorist, and so on. It is important to note, however, that these are not the only ways of fleshing out the two elements.

In reflecting on the second element, we can begin by noticing that it would be a mistake to collapse the distinction between theories that merely seek to interpret the world and theories that seek to change it with the distinction between theories that offer interpretations and theories that offer interpretations plus prescriptive principles. Compare the use of re-description (Foucault) and the deployment of exemplars (Arendt). Each offers analytically distinct media of normative (re-)orientation that can engage and motivate political agents. Unsurprisingly, these alternative modes of activist political theory also construe the relationship between political theorist and political activist in a rather different way. Activist political theory in its re-descriptive mode attempts to make perspicuous the conditions and character of political agency in such a way that both the main threats to such agency and the possibilities for productively transforming the conditions and character of political agency become visible to those agents but does not attempt to prescribe their conduct. In its exemplary mode, activist political theory focuses on the education of political judgement through attention to specific political figures or movements as exemplars of successful (or failed) transformative political agency in order to cultivate and guide the political virtù of agents.

The point of this extremely brief contextualisation of the specific mode of activist political theory proposed by Ypi is twofold. The first is simply to remind us that Ypi is articulating one mode of activist political theory. The second, more interestingly, is to identify the target audience of her account. Contextualising Ypi’s account helps to make it transparently clear that her argument is not primarily addressed to those engaged in other modes of activist political theory (thus she is not concerned with offering a comparative defence of her approach to activist political theory). Rather, her account is addressed directly to political philosophy in its contemporary analytic
style (what she calls ‘mainstream political theory’, 35) and is best seen as an internal critique directed at moving political philosophy from its ‘analytic’ to its ‘critical’ phase; it is this that brings Ypi’s work towards the recent work of the Frankfurt School.

**DIALECTICAL THEORIZING AND THE QUESTION OF POWER**

Let us turn now to the structure of ‘activist political theory’. Ypi proposes a ‘dialectical’ view of theorizing which construes this activity as ‘reasoning in transition’ (in Charles Taylor’s apposite phrase), where the concern is characteristically a matter of seeking to show that one outlook is superior (or inferior) to another in terms that persons holding both outlooks can accept. The central issues for this mode of reasoning are specifying its form in relation to different fields of practical reasoning and establishing criteria in terms of which judgements concerning the relative merits of the outlooks in question can be adjudicated. Ypi’s argument with respect to form is that, in the domain of political philosophy, the central issue concerns the relationship between principles and agency, that is, showing how the gap between first-order norms and practical political agency can be bridged. She then offers three criteria—diagnostic capacity, innovating ability and heuristic potential—for addressing competing views. To elucidate this account, she turns to Kant’s work on cosmopolitanism as an example of a normative theory that illustrates such an approach and that meets these criteria.

On Ypi’s reconstruction, Kant’s work on cosmopolitanism illustrates such an approach because it offers: (1) an account of the relationship between principles and agency in which the gap between first-order commitments to freedom and equality, on the one hand, and the circumstances of political agency, on the other hand, are bridged through an account of the unsociable sociability of man and, on this basis, a developmental historical story of learning processes which leads to conditions under which moral agency can rationally hope to be political effective; (2) the formulation of political principles that express first-order norms but are sensitive to the specific historical circumstances of political agency; and (3) an acknowledgement of the central role of avant-garde political activists—‘moral politicians’ in Kant’s parlance—in achieving a just political order. Moreover, Kant provides a diagnosis of the sources of political antagonism in terms of intensifying global trade relations which serves as a basis for conceptual innovation (the idea of cosmopolitan right) and exhibits heuristic potential in opening up a new range of concerns with the institutionalisation of a cosmopolitan order (59–60).

But just how dialectical is Kant’s argument? This question comes up when Ypi suggests that whereas Kant’s writing prior to the French Revolution exhibits the familiar teleological conception of history in which it is a condition of our agency combining normative and motivational elements that we act *as if* nature has a purpose (a matter of practical faith), his writings after the Revolution set aside this dogmatic faith in progress in favour of ‘a more critical reading, where appeals to past
history only act as a heuristic device guiding our analysis of how normative principles interact with current expressions of political agency. But if we drop the requirement of faith in human progress, then we cannot simply restrict the consequences of this act to an analysis of how normative principles interact with current expressions of political agency, rather these consequences extend to the authority of the mode of theorizing and the first-order norms themselves, not merely that of their specific expressions in particular theories and contextually sensitive principles. It is not least for this reason that the century following Kant is as much concerned with issues of philosophical methodology as substantive ethical and political commitments. In making this claim, I want to draw attention to how much faith Ypi’s account needs to put in ‘learning processes’. So notice that appeal to ‘dialectic’ in abstract would not itself do the work here since, if I may shift to ethical examples, Nietzsche’s *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Taylor’s *Sources of the Self* and MacIntyre’s *After Virtue* are all accounts which acknowledge the requirement of dialectic in the abstract sense that Lea invokes and extend it to the mode of theorizing as well as first-order norms.

Notice, further, that in order to respond to the criticism of what we might call ‘progressive dialectics’ that we cannot assume that the historical triumph of outlook B over outlook A is reason to take outlook B as superior to outlook A, Ypi comments:

> The potentially progressive tendency involved in the critique of existing institutions becomes plausible when we consider that moral reflection and historical performance are related to each other.

But that relation cannot do any general work because as an abstract claim, it applies as much to Nietzsche and MacIntyre as to Kant and Habermas so it cannot support a presumption for any specific outlooks A and B that outlook B’s practical triumph entails its normative superiority.

To come at this another way, notice that if we adopt Ypi’s analogy with avant-garde artistic movements, we can note that alongside Picasso and the Cubists, there were the Futurists, Vorticists, Surrealists, Expressionists and Constructivists, to name a few. Determining which were progressive and which were reactionary forms of artistic modernism is a complex and contested undertaking even today let alone at the time. There is, we might say, considerable space for reasonable disagreement here. The same point applies to politics. It may be plausible to argue that the norm of equality has become spade-turning in the sense that, for example, explicitly racist justifications can no longer do any normative work but this still leaves considerable space for the articulation of different understandings of equality and how it stands to other fundamental norms such as freedom. And the same point extends to Ypi’s criteria for discriminating between different avant-garde orientations. What counts as best satisfying these criteria is also open to considerable reasonable disagreement.

The issue becomes more complex still if we introduce the topics of power and ideology into Ypi’s account. Although the question of power informs her sensible focus on the disclosing potential of moments of crisis and contestation, there are two problems with the limited character of her engagement with the question of power. The first concerns the role of political theory in contexts of ‘manufactured consent’.
What is missing here is any analysis of the role of political theory in constituting relevant avant-gardes. Both Frankfurt School ideology-critique and Foucauldian genealogy, despite their many differences, take this to be a fundamental part of an emancipatory political theory. This issue also bears on the second problem, namely, the operation of power in relation to shaping the space of ‘the reasonable’ at each level of Ypi’s approach, perhaps most crucially in terms of her criteria for adjudicating competing normative accounts. Thus, for example, recent historical accounts of modern constitutionalism and international law have emphasised the ways in which contexts of imperialism shaped the very distinctions, concepts, assumptions, inferences and assertability warrants that are taken for granted in normative debates about modern constitutionalism and international law. From the perspective of agents within these contexts, the application of Ypi’s criteria would be governed by this background picture and hence liable to reproduce the very forms of domination against which, for example, aboriginal peoples have struggled for 400 years. So at the very least she also needs to attend to moments of crisis and contestation concerning the criteria for adjudicating between accounts.

**GLOBAL JUSTICE AND POWER AS A POSITIONAL GOOD**

In this final section, I turn from the question of power as a methodological issue for Ypi’s approach to address the way in which she treats power in her substantive (illustrative) discussion of global justice. One of the major conceptual innovations of Ypi’s argument is that it aims to show how starting from a sufficientarian view of global justice can motivate a turn to an egalitarian account of global justice not only as the best way of meeting one’s sufficiency concerns but as a methodologically superior way of addressing the circumstances of injustice. In order to try and generalise this argument from the specific case of poverty where it is, I think, compelling, Ypi focuses on a particular kind of good, global goods with positional aspect, that is, goods where relative inequalities in their distribution affect their absolute value for their possessors. To make this case as effectively against anti-cosmopolitan statists as possible, Ypi focuses on the example of state power as a global positional good, specifically focusing on the distribution of power in global circumstances of injustice where power is understood as a dispositional and relational concept denoting a comparative ability.

Ypi’s claim runs thus:

> In global circumstances of injustice, states compete with each other in a global market. In similar conflicting circumstances, power represents a positional good. The most plausible way to enjoy sufficient power is to possess it in relatively equal amounts. In circumstances where power is presented as a positional good, levelling down might be required to improve the position of the absolutely worse off. Sufficiency and equality cannot be kept apart. ‘Enough’ can only be secured by enabling all agents to have ‘as much as’ others. (123–4)

Let us start by simply asking what it means to talk of equalizing state power. Non-proportional equalizing would entail states having the same amount of power.
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Proportional equalizing would mean each state having the same amount of power per member of population. Ypi adopts a proportional view of equality but we may worry about this. Consider that in federal (e.g. United States) and confederal (e.g. European Union) arrangements of states, we find a view of fairness expressed as a mix of both modes of equality. In the United States, this is institutionalised in the different rules of representation in the Senate and the House of Representatives, while in the EU, to take just one example, it is given procedural expression in the different rules on voting for different issues in the Council. The presumption here is that fairness entails treating each state both as one person (the self-governing community) and as many persons (the population). Such considerations might lead us to favour working towards institutions that can accommodate both dimensions.

More significantly, simply calling for the equalisation (in either sense) of power is radically insufficient as a way of addressing the issue of power as a positional good for the straightforward reason that power can be exercised in concert with others. Consider a position in which all states have equal military power but are aligned in coalitions of liberal and non-liberal states where the latter significantly outnumber the former. In such a context, the power of any liberal state is not a function of its comparative military strength in relation to any other state, but a function of the military strength of the coalition of which it is a part in relation of the coalition of which it is not a part. Or consider a situation in which a few states are each individually more powerful that any of a large number of other states but in which the ‘less powerful’ states are collectively more powerful than the combined might of the few states. Again the power of a given state is not a function of its comparative military strength considered as a single unit in relation to other units (and this is so even if no coalitions currently exist since a part of the power of a state is given by the coalitions into which it can plausibly enter and not enter). In summary, the power possessed by a state is not independent of political strategies of coalition since such strategies govern what count as the relevant units for comparison in relation to power as a positional good (a point also amply demonstrated by the history of political struggles for the franchise, for union rights, etc., within states). Power is a positional good but it is a distinct kind of positional good in that who counts as its possessors for comparative purposes are not ‘pre-individuated’ but are individuated by the units that they become for a given contest. What follows from this point is that Ypi needs to be far more attentive to the institutional question of how to equalise power in order to achieve fair competition (and the same point applies to any other positional goods that share this characteristic with power). For example, one way of equalising power is to provide each state with a veto right over global regulations on the grounds that this provides any state with effective resistance against more powerful coalitions of states. Another plausible route is to move to confederal or federal arrangements such as the European Union and United States exhibit at a global level—a move that stands in tension with Ypi’s defence of statist cosmopolitanism. My point is simply that: (1) unless Ypi deepens her non-ideal analysis to address this kind of institutional question, the argument that she makes remains unpersuasive and (2) shifting to a fundamentally appropriate institutional level of analysis may well have
non-trivial implications for the normative principles that the overall account comes to recommend.

**CONCLUSION**

*Global Justice and avant-garde political agency* is an exhilarating book, bursting with ideas, and even if, like many manifestos, some of the arguments feel like they are not fully developed, this hardly undermines the vigorous challenge that Ypi puts down to analytic political philosophy. Among the areas that I hope she will develop in further work is a point that links the two discussions of power in this brief commentary, namely, the formation of coalitions of avant-garde movements oriented to targeting circumstances of injustice.

**NOTES**

1. Two rather different but compelling reflections on this shift in philosophical thinking are Edward Craig, *The Mind of God and the Works of Man* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996); and Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought* (New Haven: Princeton UP, 2004).

2. I am thinking here of the work of James Tully, S. James Anaya, Anthony Anghie, Barbara Arneil, Jennifer Pitt and Duncan Bell among others.