Lea Ypi’s book *Global Justice and Avant-Garde Political Agency* is a very rich book, and one cannot hope to do it justice in the space of a short discussion.¹ In this commentary I will focus on the second part of her title, reserving for another occasion her interesting discussion of equality and sufficiency as principles of global justice. Here I will restrict myself to some remarks about method in political theory, and especially the idea of *avant-garde* political theory, which is perhaps Ypi’s most distinctive contribution.

Even before one opens the book one cannot help be struck by its distinctive cover, deliberately chosen because of its association with the idea of the avant-garde. It is a partial reproduction of a revolutionary poster by the Jewish–Russian artist El Lissitzky, whose title is ‘Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge’. The poster was designed in 1919, and the context was the clash between Red and White armies during the Russian Civil War. Lissitzky was a prominent member of the movement that became known as the Russian avant-garde, which was at this stage aligned with the Bolsheviks, and particularly with Trotsky who as commander of the Red Army was the personification of the idea of the Red Wedge. So the poster was conceived as art in the service of a political cause, and as Lissitzky at the time believed, ‘the people’. He wrote:

> The artist constructs a new symbol with his brush. This symbol is not a recognizable form of anything in the world – it is a symbol of a new world, which is being built upon and which exists by way of the people.²

This was the idea of the avant-garde – the artist as the vanguard of the revolution – and it’s the idea that Ypi uses in her book, while transposing it to political theory and
political agency. But before we examine what it means to be ‘avant-garde’ in that different context, it’s worth pausing to see what became of Lissitzky himself, in the years during which the Communist Party consolidated its rule over the Soviet Union. He appears to have become ever more strongly committed to that regime, and was willing to forsake the artistic style that originally earned him the ‘avant-garde’ sobriquet and to adopt the canons of socialist realism as demanded by Stalin. Thus, in his later work abstract posters have given way to pictures of proletarians with chiseled features standing in front of tanks and planes to defend the new Russia. This is a stark reminder that when art allies itself with a political cause, it may find its original radical intentions subverted. Might the same be true of ‘avant-garde’ political theory?

In her book, Lea Ypi urges us to practise ‘activist political theory’. What does that mean? She says a number of things about it, e.g. ‘the concepts we invoke in activist political theory are informed by relevant (avant-garde) instances of political practice’; also ‘political agency is a necessary component of political theory’; again she says that it involves ‘a dialectical approach’ – then ‘dialectic is concerned with the kind of learning processes that take place in the course of adapting a certain reflective apparatus to the development and needs of a particular historical age’. Let me now reflect on these claims and see where they might lead us.

Who or what are the avant-garde? How do we know them when we see them? They are described as agents, so they are presumably people, or groups of people, doing certain things. What things will count here? – I will return to that question later when I discuss what should be included under the heading of ‘agency’. It is implied by what Ypi says that those who are included in the avant-garde are critical of the political status quo. They are not happy with the way things are around here now, and they want to change their society and/or the world. But change it in what direction? At any moment, certainly in open societies like ours, there are going to be lots of groups advocating change in all manner of different directions. Do they all count as avant-garde? I believe that Ypi would be reluctant to concede this. ‘Avant-garde’ is supposed to be a selective label. For example, the Tea Party in the US certainly has a radical political programme. Given the opportunity, they would make a bonfire of many existing institutions and policies in the US. However, I very much doubt if Ypi would be willing to grant them the title of ‘avant-garde’ simply on that basis. To understand the idea of an avant-garde, we need to return to its literal meaning: as Ypi points out, the avant-garde are supposed to be the vanguard of the army, marching ahead of the rest of the troops. So we need to find the army first, and the direction of its march, and then we can identify who counts as the avant-garde. But that may not be so simple. In fact, it seems much easier to do looking backwards than looking forward. If we know which way the army has marched, then we can rewind the historical clock and identify the individuals and groups who were out in front pointing the way. So Ypi has no problem identifying as ‘avant-garde’ the pioneers of women’s emancipation such as Stanton and Anthony in the US or Fawcett and Pankhurst in the UK; or the small group of British abolitionists who in
the late 18th century began producing pamphlets attacking the slave trade. These judgements are easily made because we know with the benefit of hindsight that the movements for women’s suffrage and for the ending of slavery were successful. But she also wants us to be able to say now, with respect to contemporaries, which are instances of avant-garde practice and which aren’t, since the former are the ones she wants us to build our political theories around.

Of course, if we thought that there was a direction of movement built in to history itself, then we might be able to project the past into the future and say which way the army must be moving. But how plausible is that picture for us, now? I believe Ypi is heavily influenced by her Germanic philosophical ancestors, namely Kant, Hegel and Marx, all of whom subscribed to that general picture of historical progress, albeit with somewhat different views about the final destination. Each had their avant-garde: for Kant, the moral politicians, for Hegel, world-historical individuals, for Marx the rising social class, with the proletariat last in line. This picture lingered on in the Frankfurt school, and in certain liberal versions such as that of Fukuyama, but apart from that it has long since lost any plausibility it may once have had. Consider the condition of the liberal democracies over the course of the 20th Century. At an earlier moment, it was tempting to think that the historical trend in these societies was one of steady progress towards the welfare state and social equality, but anyone who took that view would have to concede that, in the last quarter of the century, history had done a U-turn and the trend was now towards cutting back on welfare and increasing inequality. Who would count as the avant-garde in this story, the social democrats of the post-war years or the Thatcherites and Reaganites of the 1980s?

A similar problem arises with the idea of a cosmopolitan avant-garde, the heroes-in-waiting of Ypi’s book. When she identifies them in Ch. 7, they are depicted as those who are in the forefront of resistance to ‘the negative effects of neo-liberal globalization processes’ and there follows a familiar list of leftist political organizations, groups campaigning in support of the rights of migrants and peasants, students protesting against multinational clothing and sportswear companies that employ cheap foreign labour, and so forth. If the movement of history is indeed in the direction of ‘more just and equitable global political institutions’, then these groups will no doubt one day be celebrated by our descendants as courageous visionaries pointing the way to a brighter future. But suppose instead it turns out that the neo-liberal globalization processes carry the day. Then, with hindsight, the avant-garde will include the entrepreneurs who created businesses with global scope, the computer programmers responsible for developing the internet, and the intellectuals who preached the virtues of the global free market. Anticipating their victory, these groups might also be described as a cosmopolitan avant-garde, and so far, deprived of a crystal ball, we have no way of telling which side has the better claim to the title.

Faced with this problem of indeterminacy, Ypi might respond by simply defining the avant-garde as those who at any moment promote particular principles or values – social equality, say, or global justice. That seems to me a coherent position in itself.
But it doesn’t give her the relationship between theory and practice that she wants, because then the relevant principles would need to be identified and defended before we could specify who counts as the avant-garde, whereas the picture that she wants to present to us is one in which the concepts we develop are supposed to be informed by avant-garde practice. Laying the principles down in advance would get the relationship back to front.

Let me switch my focus now to the idea of political agency, which runs as a thread throughout the book. Again it is worth asking: what exactly is a political agent? Could it be an individual person, a collective, a group, or an institution? Or perhaps all of these? An agent by definition is someone or something that acts in a certain way, but which ways of acting are relevant here? Does writing a pamphlet count, for example? Or, standing on a soapbox making a speech? Organizing a demonstration? Occupying Wall St? Or do you actually have to change something in order to count as an agent, in the sense that your action produces a lasting change in the social world? If we were to adopt that last criterion, then our thoughts would be drawn towards institutions like legislatures, or possibly political parties, perhaps social movements, as agents in the relevant sense.

These questions are worth asking because there is an understandable tendency among academic scribblers to believe that the act of writing is itself a form of political agency, if you’re denouncing capitalism, or male oppression, or environmental destruction. So at this point we should return to Ypi’s statement that ‘political agency is a necessary component of political theory’. What could that mean, focusing our attention on ‘component’? One meaning could be: when you’re doing a piece of political theorising, writing an article or a book, say, part of what you’re doing is acting as a political agent. Is that true? Certainly you’re writing in the hope that others will read you, and perhaps you might inspire them to act in certain ways. Suppose you succeed. Does that make you a political agent yourself, or are you just somebody who’s helped to engender political agency in others? That’s going to depend on how we answer the questions listed above about the nature and effects of our intervention.

There’s another very different meaning that might be attached to Lea Ypi’s statement. This is that a political theory that defends certain values or principles must at the same time identify the agents who could realise those values. To be clear about the distinction I’m drawing, the first position holds that engaging in political theory is itself an exercise of political agency; the second position holds that engaging in political theory necessarily involves specifying the agents other than the theorist herself who will turn the theory into practice. On the latter view, if you are going to argue in favour of equality, say, you have to say something about the agents who are going to bring equality about. This is more plausible, I think, though one has to then avoid the trap of saying that the agents are just all those who believe what the theorist has to say and therefore act accordingly. This second way of invoking agency would introduce issues first about competence or power, and second about motivation. That is, you argue for a social change, say getting rid of class discrimination in education, and then you need to identify some mechanism, perhaps some law or
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social policy, that could be used to achieve this, and finally show that there is some person or some group who might be motivated to set the mechanism in motion. That would involve a dose of what is sometimes now called realism in political theory. You would have to consider the possibility that no mechanism is actually available, and/or that there is no one willing to press the relevant button. I’m not sure though that this is what Ypi has in mind when she talks about activist political theory in general. Perhaps it explains, however, her enthusiasm for states, as vehicles of cosmopolitan values. States are powerful agents: they solve collective action problems and get things done. So if you could motivate the people who control them in the right way, that would be good news for cosmopolitans. But that’s obviously a big ‘if’ and Ypi is undoubtedly aware that there is a powerful dynamic within states that leads them mainly to pursue ‘the national interest’. So are they likely candidates to be the cosmopolitan avant-garde?

Ypi’s discussion of states as (prospective) cosmopolitan agents emphasizes political sovereignty and civic education as the two practices that will weld citizens into a form of political association that can pursue such a goal. Popular sovereignty is necessary to legitimise decisions taken by the state in the eyes of the people. But in Ypi’s account, this turns out to be somewhat formal. She quotes approvingly some remarks of Gramsci to the effect that when decisions are taken, individual opinions should not count equally. ‘The counting of “votes” is the final ceremony of a long process, in which it is precisely those who devote their best energies to the State and the nation . . . who carry the greatest weight’. Her hope must then be that the avant-garde prove to be such devoted persons, more so than the state functionaries who are likely to have the interests of the state itself, rather than cosmopolitan goals, mainly in mind. But this does not quite line up with her general depiction of the cosmopolitan avant-garde, as people who engage in forms of political action – lobbying international organizations, engaging in direct action against multinationals, supporting protest movements in developing countries, etc. – outside of the normal channels of domestic politics. Ypi seems torn here between two aspects of her realism, one which picks out states as the agents who could, if rightly motivated, effectively promote global justice, and the other which looks to those individuals and groups who are now most ardently pursuing cosmopolitan goals, but usually in ways that bypass formal state structures.

A somewhat similar problem arises in relation to civic education. For this has to serve two functions, on Ypi’s account. On the one hand, it is supposed to motivate people to participate politically and engage in public deliberation, while simultaneously encouraging them to accept and comply with the decisions that their political community takes. On the other hand, it is supposed to make them into good cosmopolitans, alert to issues of global justice. If one thinks about this in terms of the citizenship education that is now provided in schools in many democracies, there is no strict incompatibility between trying to bring up children as good citizens of their own state and trying to sensitise them to issues of global justice. Nevertheless, there is an underlying problem about political identity: are children to be raised as national citizens or as ‘global citizens’? This comes into practical focus when questions such
as the teaching of national history and culture are concerned. The very act of selecting some topics as important while disregarding others signals to children how they are to understand their future political agency.

Finally, I need to say a few words about the dialectic as a method within political theory. As I understand Ypi’s use of it, the essential idea is that we start with a historically given set of institutions and practices, which we then subject to normative critique, which in turn points us to a new set of institutions and practices. We try these out, and then they get subjected to normative critique in the same way, and the process continues: she calls this ‘the method of trial and failure’. The problem, as Ypi sees, is how to know which of these changes are improvements and which are not. She says ‘the challenge is of course to understand in what way the dialectical method can be deployed to select among various candidate interpretations all who [sic] purport to contribute to political progress in this way’.13 She suggests three criteria, which, to simplify somewhat, say that an interpretation of current social practice is better to the extent: a) that it diagnoses better what is wrong with that practice; b) that in what it prescribes it ‘preserves all the normative benefits of its predecessors whilst avoiding their failures’; and c) that it gives us ‘guidelines for anticipating new, unforeseen questions and challenges’.14 The problem, however, is that these criteria seem themselves to be somewhat question-begging, i.e. they presuppose a standpoint from which one can say that one diagnosis is better than another, or that one proposal is normatively superior to another. It can be rather tempting to think that social and political theory can proceed in the way that scientific theory proper proceeds, where existing theories are tested empirically and replaced by more adequate theories according to the usual history of science story, but this works (when it does) precisely because the stuff that the theory is about is itself theory-independent and invariant. Hydrogen atoms are as they are, and their behaviour isn’t affected by what we say about them. It’s far from clear that this applies in same way to social practice, where agents’ own beliefs about what they are doing are an integral part of the subject-matter. So notions of theoretical ‘progress’, which make perfectly good sense in a scientific context, are much more problematic when applied to the social world, where one person’s progress is likely to be another’s backwards step. However, this merely reiterates in a different vein the worries I expressed earlier about identifying in a non-circular way who belongs to the avant-garde.

There is much to praise in Ypi’s book, especially her insistence that political theory cannot proceed without paying attention to political agency, the issue of who we might look to to act on the proposals the theorist makes. This is particularly relevant when the theory in question has a cosmopolitan character. I have cautioned against assuming that political theorising is itself a form of agency; nor should one assume that the agents who might act to bring about the results that the theory demands will be motivated entirely by the principles it contains. The famous trio of German philosophers whose ideas standing behind Ypi’s work all subscribed to some version of the cunning of reason, where historical change occurs as a result of agents pursuing material interests rather than following the principles that will govern the new order they bring into existence. I suggested, however, that this can only be
properly understood with the benefit of hindsight. So I have been sceptical about the idea of an avant-garde, used prospectively rather than retrospectively to identify the agents who will lead our society (or our world) in the direction we favour. Lissitzky’s example shows us that those who initially appear to be ‘avant-garde’ may later prove to be the accomplices of reactionary regimes. So there is no substitute for laying out and defending political principles in advance of deciding who might qualify as the agents to promote them. And sometimes the form that political agency will take looks more like holding the fort against advancing enemies than leading a forward march. If, like Ypi, you wish to defend global egalitarianism as a principle of justice, the outlook for anything more than a defensive action – curbing the worst excesses of international capitalism – is presently rather bleak. We need to know who the potential defenders are, nonetheless, if our political philosophy is to be more than lamentation for what might have been; on this point Ypi and I are at one.

NOTES

1. Lea Ypi, Global Justice and Avant-Garde Political Agency (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).
2. Cited in Margarita Tupitsyn, El Lissitzky (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 9.
3. Ypi, Global Justice, 37.
4. Ibid., 37.
5. Ibid., 40–1.
6. Ibid., 163–4.
7. Francis Fukuyama, The End of History and the Last Man (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1992).
8. Ypi, Global Justice, 167–70.
9. Ypi seems to suggest this when she claims that agency requires that ‘the outcome of political action is sustainable’ and that it ‘generates a sense of the collective that is likely to endure throughout time’. See Ypi, Global Justice, 131.
10. For a good critical introduction, see Mark Philp, ‘Realism without Illusions’, Political Theory, 40 (2012), 629–49.
11. Antonio Gramsci, Selections from the Prison Notebooks, ed. Q. Hoare and P. Nowell Smith (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971), 193.
12. For my scepticism about the latter possibility, see David Miller. ‘The Idea of Global Citizenship’ in Varieties of Sovereignty and Citizenship, eds. S. Ben-Porath and R. Smith (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 227–43.
13. Ypi, Global Justice, 43–4.
14. Ibid., 44.